Working paper brief
Multisector

Evaluating advocacy initiatives: what works?

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Advocacy for social, economic or political change has always existed, in numerous forms and across societies. In recent decades, advocacy's importance in bringing about social change has been widely recognised and formal advocacy programmes have proliferated, particularly in development programming. They have aimed to establish or change policy and legislation, bring about positive change within an organisation, or target behavioural and attitudinal change amongst individuals or communities. The advent of the Internet and social media has contributed to the growth of advocacy initiatives in terms of their size, frequency and scope.

With this growth in formal advocacy programmes comes the challenge of evaluating them. It has proved difficult to substantiate what constitutes effectiveness; what the characteristics of successful advocacy programmes are; and what, if any, aspect of advocacy can be measured with attribution, using a counterfactual. Nonetheless, it is important to evaluate these programmes and identify what is working, for whom, why and how. The evaluation sector can innovate and test which evaluation methods work most effectively and deliver value.

Highlights

- Key factors influencing successful advocacy programmes include who advocates, whether incentives are offered, whether the target group is offered comparison information about other groups, who delivers messages and which channels are used to disseminate information.

- Thirty-four impact evaluations concluded that the advocacy programme had been successful, 10 concluded the programme had been unsuccessful and 12 reported mixed results.

- Evaluating advocacy requires a combination of methods, as any one method could be limited in assessing the complex and dynamic nature of advocacy initiatives.

- Evaluations that look at how information type, communication channel and provider influence outcomes are likely to contribute to building the evidence base on effective advocacy.

- Evaluations should include robust political economy analysis of contextual factors influencing the impact of advocacy programmes.

The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), with support from the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, produced a working paper that reviewed 56 impact evaluations and used positive deviance analysis to identify factors associated with successful advocacy programmes. The authors also drew on in-depth interviews with 14 advocacy and advocacy evaluation experts and carried out a literature review to interpret findings, assess challenges related to evaluating advocacy and identify suitable methods.

Defining advocacy

Organisations engaging in advocacy define it in different ways, and evaluations of advocacy initiatives reflect those differences. For this paper, the authors defined advocacy as the deliberate process of managing information and knowledge with the clear goal to change the policies, practices, power dynamics, attitudes, and/or actions that directly and positively affect the lives of individuals or groups of individuals. Advocacy can be used by a directly or indirectly affected population or by a third party on behalf of an affected population. Policy advocacy programmes target government officials, such as legislators and elected officials; systems advocacy programmes target organisations or other established bodies for bringing about change; and advocacy programmes for behaviour change target individuals or communities.

Evidence base

The studies selected for review had to evaluate an advocacy intervention or campaign and had to be an experimental or quasi-experimental impact evaluation published after 1995. Fifty-six impact evaluations met the inclusion criteria, including 13 in North America, 18 in Sub-Saharan Africa, 16 in Asia, 8 in South America, 3 in North Africa and the Middle East, and 1 in Europe.[1] Most included initiatives in which an individual, group or organisation undertook voluntary behaviour change. Evaluations of advocacy programmes that aimed to influence policy, legislation or law were excluded because few impact evaluations examined such programmes.

Figure 1 shows that most advocacy initiatives included an information campaign. The initiatives evaluated in the studies included information and media campaigns; public campaigns or protests; efforts to organise citizens; and other types of initiatives, such as citizen debates and mailings.

Figure 1: Types of advocacy initiatives evaluated[2]
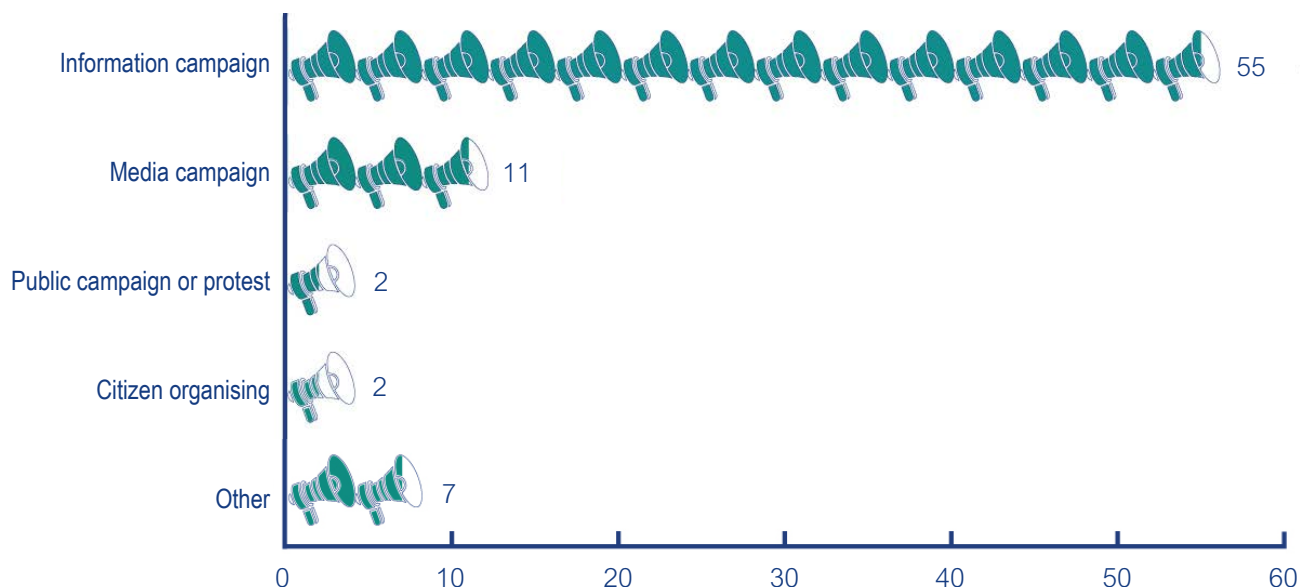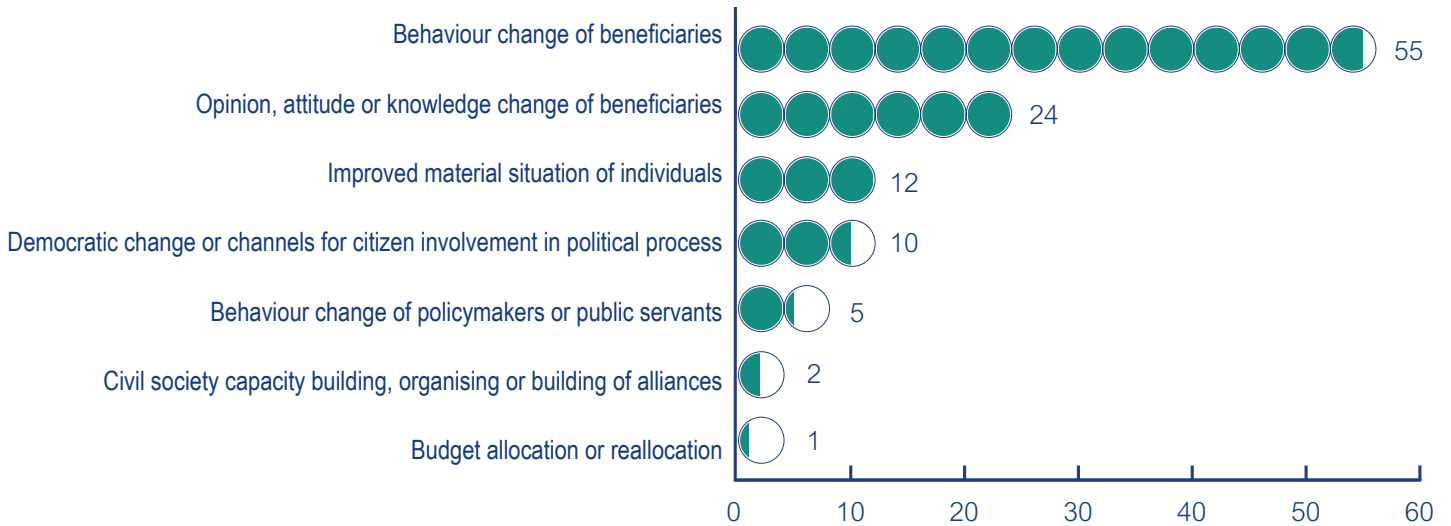
[1]A single study can cover multiple regions.

[2]The total number of initiatives is more than 56 because a single study can cover multiple initiatives.

Figure 2 shows that advocacy initiatives in almost all the evaluations (55 of 56) primarily targeted behaviour change of individuals and groups, such as households, schools and villages. Initiatives in 24 studies aimed to influence beneficiaries' knowledge, opinions and attitudes. In 10 studies, interventions also aimed to promote democratic change or encourage citizen involvement in the political process.

Figure 2: Goals of advocacy initiatives evaluated

Goal	Count
Behaviour change of beneficiaries	55
Opinion, attitude or knowledge change of beneficiaries	24
Improved material situation of individuals	12
Democratic change or channels for citizen involvement in political process	10
Behaviour change of policymakers or public servants	5
Civil society capacity building, organising or building of alliances	2
Budget allocation or reallocation	1

Key factors associated with successful advocacy initiatives

Evaluations of advocacy initiatives used reported findings about stated advocacy goals to determine whether they had successful, unsuccessful or mixed results. Thirty-four studies concluded the advocacy programme had been successful, 10 concluded the programme had been unsuccessful and 12 had mixed results. The authors identified five key factors associated with successful advocacy initiatives.

■ The source of advocacy matters for the success of the advocacy initiative.

Behaviour change programmes that involved a government official as an advocate were found to be 83 per cent more likely to be effective than those that did not. When research teams were advocates, interventions were 72 per cent more likely to be effective. The least effective interventions were ones in which the advocates were service providers (46%).

According to the authors of the paper, the target group is likely to take the advocacy issue and the required change seriously when a government official or a research team advocates for a specific behaviour change. This could be because these sources are seen as more credible and persuasive. On the other hand, the target group could perceive a local provider as having a vested interest.

■ Incentives are associated with success.

Interventions that provided incentives to change the behaviour of beneficiaries or targets (individuals or households) had a success rate of 93 per cent. Monetary or in-kind support offered to participants was small (e.g. sweets, stickers or calendars during informational visits).

However, if the incentive is withdrawn, impact may not be sustained. A systematic review included in the literature review examined the role of personal financial incentives in changing habitual health-related behaviours. The review authors found that although financial incentives changed habitual health behaviours and helped reduce health inequalities, the impact of financial incentives was not sustained for long once the incentive disappeared.

■ Providing comparison information to target groups about related individuals or groups of individuals makes a positive difference.

Three out of four advocacy programmes that provided the target group (e.g. households or communities) with comparison information about the intervention in another community were more successful than advocacy programmes that provided information only about the target group. For instance, telling people their neighbours are conserving energy is three times more effective in curtailing a household's energy expenditure than simply telling them they can cut their bills by using certain methods.

■ The information provider matters for advocacy programmes targeting behaviour change.

Information provided directly by government representatives or non-governmental organisations yielded more positive results (73%) than information provided through any other method. Nearly two thirds of the programmes in which information was provided by a research team were judged successful. However, only one third (33%) of programmes in which information was provided by a service provider were successful.

■ The media channels used for messages or information matter.

Information campaigns that used newspaper and other mass media channels were most successful (73%). Half of the campaigns that provided information to individuals via text message (50%) were reported as successful, while only one third (33%) of those that provided information via phone calls were successful.

Mass media channels may be more effective because they address the entire target group and aim to transform social norms. Text messaging might not be as successful because it is seen as a more impersonal form of communication. Media use is often combined with other efforts, as well as context, that can affect the extent to which the media channel proves effective.

Methodological challenges in evaluating advocacy

- Evaluating advocacy is challenging because successful advocacy is often multicomponent, adaptive and context dependent, involving the intersection of complex factors influencing outcomes. Impact evaluations, which require causal attribution, might not be possible or be the most appropriate evaluation design for evaluating advocacy. Regardless of the design, designing indicators to measure the success of an advocacy programme is difficult. In addition, the trajectory connecting advocacy components and markers of progress and results is complex and nonlinear.

- The analysis shows that theory-based impact evaluations work well in three scenarios: (1) when there is a critical constraint or a bottleneck in the theory of change that is not informed by past evidence; (2) when the intention is to test the efficacy of the intervention (e.g. does increased handwashing lead to reduced disease incidence?); and (3) when there is a need to show measurable change (e.g. what was the percentage change in disease incidence as a result of handwashing?).

- Methods such as case study, process tracing, outcome mapping and qualitative comparative analysis provide some solutions to the challenges encountered in evaluating advocacy initiatives, but each has its limitations. Any single method is often too limited for evaluating the dynamic, contributory multilevel and multi-actor nature of advocacy initiatives. Evaluating advocacy therefore requires a combination of methods. Thinking about timing, effort and agency requires multidisciplinary investigation.

- Before selecting an evaluation method, it is essential to understand the nature and purpose of the initiative and the factors influencing it. Evaluation questions need to be well and clearly constructed. Mapping stakeholders and contributors and identifying critical nodes in the overall theory of change can indicate which methods could be most usefully employed to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the advocacy programme.

- Having a clear idea of what data to collect will help determine the approach for combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

- Future evaluations should include robust political economy analysis of contextual factors influencing the impact of advocacy programmes. Cultural norms, political participation, the type of governance in a country, socio-economic status, severity of the issue and the appropriateness of messages in campaigns are some of the many factors that can affect success.

- Studies examining policy advocacy programmes and those looking at how information type, channel and provider influence outcomes would contribute to building the evidence base on effective advocacy.

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About this brief

This brief is based on *Evaluating advocacy: an exploration of evidence and tools to understand what works and why,* 3ie Working Paper 29, by Katie Naeve, Julia Fischer-Mackey, Jyotsna Puri, Raag Bhatia and Rosaine N Yegbemey. This paper is the result of a collaborative partnership between 3ie and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, called the Evidence Programme on Sanitation and Hygiene.

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