Praxis Note No. 72

Advocacy capacity building using blended learning in complex and fragile contexts

A case study drawing on the experience of Dutch Consortium on Rehabilitation participants in INTRAC's Blended Learning Advocacy and Policy Influencing course

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Introduction

INTRAC and the Dutch Consortium for Rehabilitation (DCR) have worked together to strengthen advocacy capacity within DCR programmes and partners in Burundi, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Core to the capacity building approach has been the participation of 40 DCR-funded participants in INTRAC's Advocacy and Policy Influencing Blended Learning Course.

Drawing on course evaluations and interviews with participants this paper shows how blended learning approaches can provide access to high quality capacity building support in remote and conflict-affected locations in a cost-effective way. In addition, it shares how the content and methodology of the training was able to address specific challenges of undertaking advocacy in fragile and conflict-affected environments.

What did we do?

INTRAC and DCR worked together on:

- Training in Supporting Southern Advocacy for members of the Advocacy Working Group in the Netherlands (October 2011).
- Delivery of Advocacy and Policy Influencing Blended Learning Training Course to 40 country programme staff and partners in 6 cohorts between

September 2012 and January 2015. Participants were from Burundi (7 participants), Liberia (5 participants), South Sudan (9 participants), DRC (1 participant), Sudan (7 participants) and Uganda (11 participants). 24 participants were staff of DCR members and 16 were representatives of partner organisations.

- Support for development of a participatory Advocacy Capacity Assessment Tool based on INTRAC Praxis Paper 25 'Capacity Building for Advocacy'[3]. The tool was used in DCR countries facilitated by members of the Advocacy Working Group based in the Netherlands.
- Facilitation of DCR Advocacy Workshop July 2014 held in Uganda. The group consisted of members of the advocacy working group and representatives/focal points from each of the DCR countries.
- Tailored support through webinars and email.

> Blended learning is an approach that combines different methodologies for learning. It usually involves a "blend" of online and/or face-to-face approaches. It can also include self-study and other forms of teaching and interaction.

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[1] The Dutch Consortium for Rehabilitation is a collaborative venture between CARE, Healthnet TPO, Save the Children and ZOA. It is funded by the Dutch government for the period from 1 January 2011 up to 31 December 2015. The Consortium works in Burundi, South Sudan, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Uganda. As part of the broader programme (which focuses predominantly on poverty alleviation and economic development) there is a core component which focuses on lobbying and advocacy both in the Netherlands and also supporting advocacy at the national and local level within the focus countries.
[2] For further details of the course see:
http://www.intrac.org/data/files/Course_Profiles/Advocacy_and_Policy_Influencing_Blended_Learning.pdf
[3] http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/698/Praxis-Paper-25-Capacity-Building-for-Advocacy.pdf

The INTRAC blended learning advocacy and policy influencing course consists of:

- Four half day sessions delivered over webinar on consecutive days,
- Independent study by participants working through mini-workbooks on core advocacy approaches (lobbying, research, coalitions and alliances, social media, popular mobilisations, media),
- Coaching session with trainer with a focus on addressing challenges to using new knowledge and skills,
- Further half day session delivered six weeks after the original session focusing on consolidating learning and sharing of participants experience.

The course is part of INTRAC's regular training calendar and DCR sponsored programme staff and partner organisation's field officers participated alongside practitioners from a wide variety of civil society organisations.

Benefits of a blended learning approach	• Providing access to training at the grassroots level • Balancing learning with work responsibilities • Cost effectiveness • Peer-learning • Reduced security risks • Focus on applying tools
Challenges of a blended learning approach	• Using new technology • Intermittent internet connectivity and a lack of consistent power • Establishing rapport and building relationships virtually

Benefits of the approach

Providing access to training at the grassroots level

In our experience capacity building in conflict-affected and fragile environments often takes place in national capitals and is inaccessible to grassroots organisations or INGO staff based in more remote locations. Through the advocacy course, the DCR programme was able to extend its reach, offering an opportunity for field staff and partners who otherwise would not have had access to face-to-face training due to other commitments and/or costs.

> "This course provided us with an opportunity. We need changes in fragile states. We need to change a lot of attitudes, behaviour and bad laws which are slowing development. We need to train people at the grassroots so that they can advocate for the changes that are needed."

Balancing learning with work responsibilities

Many of the course participants were new to advocacy and it was not a priority area for their day-to-day work. It could have been difficult to ensure take up of training opportunities under these circumstance. Delivering the course through half-day sessions minimised the impact on their existing responsibilities and ensured high levels of take-up.

> "The cost to us was much less than if we would have travelled for the training as people could continue with their work. It was just a case of keeping the generator running a few extra hours whilst the course was taking place."

Cost effectiveness

The total cost per participant for the blended learning course was around € 1000 - a significant reduction on the cost of face-to-face training. Given that participants were often in geographically dispersed or in remote locations with poor transport links, the blended approach enabled everyone to come together to share learning without the additional expense of regional flights and accommodation. As a result it was possible for DCR to offer sponsorship for participants on 7 separate courses between November 2012 and June 2015. This also helped to mitigate the effect of staff turnover on the programme's continuity as new staff could be quickly trained.

Peer-learning

The training offered the opportunity to learn from the advocacy experience of participants working in a wide range of contexts (not just the six DCR countries). Often the non-DCR participants had more experience in advocacy and were able to provide an international/global advocacy perspective. Across the six cohorts the broader group of participants represented a range of organisations including donor agencies, INGOs and the UN.

Reduced security risks

In Sudan there would have been significant risk in bringing staff and partners together for training on advocacy. Providing online training initially in English and later in Arabic provided opportunities for participants to learn about advocacy without attracting the attention of the government authorities. In addition, in South Sudan participants were able to join the course despite the upsurge in violence in the country which might have prevented travel to attend face-to-face training.

Focus on applying tools

In face-to-face training, participants often work through an illustrative case study or example in groups to try tools and approaches. The focus on independent working ensured participants had the opportunity to apply all the tools to their own context and develop the foundations of their own advocacy strategy within the timeframe of the course. This facilitated the application of learning and also the training of others within participants' contexts in the use of tools and approaches.

Participants had the freedom to select the independent study modules (mini-workbooks) which were most relevant to their context.

The coaching session further supported the use of learning as it was able to focus on challenges to implementation of the strategy that had been developed.[4] One participant noted that the course was more intensive than a face-to-face equivalent as you cannot just 'tune out' and expect the other participants to do the hard work – you are on your own!

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[4] Participants worked through mini-work books independently for each of the core advocacy tactics (lobbying, research, coalitions, networks and alliances, popular mobilisation, media, social media). This was also beneficial because participants did not have to participate in sessions which were of limited relevance to them (e.g. social media use is limited in some of the contexts).

Challenges and mitigation

Using new technology

As with many participants in INTRAC's blended learning courses, none of the DCR participants had been involved in an online training before. Some had very limited access to technology and the internet, without Skype accounts or regular access to email.

We undertook calls with participants prior to the course starting to ensure that participants became more familiar with using the technology effectively to engage with the course content fully. Each day participants were asked to log on to the webinar an hour before the training began in order to troubleshoot any problems before the course started.
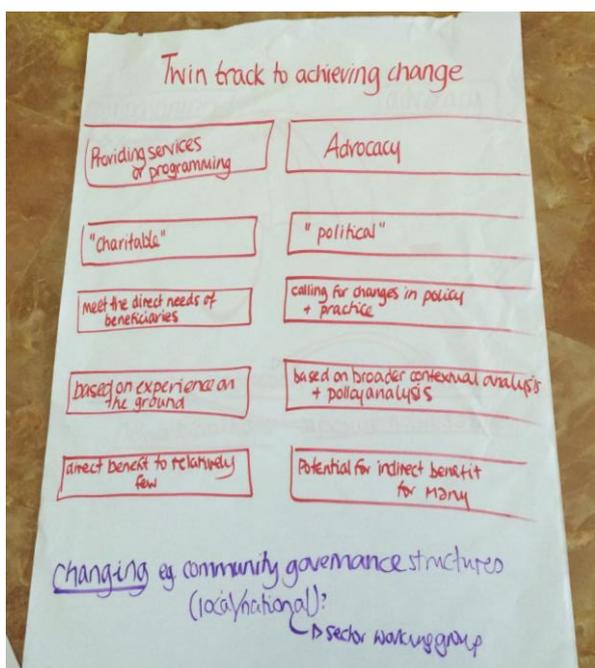
Intermittent internet connectivity and a lack of consistent power

In some instances the internet connection that participants were using was unstable or was affected by power cuts. To mitigate this risk participants were provided with a comprehensive course guide, individual workbook, and the course presentations before the sessions, as well as access to the recordings after every session. We also used Skype to facilitate further remote support throughout the duration of each course.

In some instances, participants travelled to other locations with more reliable connection/power during the course duration. As a result of the unstable nature of internet connectivity for some participants we were not always able to use all of the interactive functionality of the webinar (virtual breakout groups, opportunities for buddying) and so sessions became more focused on whole group input and discussions.

Establishing rapport and building relationships virtually

A number of participants noted that they missed the interactivity of a face-to-face training. This was partly mitigated by calls with the trainer before the course and the one-to-one coaching session. In some courses it was possible to use webinar break out groups and create 'buddy' groups to strengthen the rapport within the group. In addition, some DCR participants were able to meet as part of the advocacy capacity assessment process, advocacy exchanges and at the annual meetings for the advocacy focal points held in Kampala. The blended learning course provided another opportunity to strengthen the peer learning aspect of the overall DCR programme.

Core content and methodology

Participants highlighted how the following elements of the training content and methodology were particularly helpful in addressing the challenges that they faced.[5]

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[5] In October 2014, INTRAC began delivering a new course 'Influencing and Supporting Change in Complex Contexts' which was informed by the experience of training DCR participants and their feedback on the usefulness of elements of the blended learning course.

Focus on building analytical skills

The course was broken down into simple stages of an advocacy cycle with a strong focus on analysis to build the confidence of participants and ensure advocacy activities were linked to the overall strategy and were change-oriented.

A simplified version of a theory of change approach was used to support participants to think through what needed to change, what the role of their organisation could be and what the obstacles to change were. Outcome-focused planning approaches gave participants the flexibility to adapt their activities when there were changes in the context or as they learned which approaches were effective and which were not.[6]

> "As a new advocacy officer, I was afraid because I did not understand what I should do, but now I feel confident."

Effective planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME)

For many DCR participants, the often intangible and long-term nature of progress and results in advocacy compared to those in service delivery has been a source of frustration and sometimes tension. There were instances of participants coming into conflict with their managers (who often had a strong service delivery background) when trying to report advocacy results.

Over the six training courses, the sessions on PME were gradually strengthened to ensure that participants were more equipped to measure progress and identify the steps to change (intermediate outcomes[7]). Key to the PME approach was identifying a range of advocacy-related outcomes (not just changes in policy) as in many instances the obstacles to change were the attitudes of local government representatives and communities rather than bad policies or laws.

Managing risk

Initially many DCR participants were pre-occupied with the risks associated with advocacy, engaging in advocacy can lead to organisations and individuals being perceived as oppositional or creating conflict. There were concerns that strengthening advocacy would attract the attention of the government and potentially put service delivery programmes or the individuals involved at risk.[8]

> "At the beginning I was worried and anxious. Even some small things can cause trouble – people have contradictory ideas and accuse you of playing politics."

Often participants equated advocacy with people marching on the streets – the course explored non-confrontational advocacy approaches which encouraged dialogue and collaboration which are more applicable in DCR contexts.

Participants also appreciated the focus on developing appropriate advocacy messages, recognising that telling decision-makers or communities what they should do often increased resistance and caused conflict.

> "Before the training any attempt to advocate for something could turn quickly into a quarrel but now I know more how to organise myself."

The course provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on how they would explain their legitimacy when challenged (whether that was by the Government, local leaders or communities). This often also

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[6] The importance of iterative and adaptive approaches to development have been highlighted in recent debates around doing development differently http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/the-ddd-manifesto/

[7] The parallel development of INTRAC's Advocacy Planning Monitoring and Evaluation course supported the strengthening of the blended learning course in these areas.

[8] In 2009 a number of humanitarian NGOs were expelled by the Sudanese Government. It is widely believed that the advocacy work of some of these NGOs was a contributing factor in their expulsion.

helped participants when they had to convince their own colleagues, their organisational partners and communities of the value and legitimacy of engaging in advocacy following their training.

### Understanding the political reality

In DCR contexts, often the Government may be unwilling or unable to uphold and execute its responsibilities in relation to its citizens. In these contexts, simply re-iterating the responsibilities of government actors as an advocacy approach is often ineffective and may be risky. To be successful (and safe) participants were encouraged to deepen their analysis of the interests and incentives of stakeholders and recognise power dynamics at play.[9]

Through the use of stakeholder and power analysis tools participants were able to identify and analyse the complex web of formal and informal power relationships as part of their strategy development. They were also able to identify where social and cultural attitudes (rather than Government policy) were the major obstacles to change. In many instances, the advocacy strategy developed by DCR participants focused on creating new spaces for dialogue between citizens and government and looking for opportunities to create momentum for change. Such approaches are consistent with emerging ideas about how to apply complexity theory to development.

Most coaching sessions with DCR participants focused on how to deal with problems in key relationships: how to deal with a local leader who wouldn't meet with representatives as they were from the 'wrong' tribe; how to resolve a stand-off between the local government representative and community leaders about the alleged corruption of the local government official;

and how to convince parents from cattle owning families that there were long-term benefits of educating their children (particularly their daughters) when there were short-term costs involved in doing this if the children were not available to look after the cattle.

What difference did the training make?
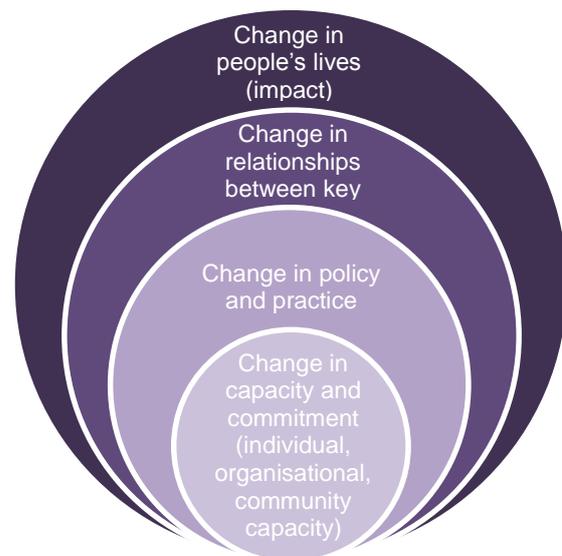
It is difficult to attribute changes directly to the training as distinct from the broader capacity building and programme activities. However those who participated in the advocacy course gave the following examples of how the course had contributed to changes at multiple levels in their post-course evaluations and interviews.

Individual capacity and commitment

The forty participants who participated in the course as part of the programme saw an increase in their knowledge, confidence and understanding of advocacy. In evaluations,

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[9] The importance of politically informed approaches is highlighted in current debates around thinking and working politically. http://www.transparency-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Thinking-and-Working-Politically.May-2014.pdf

there was a clear commitment to use their new knowledge to strengthen the impact of their work; 90% of participants gave examples of how they were going to apply their learning.

> "The training we had actually gave us confidence. At the beginning we were not even daring to talk about advocacy. We didn't know much about it. Now we feel like we are fluent. I can fill my mouth with the words of advocacy and feel confident."
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> "In our context [Sudan] you are not going to be able to come back at the end of a five year programme and say – these are the policies we changed. What has been created is cells of advocacy – people who have the confidence and skills. There are now people who say advocacy is possible. Not just the NGO people but communities, local partners and even some within the government."
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> "There has been a tremendous improvement at the level of individual capacity. We can see it in the reports, the quality of planning and execution. When the capacity of the individual improves it has an effect on the organisation. Because we have all been trained in the same approach – we speak the same language – partners are now able to identify when they are making change through advocacy and are more able to document the impact."
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> "We had a governance-focused training. Some of the participants had been on the advocacy course. They were so confident – they were challenging the trainer – saying we can achieve results quicker if we combine this with advocacy."

Organisational capacity and commitment

Many participants have used the course to build the capacity of their wider organisation in terms of advocacy. Some organisations that were initially skeptical about advocacy are in the process of developing advocacy programmes or integrating advocacy within their existing work, with some partners beginning to attract small amounts of advocacy funding to support their work. For example, Sudan and Burundi have been selected by CARE and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for continued advocacy under the 'Dialogue & Dissent' framework offering opportunities to build upon DCR's experiences.

> "It is true that advocacy was a daily activity in my project inspired by the training. In future projects within my organisation, advocacy will be part of the logical framework."
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> "I have seen the growth in the capacity of staff and partners. In recent advocacy relating to a land conflict, a group of four individuals who had been trained were able to develop their plan, thinking about the message and the right channels to transmit them. They pro-actively thought about issues of risk and they felt very confident." Uganda focal point
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> "At the beginning, we thought advocacy was impossible in our context. Now we are developing an advocacy-focused programme. This wouldn't have been possible without the capacity building we received which deepened our skills and understanding."

Community capacity and commitment

Both the training course and the advocacy capacity assessment process include a strong focus on stakeholder analysis. In many instances, participants identified where there were other actors who would benefit from strengthened advocacy capacity. This included traditional and religious leaders and community groups. Although the original training course was not designed as a 'training of trainers', the step-by-step approach using simple analytical tools made it possible for participants to share it with colleagues and others working within their context without additional support. One of

DCRs advocacy focal points developed a small manual "Civil Society & Advocacy" based on the materials of INTRAC and others for local use.

> "We have shared our new knowledge with the school management committees and the parent teacher associations. They are lobbying and taking more ownership of their schools. We have seen the farmers groups we work with grow into formal networks. They are now able to bargain for better prices."
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> "Through advocacy capacity assessment process we identified the importance of engaging and building the advocacy capacity of religious leaders in given their power and influence within the local community."

Relationships between key stakeholders

Participants have also taken the lead in creating new spaces for dialogue and engagement between citizens and government. In Uganda, in addition to school management committees and farmers groups, community and school parliaments have been trained. In Burundi, provincial advocacy committees have been set up in addition to community parliaments in two provinces. Bringing about change in complex and fragile contexts is a long-term process and these new *"claimed spaces"*[10] are critical to successful advocacy and building more inclusive governance.

Even in Sudan where visibly engaging in advocacy involves considerable risk, the participants in the training have been able to use the tools and approaches that they have learned in their work and find ways of working more constructively with stakeholders.

Secondments of government officials to work with service delivery organisations has built greater understanding of the challenges that exist and has helped to build trust and reduce mutual suspicion.

In Burundi the DCR advocacy officer started a process of advocating for community parliaments to be set up following an exchange visit to Uganda. Initially there was a lot of resistance as it was seen as a challenge to the national parliament. However, after a series of lobbying meetings and extensive dialogue, there was greater understanding that the purpose of community parliaments is to provide an opportunity for dialogue between ordinary people and service providers rather than an act of rebellion. Subsequently, the government launched the community parliament in two districts.

Through these new spaces and discussions it has been possible to empower communities and given them a greater sense of their own agency. In Uganda school management committees have raised funds to build new school blocks and are also are they engaging with local government officials. In Sudan, when the local municipal water official wanted to change the location of a new borehole (disregarding the outcome of an extensive consultation process) the community mobilised its own leaders to raise their objections directly with the official. As a result, the decision was reversed and in future the municipal water office will participate in the community discussion processes.

> "The most useful thing I learnt in the class was the focus on the message. We based our messages on our research. We called specialists on mental health together and they gave us the sound scientific arguments that nobody could oppose."

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[10] In John Gaventas' model for analysing power (the power cube) he talks about the importance of claimed spaces in enabling citizen action and participation. These are spaces for dialogue and debate that are created by those with less power (www.powercube.net).

Policy and practice

The enabling environment for policy change varied widely across the six countries but the results that were achieved both at the national and local level were impressive given the slow start of the capacity building element of the programme. In some countries changes in the context – such as the outbreak of Ebola in Liberia, instability in Burundi and renewed conflict in South Sudan – made progress in advocacy more challenging.

> "(Government) Attention and resources are focused on the war. We are trying to advocate for increased procurement of drugs to treat mental health issues but we keep on being told there is no money because of the war."

In Burundi, significant progress has been made – but the sustainability of the changes is unclear at the time of writing due to the political instability in the country. A coordinated advocacy campaign (combining research, workshops, lobbying and radio spots) has led to the setting up of a mental health commission by the Minister of Health to work on a mental health act. The commission is made up of representatives of the Ministry of Health and mental health and legal specialists from outside the Ministry and co-chaired by the DCR advocacy officer.

People's lives

Participants gave examples during interviews of where they felt that their advocacy work has had a direct impact on the lives of the poor and vulnerable. Participants identified instances where land disputes have been resolved, farmers have received better prices for their crops, more children have been sent to school, people have increased access to water and fewer girls have been raped.

> "In one area, there has been real progress on the issue of defilement (rape). Partners have been able to work with district leaders, parents, the police and schools to push for those who are responsible to be arrested. Some of the local leaders are now coming up with a byelaw and levels of rape are being actively monitored. In one of the schools which we have worked with there has been no new cases since the first arrest took place."

Key learning

- **Blended learning has significant potential as an approach to strengthen and extend the reach of multi-country advocacy capacity building programmes.** It is cost effective and has the potential to reach groups in remote and insecure locations The DCR programme more broadly highlights the potential of investing in advocacy capacity building in conflict-affected and fragile states.

- **Staff and partners in complex environments are often already engaged in influencing local government officials and other key stakeholders.** They just don't equate this with advocacy. The course built on this pre-existing experience helping participants to systematise and be more strategic in their relationship-building. This built confidence and increased commitment to advocacy approaches.

- **Capacity building programmes should support participants to train others and pass on their learning to members of community based groups and structures**. The demand for advocacy training at the community/grassroots level is high. The training led by participants has contributed to increased advocacy capacity at the local level which is an important to the long term impact of the DCR programme.

- **Capacity building support needs to be provided on a long-term basis as bringing about change through advocacy can be slow and unpredictable.** The DCR programme began to see tangible success in its final year (year four of five). In some countries there are groups and structures in place that will support sustainability, in others not. It is important to start the capacity strengthening process as soon as possible within any new programme in order to be able to see tangible results within a programme or project timeframe.

- **Leadership, coordination and ownership at country level is key to results.** The advocacy focal points who coordinated country-level activities were very influential in terms of the overall success of the advocacy capacity building programme. Interestingly two of the most successful focal points (Burundi and DRC) did not have a traditional NGO/CSO background but instead were a former journalist and a trained lawyer who had worked as a political advisor, respectively. They demonstrated the kind of entrepreneurial approach which has been identified as helpful in supporting local advocacy in other programmes.[11]

> "What the participants have done is really impressive given the challenges they face in their contexts. It is important to make sure training, coaching and support is given in a mixed package, over a longer period of time and to a broad group of people, ranging from advocacy staff of INGOs to community based organisations and local leaders, so that they can jointly achieve results. The DCR programme has shown what can be achieved if you get high quality training support to the right people in communities who want to make change happen."
> Elske van Gorkum, DCR Advocacy Coordinator

References/ further learning

- Haddock, P. Monitoring and Evaluating Training. Challenges, opportunities and recommendations (Praxis Paper 30). September 2015. INTRAC, Oxford, UK.

- Van Gorkum, E. How to effectively strengthen advocacy capacity. Lessons learned from the DCR programme 2011-2015. September 2015. Dutch Consortium for Rehabilitation.

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[11] In the evaluation of the Mwananchi programme the importance of local CSOs being seen as political entrepreneurs as opposed to local project implementers was a key finding. http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8561.pdf

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