

Civil society, research-based knowledge, and policy

Julius Court, Enrique Mendizabal, David Osborne and John Young

This paper, an abridged version of the 2006 study ‘Policy engagement: how civil society can be more effective’ by the same authors, focuses on the role of evidence-based knowledge in improving civil society engagement in international development policy processes. Section 1 focuses on the role that evidence-based knowledge can be used by civil society organizations (CSOs) to improve their role in policy processes, and aims to outline why evidence matters for CSOs’ work in international development. Section 2 the scene and highlights the opportunities and challenges facing CSOs policy work. Section 3 provides a framework that matches the engagement mechanisms and evidence needs to the critical stages of policy processes. Section 4 summarizes strategic and practical advice regarding how CSOs can ensure their policy engagement is more effective, influential and sustained.

Before starting we would like to clarify our use of some of the key terms we shall be using throughout the paper:

- CSOs refer to any organization that works in the arena between the household, the private sector, and the state, to negotiate matters of public concern. CSOs include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, research institutes, think tanks, advocacy groups, trade unions, academic institutions, parts of the media, professional associations, and faith-based institutions.
- We take the view that policy and practice should be informed by research-based knowledge. But we adopt a general, though widely accepted, definition of research as ‘any systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge.’
- We use the term ‘policy’ to denote a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors.

CSOs, evidence and policy

Recent work by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) shows that: (1) better outcomes stem from better policy and practice; (2) better policy and practice occur when rigorous, systematic research-based knowledge is used; (3) CSOs that use research-based knowledge better will have greater policy influence and greater pro-poor impact.

Better use of research-based knowledge by CSOs can increase the policy influence and pro-poor impact of their work in three ways. First, it can help improve the impact of CSOs’ service delivery work. Rigorous evidence can help CSOs understand problems

more clearly, design better interventions, make practice more effective and monitor their results.

Second, better use of research-based knowledge can increase the legitimacy of their policy engagement efforts, helping CSOs to gain a place and have influence at the policy table. Some CSOs claim their legitimacy from representing a particular group and can use evidence to argue that the size and views of their membership can give weight to policy arguments. Also, use of rigorous evidence can increase the technical legitimacy of a CSO. Being seen as a source of expertise can help CSOs create space in policy processes and give them greater weight in relating to other policy actors.

Finally, better use of research-based knowledge can increase the effectiveness of CSO engagement, by ensuring that policy recommendations really do help the poor.

CSOs engage with policy processes in many different ways. They can:

- *Identify* the political constraints and opportunities and develop a strategy for engagement.
- *Inspire* support for an issue or action; raise new ideas or question old ones; create new ways of framing an issue or ‘policy narrative’.
- *Inform* the views of others; share expertise and experience; put forward new approaches.
- *Improve*, add, correct or change policy issues; hold policymakers accountable; evaluate and improve their own activities, particularly regarding service provision.

Additionally, research-based knowledge can be influential in each of the four main stages of policy processes:

- agenda setting
- policy formulation
- decision, implementation
- monitoring and evaluation.

At the agenda setting stage, evidence can help put issues on the agenda and ensure they are recognized as significant problems which require a policymaker’s response. CSO inputs can be even more influential if they also provide options and realistic solutions. Better use of evidence can influence public opinion, cultural norms and political contestation and indirectly affect policy processes.

At the policy formulation stage, evidence can be an important way to establish the credibility of CSOs. Here, evidence can be used to enhance or establish a positive reputation. CSOs can adapt the way they use evidence to maintain credibility with local communities and with policymakers, combining their tacit and explicit knowledge of a policy issue. A key issue is to outline the theory of change, namely how the proposed policy measure will result in pro-poor impact. CSOs may also present evidence of their

political position, as much as their competence, in order to be included within policy discussions.

At the implementation stage, evidence helps CSOs translate technical skills, expert knowledge and practical experiences, so as to inform others better. CSOs have often been successful innovators in service delivery that informs broader government implementation. The key to influencing implementation of policy is often to have solutions that are realistic and generalisable across different contexts.

Finally, evidence can be further used to influence the monitoring and evaluation of policy. It helps to identify whether policies are actually improving the lives of their intended beneficiaries. For example, many CSOs have pioneered participatory processes that transform the views of ordinary people into indicators and measures, garnering the interest of the media or other external groups. This can make help improve policy positions and make policy processes more accountable.

An example of CSO involvement in policy from Bulgaria: Coalition 2000

The Coalition 2000 initiative was launched in 1998 to counteract corruption in Bulgarian society through a process of co-operation among NGOs, governmental institutions and citizens (Dimitrova 2005). In 2003, the Corruption Monitoring System of Coalition 2000 identified the education sector as a corruption-prone area. University professors and school teachers were consistently rated by the general public in the top five most corrupt professions in Bulgaria. Based on this evidence, and to support governmental efforts to tackle the problem, Coalition 2000 developed and tested a set of instruments for teaching on corruption for use in secondary and tertiary education. This included designing textbooks, on-line study materials, manuals, and teaching programmes.

These experiences demonstrated to public institutions the benefits of introducing the topic into civic education curricula. They also underscored the usefulness of creating new anticorruption programmes and ready-made teaching materials for the Ministry of Education and Science. As a result, anticorruption classes were introduced in the official curricula of the Bulgarian secondary schools in the fall of 2004.

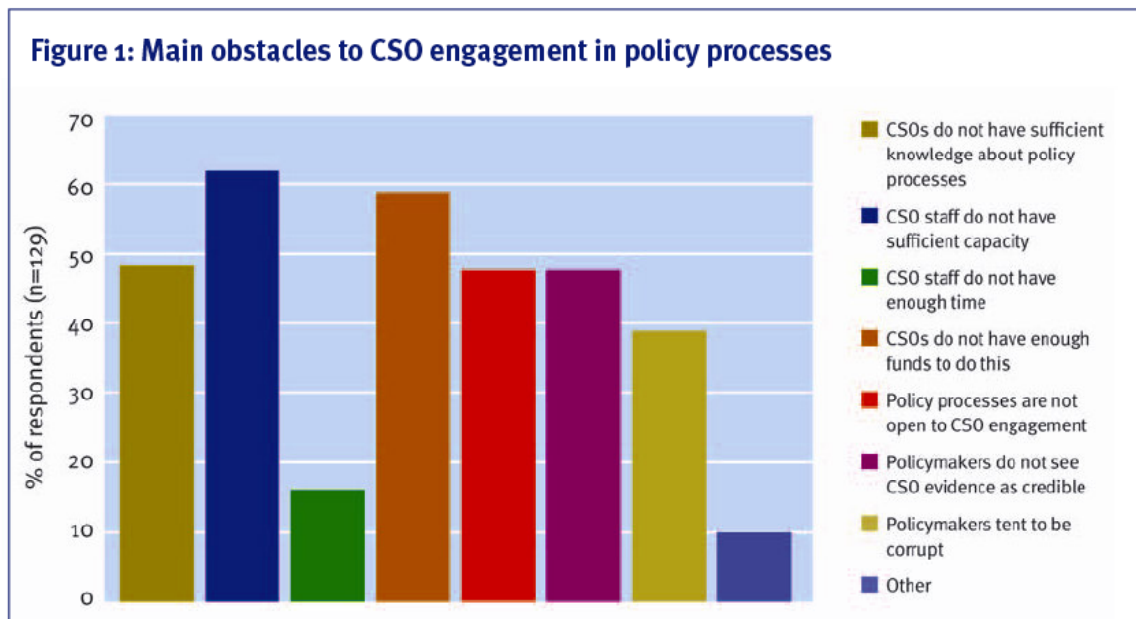
Changing context: opportunities and constraints

There is increasing recognition of the fact that CSOs based in developed and developing countries are enormously important players in international development. They provide development services and humanitarian relief, innovate in service delivery, build local capacity and advocate with and for the poor. Acting alone, however, their impact is limited in scope, scale and sustainability; history has shown that, ultimately, effective states are vital for sustained developmental progress. Progressive government policy and effective implementation matter. With mixed progress across the developing world in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), work needs to be done to make

policy and practice more pro-poor. CSOs need to engage in policy processes more effectively.

The last 15 years have seen significant changes in the contexts affecting the relationship between CSOs and policymakers. This period has been characterized by globalization, democratization, decentralization, reductions in conflict, and advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs). Overall the operating environment for civil society is improving, and there is potential for progressive partnerships involving the public and private sectors and CSOs in more and more developing countries.

The number of CSOs is growing. Many CSOs have become aware that policy engagement can lead to greater pro-poor impacts than contestation, and are beginning to move beyond service delivery. We see more and more examples of CSOs engaging in informed advocacy as an important route to social change and a means of holding governments to account. Sometimes the work of CSO is leading to impressive outcomes, but this is far from always being the case. The evidence suggests that while adverse political contexts are partly responsible, some of the main obstacles are within CSOs.



(Source: CSPP Survey, 2005)

Figure 1 highlights the main obstacles to CSO engagement in policy processes (from a survey of CSOs). The most common barriers were internal to CSOs, with respondents listing insufficient capacity and funding (62% and 57% respectively) as significant constraints. Others cited the closed nature of the policy process as an impediment to their participation, with 47% of respondents noting policymakers do not see CSO evidence as credible.

Approaches for effective policy engagement

As shown in the survey, there are a number of obstacles, both external and internal, which restrict CSO policy engagement. Below we highlight ways to overcome some of these. More detail on each is provided in the full report.

Generating and using better knowledge

While many CSOs have the potential to generate and use research-based knowledge much more effectively than they do, many policymakers are frustrated with the nature of the knowledge they receive to inform policy processes. Using different types of evidence more effectively would help CSOs influence policy and practice in a pro-poor manner. Key characteristics that would make evidence more useful for policymakers include:

- Availability: Does a body of (good) knowledge exist on a particular issue?
- Accuracy: Does the knowledge correctly describe what it purports to do?
- Objectivity: How objective is the source?
- Credibility: How reliable is the knowledge?
- Generalisability: Is there extensive knowledge or are there just selective cases?
- Relevance: Is the knowledge timely, topical and have policy implications?
- Practical usefulness: Is knowledge grounded in reality and presented in a useful format?

Bridging the policy gaps

Policymakers are often frustrated by the inability of many CSOs to communicate effectively in policy processes. To have greater influence, CSOs need to make their points accessible, digestible and in time for policy discussions. To better communicate CSOs need to ask several questions:

- Why is their knowledge and knowledge not being used successfully to inform policy and practice?
- Has it been appropriately targeted?
- Has it been communicated clearly?
- Is it easily accessible?
- What does it take for research to inspire?
- What makes some forms of knowledge easy to ignore and other forms more difficult?

The power of networks

Networks can help CSOs bypass obstacles to consensus; assemble coalitions for change; marshal and amplify evidence; and mobilise resources. For many CSOs that previously focused on service delivery, networks have enabled them to join in with lobbying activities. The problem is that CSOs, policymakers and researchers sometimes seem to live in parallel universes.

Greater networking would help with policy influence. Developing effective links and trust-based relationships with policymakers, the media and other stakeholders is necessary for CSOs to engage fully with policy processes. They can do this by making the most of existing links, and by identifying key personalities who can help and generate new linkages and partnerships with likeminded individuals and organizations.

There are six non-exclusive functions that networks can play to improve CSO policy influence:

- Convenors bring together groups of people. For example, Coalition 2000 in Bulgaria brings together CSOs, government institutions, the private sector and donors in various coordinated initiatives to fight corruption.
- Filters ‘decide’ what information is worth paying attention to and organize unmanageable amounts of information.
- Amplifiers help take little-known or little-understood ideas and make them more widely known or understood. Advocacy or campaigning NGOs such as the Jubilee Campaign are amplifying networks.
- Facilitators help members carry out their activities more efficiently and effectively.
- Community builder networks promote and sustain the values and standards of the individuals or organizations within them. For example, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) promotes best practice and minimum standards of learning accountability and performance among humanitarian agencies.
- Investor or provider networks offer members the resources they need to carry out their main activities. The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), for instance, provides technical assistance, skills and funding to its policy research partners.

It is important for actors to recognise that networks do not guarantee success. Although influencing policy is rarely straightforward we know more and more about what works. There are 10 commonly cited network ‘keys to success’: clear governance agreements that set objectives, identify functions, define membership structures, make decisions and resolve conflicts; strength in numbers lends greater political weight to a cause or policy issue; being representative is a key source of legitimacy and thereby influence; quality of evidence affects both credibility and legitimacy; packaging of evidence is crucial to effective communication; persistence over a period of time is often required for policy influence; key individuals can facilitate policy influence; informal links can be critical to achieving objectives; complementing official structures rather than duplicating them makes networks more valuable; and ICT are increasingly vital for networking.

Building CSO capacity

As shown in Figure 1, 65% of CSOs noted lack of capacity as an important constraint on their ability to influence policy. For effective policy influence CSOs need to be able to: understand the policy process in their specific context; generate high-quality, relevant

research, or have access to such research; and link to and communicate with policymakers and other actors. This requires a wide range of technical capacities.

Networks can help their members with the resources needed to engage with policy processes and use evidence. Effective networking allows CSOs to access specific capacity lacking in their context, and this is also gaining in importance due to questions about the niche and duplication of effort by individual CSOs.

We believe that to be successful, capacity building:

- requires a broad-based participation and a locally driven agenda,
- needs to build on existing local capacities,
- requires ongoing learning and adaptation,
- is a long-term investment, and
- needs to integrate activities at different levels to address complex problems.

An example from Kenya: Responding to HIV/AIDS

A network including children, teachers and parents established by the Primary School Action for Better Health Project in Kenya has revolutionized HIV/AIDS awareness in schools in Kenya. The project, developed and managed by the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT), is funded by the Department for International Development (DfID). The project's overall purpose is to bring about positive behaviour changes in sexual relationships of upper primary school pupils so that the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission will be reduced. It aims to provide accurate information on prevention, promote abstinence and delay the onset of sexual activity.

Capacity and awareness building is carried out through a highly participatory process that involved teachers, students and community leaders. It has been implemented in 5000 primary schools across Kenya. The process itself is closely informed by research based evidence appropriately presented for each stakeholder group to incorporate lessons into their own activities. The project has institutionalized a new attitude towards HIV/AIDS education in primary schools, effectively changing teachers and pupils' knowledge attitudes and behaviours. The programme management is now being transferred to the Ministry of Education.

Policy entrepreneurship techniques: campaigns, boomerangs and policy pilots

In some cases, the political context is problematic- political rights may be limited, policy processes may be closed, decisions may be dependent on the will of a few groups or individuals or policy implementation may be ineffective. Even in many troubled political contexts, CSOs can still influence policy. There may be opportunities to engage with particular organizations and individuals to inform and improve policy positions, through a process we call *policy entrepreneurship*. Three options are: *campaigns* to try to change policy by increasing awareness and support; *'boomerang' strategies* (engaging with external partners to try to change policy in a country); and *policy pilots*, which allow for

new approaches to be tested and operational solutions to policy problems to be demonstrated.

Improving understanding and targeting of policy processes: context assessments

Another problem is that CSOs often have a surprisingly limited understanding of policy processes, and fail to engage in a strategic manner or use evidence in an effective way. In this situation, a practical starting point is for CSOs to generate rigorous assessments of political contexts and policy processes. Recent work has identified five key clusters of issues that CSOs should focus upon:

- the macro political context,
- specific policy context,
- the situation surrounding the implementation of the policy,
- decisive moments in the policy process, and
- the way policy makers think.

If CSOs are able to build a portfolio of information within these clusters, they will be able to better understand the policy process and more clearly identify the types of approaches that might maximize their chances of policy impact.

A case study: CSO involvement in budget processes

A case study by de Renzio 2005 provides an example of how CSOs have managed to hold government to account by collecting information about budget expenditure. The Budget plays a central role in the process of a government fulfilling its functions. A certain policy which is given great importance in national policy strategies will need to be backed by the necessary budget resources in order to have an impact. Therefore understanding how budgets are constructed and implemented is crucial for CSOs seeking to influence policies and their implementation.

Looking at the case studies of CSO influence in budget processes in different countries involving the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) and the Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis (IBASE) reinforced the basic point that the roles that civil society can play to influence policy are heavily shaped by the political and institutional context. In the case of budgets, that includes issues related to the credibility, robustness and transparency of budget systems and processes, and the roles and interests of different actors (government, Parliament, audit institutions, the media, etc.) South Africa's historical moment after 1994 provided opportunities and openings for IDASA that were not available elsewhere. In the post-apartheid years, rules were being redefined to shape a more inclusive, accountable government that would underpin South Africa's new political regime. This provided access to policy processes (especially with Parliament) and allowed IDASA reasonable success in budget advocacy. By contrast, there were few real openings of democratic space at the national level in Brazil to allow for genuine dialogue around budget priorities. As a result, IBASE has had more limited policy impact.

Conclusions

In some countries, adverse political contexts continue to be the main barrier to informed policy engagement. CSOs can try to improve the situation and influence policy but their options are limited. In many contexts, the extent of CSOs impact on policy is in their own hands. As we have shown above, by getting the fundamentals right – assessing context, engaging policymakers, getting rigorous, systematic knowledge, working with partners, communicating well – CSOs can overcome key internal obstacles. The result will be more effective, influential and sustained policy engagement for poverty reduction. These approaches are summarized below in Table 1: Approaches for Effective Knowledge-based Policy Engagement.

Table 1: Approaches for effective knowledge-based policy engagement

Key obstacles to CSOs	Potential solutions for effective policy engagement
<i>External</i>	
Adverse political contexts constrain CSO policy work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campaigns – to improve policy positions and governance contexts. • ‘Boomerangs’ – working via external partners to change national policy. • Pilot projects – to develop and test operational solutions to inform and improve policy implementation.
<i>Internal</i>	
Limited understanding of specific policy processes, institutions and actors.	Conduct rigorous context assessments. These enable a better understanding of how policy processes work, the politics affecting them and the opportunities for policy influence. We outline key issues and some simple approaches to mapping political contexts.
Weak strategies for policy engagement.	Identify critical policy stages – agenda setting, formulation and/or implementation – and the engagement mechanisms that are most appropriate for each stage. We provide a framework that matches the different approaches and evidence requirements to each stage in the policy process.
Inadequate use of evidence-based knowledge	Ensure that knowledge is relevant, objective, generalisable and practical. This helps improve CSO legitimacy and credibility with policymakers. We outline sources of research advice and mechanisms for how CSOs can access better evidence.
Weak communication approaches in policy influence work.	Engage in two-way communication and use existing tools for planning, packaging, targeting and monitoring communication efforts. Doing so will help CSOs make their interventions more accessible, digestible and timely for policy discussions. We provide examples and sources of further information.
Working in an isolated	Apply network approaches. Networks can help CSOs: bypass

manner.	obstacles to consensus; assemble coalitions for change; marshal and amplify evidence; and mobilise resources. We outline the key roles of networks (from filters to convenors) and the 10 keys to network success.
Limited capacity for policy influence.	Engage in systemic capacity building. CSOs need a wide range of technical capacities to maximize their chances of policy influence. We outline some key areas where CSOs could build their own capacity or access it from partners.

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Abstract

This article has been edited from a longer ODI publication, 'Policy engagement: how civil society can be more effective' by same authors, published in 2006. Civil society organizations (CSOs) make a difference in international development. They provide development services and humanitarian relief, innovate in service delivery, build local capacity and advocate with and for the poor. Acting alone, however, their impact is limited in scope, scale and sustainability. CSOs need to engage in government policy processes more effectively. With increased democratization, reductions in conflict, and advances in information and communication technologies, there is potential for progressive partnerships between CSOs and policymakers in more developing countries. The first part of this article shows why and how better use of evidence by CSOs is part of the solution to increasing the policy influence and pro-poor impact of their work. Better use of evidence can: improve the impact of CSOs' service delivery work; increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of their policy engagement efforts, helping CSOs to gain a place and have influence at the policy table; and ensure that policy recommendations are genuinely pro- poor. The second half outlines how CSOs can engage more effectively in policy processes. It includes strategic and practical advice regarding how CSOs can overcome the main challenges to policy engagement. These challenges and some effective ways of addressing them are outlined.

About the authors

Julius Court is a Governance Adviser in Policy Division at the Department for International Development (DFID). He was a Research Fellow in the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme for four years, until August 2006. At ODI, he was involved in research, advisory work and training on issues of civil society and policy influence; bridging research and policy; and governance and development.

E-mail: j-court@dfid.gov.uk

Enrique Mendizabal joined RAPID as a Research Officer in October 2004. His responsibilities include the development of ODI's research on the use of evidence and the contribution of networks to pro-poor policy processes. Enrique also supports the development of the Civil Society Partnerships Programme's Latin American network and is involved in capacity building and advice for civil society and policymakers on bridging research and policy in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Enrique also chairs the Latin American and the Caribbean Group at ODI - a cross-cutting group that aims to study and promote debate and solutions for pro-poor policies in the region. His areas of focus include networks and their role in development, civil society and policy influence, children and vulnerable groups, public sector reform and urban development.

E-mail: emendizabal@odi.org.uk

David Osborne is a governance adviser at DFID in Bangladesh. He was a Project Officer with the RAPID programme involved in research on the economic policy process in Egypt and issues of evidence use and civil society participation in the policy process.

E-mail: d-orborne@dfid.gov.uk

John Young joined ODI in May 2001 after 5 years in Indonesia managing the DFID Decentralized Livestock Services in the Eastern Regions of Indonesia (DELIVERI) Project - an action-research project to promote more decentralized and client-oriented livestock services. Since joining ODI he has been involved in projects on decentralization and rural services, information and information systems, strengthening southern research capacity, and the research-policy interface. He is Director of Programmes for the RAPID Group, and also manages the Civil Society Partnerships Programme.

E-mail: jyoung@odi.org.uk