# CONTRIBUTION TO ADVOCACY OUTCOMES

In advocacy work, it is often difficult to isolate the impact of an individual CSO's work from that of other organisations and factors, or distinguish the impacts of different advocacy activities from each other. In some circumstances, CSOs may need to carry out in-depth work to investigate the contribution they have made to change. Assessments of contribution usually rely heavily on interpretation and judgement.

Immediate or short-term changes resulting from advocacy work can usually be assessed in a conventional way. This means CSOs start by identifying their advocacy activities (what they did) and then track forward to see what changed because of these activities. Much of the time, this kind of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) can be done without using any sophisticated techniques.
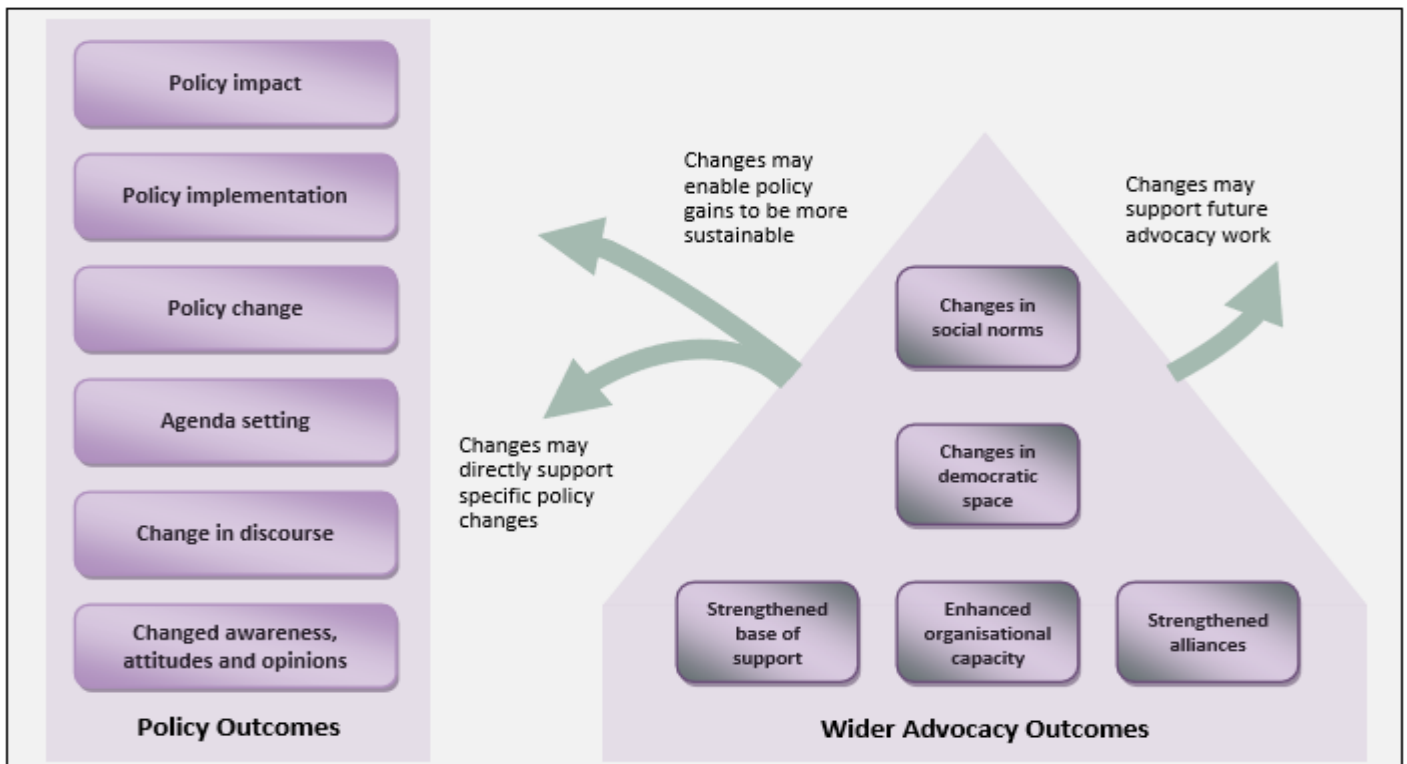
However, this approach can only take a CSO so far in understanding the effects of its advocacy work. As advocacy interventions become longer and more complex, and as more and more actors become involved, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish changes resulting from a CSOs' work from changes due to the work of other organisations, or external changes in the political, social or economic environment. In these circumstances, CSOs need to consider whether they should carry out more in-depth M&E work to properly investigate the contribution they have made to change.

There are two major pre-conditions for carrying out this kind of work:

- First, a CSO must have reason to believe that a major change of some kind has taken place, or be willing to carry out an assessment to find out; and
- Second, a CSO must believe it has influenced that change in some way.

Obviously, there is no point in trying to assess contribution to a change if a CSO is unsure whether or not that change has happened. So the first step normally precedes the second one. The ease with which change can be assessed is likely to depend on two different factors.

- The first is the type of advocacy change. As can be seen in the diagram below, there are many different types of advocacy outcomes. Some are very easy to measure. For example, it is usually straightforward to establish whether or not a policy has been changed. Equally, it may be easy to establish whether or not a policy issue has been put onto the agenda. On the other hand, assessing how far discourse has changed, or whether a policy is being properly implemented, can be much harder. And many wider advocacy outcomes, such as



Policy Outcomes: Policy impact; Policy implementation; Policy change; Agenda setting; Change in discourse; Changed awareness, attitudes and opinions

Changes may enable policy gains to be more sustainable

Changes may directly support specific policy changes

Changes may support future advocacy work

Wider Advocacy Outcomes: Changes in social norms; Changes in democratic space; Strengthened base of support; Enhanced organisational capacity; Strengthened alliances

enhanced organisational capacity to carry out advocacy work, increased democratic space, or shifts in social norms, can be very difficult to assess. These kinds of changes may require quite detailed M&E or research studies, which may not be possible within the budget allocated to the advocacy intervention.

▪ The second issue concerns who leads on carrying out the assessment. If a CSO plays a sole, lead or major role in an advocacy intervention then it may lead on establishing whether or not, or how far, changes have taken place. However, if it is operating as one of many different actors – perhaps as part of a coalition or loose alliance – the responsibility may be shared. Alternatively, a CSO may find out that other actors in a coalition or alliance have already made an assessment of change. Or the work might have been carried out by third parties, such as media, academic or multilateral agencies.

The remainder of this paper assumes that a change has been established, and that the task of a CSO is to try and find out what role it played in contributing to that change.

It should be noted that the ultimate goal of an advocacy intervention is often changes in people's lives. This can involve tracking forwards from medium- or long-term advocacy outcomes to investigate the impact in terms of communities, the economy or the environment (Coffman 2009). However, CSOs rarely engage in this kind of work outside of major research projects. This is partly due to the expense, and partly because it is often unrealistic to try to capture impact within a typical project or programme timeframe. For example, it may be unrealistic to try and count the number of girls that have benefited over short time periods as a result of advocacy work around anti female genital mutilation (FGM).

## *Assessing contribution*

Within advocacy work, assessments of contribution to change can focus on different levels. This includes:

- the contribution of an advocacy intervention;
- the contribution of an individual CSO; and
- the contribution of different advocacy activities that make up an intervention.

Assessments of contribution may cover any of these three, and often more than one. For example, a CSO working in a coalition may want to know how that coalition has influenced change, and may also want to go further and identify its own particular contribution. Or a CSO may want to know how different advocacy activities (e.g. lobbying, popular campaigning, media work) contributed to bringing about change within a broader advocacy intervention.

Contribution assessments do not normally aim to prove a causal connection between a CSO's activities (or those of an advocacy intervention) and advocacy outcomes. Instead, they attempt to generate a plausible or credible narrative, backed up with evidence, that a reasonable person would be likely to agree with (Mayne 2008).
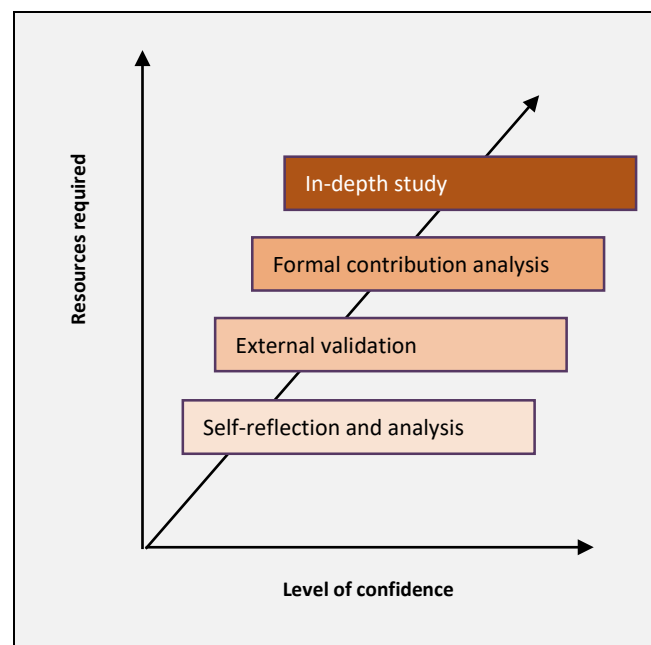


CSOs can do this in a variety of different ways. Some are more reliable than others, and some require greater resources. Generally, the greater the level of confidence needed, the greater the level of resources required. This is shown in the diagram above, adapted from an original diagram by Beer and Coffman (2015, p3).

*Self-reflection and analysis:* The most basic level is for CSOs to make their own assessment of contribution. This can be done in a variety of ways. For example, CSOs might bring staff together in a workshop or conference to discuss how they feel they contributed to a change, or set of changes. Or if a CSO works through partners it could conduct interviews with partners, or ask them to fill in a survey.

Self-reflection can be done very cheaply and quickly. Clearly, it relies heavily on the honesty and integrity of staff, and their ability to assess their own contribution to change. If staff understand their contribution, and are happy to discuss it openly and honestly, then this is sometimes all that is needed. But an over-reliance on self-reporting can sometimes lead to accusations of bias.

Some level of self-reflection (and documentation of results) is often a pre-condition for useful review or evaluation later on. Otherwise, the budget of an advocacy evaluation is often absorbed just trying to work out what happened. Simply having an internal document capturing what was done in an advocacy intervention, and how advocates believe it contributed to change, can save a lot of time and expense during an evaluation. Instead of wasting time trying to establish basic facts, evaluators or reviewers can spend their time validating and/or interrogating the judgements of the advocates. This is often the most interesting and revealing part of a review or evaluation.

*External validation:* Often it is useful to get an external viewpoint. This can be done quite simply by inviting external actors to a workshop to ask for their opinions about whether, or how far, an advocacy intervention or

CSO contributed to change. External actors could be partners, allies, members of the public, or even targets of advocacy work in some circumstances.

If a CSO has made some kind of contribution to change through an advocacy intervention then asking allies – such as partners or coalition members – is often a basic step. If even allies cannot easily identify contribution to change, a CSO has probably not played that important a role. Sometimes, CSOs are reluctant to ask their allies because they do not really want to know the answer!

Another problem is that some stakeholders may not want to acknowledge a CSO's contribution. For example, targets of advocacy work may be fearful of encouraging further advocacy. Or sometimes, people who have been influenced might be hostile, and may not participate in any exercise in good faith. This is partly why it is so important to thoroughly understand the context when making judgements about advocacy work.

External validation can also be done via wider surveys that seek to solicit the views of the general public. Again, however, this method depends to a large extent on whether or not external actors know what the contribution of a CSO has been.

*Formal contribution analysis:* Sometimes, a CSO may go further and engage in formal contribution analysis. A variety of different methods can be used for this purpose. Two of these – contribution analysis and process tracing – are described in dedicated papers within the M&E Universe. Others include general elimination methodology and contribution tracing.

Most of these kinds of methods work in roughly the same way. They first require a CSO to develop an explicit theory of how it contributed to change – perhaps through a logic diagram or some other kind of flow chart. Next, evidence is examined at different stages of the theory, to see if it supports the theory or not. Sometimes further evidence is then sought. After that, alternative theories of how the change (or changes) came about are examined. Finally, a conclusion is reached about the various factors that contributed to change.

This kind of analysis can help CSOs in different ways. It can help them identify their overall contribution to an advocacy outcome or set of outcomes. It can also help them to identify which of their activities were most effective in bringing about change, and which were of lesser importance, or were not important at all.

The methodologies can be applied relatively cheaply and quickly in some circumstances. But they are more often conducted as part of an external review or evaluation. The findings are normally more robust than those of exercises which rely solely on internal or external stakeholder opinions. However, the time and expense required is also greater.

It is important to note that, as mentioned earlier, a key requirement for contribution analysis is that a CSO needs to know whether, or how far, individual advocacy activities have been successful in the immediate or short-term. If this has not already been established through ongoing monitoring, then it will be necessary to do so as part of the formal contribution analysis.

*In-depth study:* The fourth option is to carry out a properly funded and conducted study of some kind. This may be called a research study, a formal review, an evaluation, an episode study, or another name. The key point is that the study involves intensive work designed to assess what has changed in some detail, and then to work backwards to identify the different factors that contributed to the change, including different forces, events, documents and decisions (Jones 2011).

Such a study may include any or all of the previous options, including self-assessment, external validation and formal contribution analysis. Eventually, the study will need to come to a conclusion about what contributed to a change, and what the role of a particular CSO or advocacy intervention might have been. But as explained in a previous paper, this may not mean coming to a definitive conclusion. Instead, it is more likely to involve weighing up how well the evidence supports different perspectives, making a judgement, and then using that judgement to provoke discussion (Coe and Schlangen 2019).

## Types of contribution

Any assessment of contribution needs to take into account the different types of contribution a CSO (or advocacy intervention) might make to advocacy outcomes. In other fields of work, contribution is often captured by using ratings scales, such as 'high', 'medium', 'low', and 'none'. More nuanced contribution rating scales might separate out different dimensions, such as the number of organisations engaged in an intervention, and the degree of influence that each one has.

However, in advocacy work these types of ratings are seldom satisfactory. CSOs might contribute to advocacy outcomes in many ways. For example, a CSO may be a lead agency. It may perform a niche service. It may be the first agency to engage in an issue, after which many other actors become involved. Or it might simply be one of many actors in the same space, together jointly increasing the chances of change happening.

For CSOs interested in assessing contribution it is often useful to develop a typology. One such typology has been developed by Coe and Schlangen (2019, p30). This is shown in the chart on the following page. This kind of typology enables a CSO to better understand the role it has played within an advocacy intervention, and thereby helps it to better explain its contribution to advocacy outcomes.

One caveat is that CSOs should always consider the possibility that they played no significant role in contributing to advocacy outcomes, or that their efforts in some circumstances might have been counter-productive.

| TYPOLOGY OF POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTION | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| SOLE ACTOR | The sole actor calling for the change. |
| PRIMARY ACTOR | The actor that coordinated the approach, corralling and organizing others. |
| LEAD CONTRIBUTOR | An actor that made a leading contribution, was prominent throughout, stayed the course, and made a number of significant interventions. |
| IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTOR | An actor that played an important role but may not have been vital to the result. There may be a case that the outcome would have happened anyway. |
| SEED SOWER | The actor that initiated the campaign and sowed the seeds, which then took a life of their own. This makes their fingerprints on the final result difficult to see (but in a good way because of the momentum it generated). |
| TEAM CONTRIBUTOR | An actor that worked as part of a team, among whom it's difficult to disentangle who achieved what. Isolating the factors may not be possible and is probably not that helpful: it's the combinational effect that is key. |
| OVER-THE-LINE GETTER | An actor that made a discrete or niche, but undeniably vital, contribution. |
| KEY ROLE PLAYER | One of a small number of main players, each fulfilling a particular role. Each actor adds value; each is vital. |

Source: Coe and Schlangen (2019, p30)

## Levels of confidence

Coe and Schlangen also emphasise the importance of explicitly setting out how confident CSOs are in their findings and analysis. This is important in any kind of complex work where findings are less likely to be proven, and more likely to be based on balance of evidence.

The table below (adapted from ibid, p13) shows how findings can be subject to various levels of interpretation, ranging from those that are certain to those that are more speculative. This also links back to the diagram on page 2, which shows how the level of confidence in findings can increase as more sophisticated M&E methods are used, and more resources are devoted to an issue.

This is always going to be a balancing act with CSOs. The message of this paper is that it is fine to reach conclusions on contribution based on relatively quick and cheap

methods, provided the evidence is clearly stated, and the degree of confidence in findings is explicit. Where more certainty is needed (e.g. when looking to make major decisions based on findings) then it may be desirable to go further. But it is always important for CSOs to recognise how confident they are in their findings.

In most cases this will involve at the very least providing an analysis or summary of contribution to change, setting out the evidence that supports that analysis, explicitly setting out the level of confidence, and, where necessary, commenting on possible alternative conclusions.

## Summary

There are often no perfect ways to assess contribution. As Teles and Schmitt (2011) put it:

> "Evaluators must acquire and accurately weigh and synthesize imperfect information from biased sources with incomplete knowledge, under rapidly changing circumstances where causal links are almost impossible to establish."

Rather than trying to create the illusion that judgements on contribution are completely objective, it is better to acknowledge that a great deal of assessment comes down to interpretation and judgement, as well as a deep understanding of the context. This means it is important to find people who can do this well; whether internal staff, external evaluators or other actors.

For CSOs a key message, perhaps, is that if they are determined to demonstrate that they have contributed to advocacy outcomes then they will usually be able to find some evidence that supports their claim. However, in advocacy work there are always multiple perspectives on

| Level of confidence | |
|---|---|
| Certain | There is definitive evidence that makes it possible to be 100% sure of the conclusion. |
| Strongly likely | The conclusion can be stated with high confidence, but not definitively. |
| Probable | The balance of evidence points to this conclusion. |
| Possible | There is a viable case for supporting this conclusion, but the balance of evidence is against it (or the evidence is incomplete). |
| Highly unlikely | There is little basis for supporting this conclusion, but it cannot be ruled out. |
| Definitely not the case | There is definitive evidence that makes it possible to rule out this conclusion completely. |

how a change happened. It is obviously important that CSOs are clear about their contribution to change, and have the evidence to back it up. But in order to enable genuine learning and improvement, CSOs also need to properly consider the contribution of others, as well as other perspectives on how the change happened. Proper advocacy M&E means going in with an open mind, and being willing to look at both sides of the evidence dispassionately, before coming to a rational and reasonable conclusion.

INTRAC's experience suggests that many CSOs do not do this at present, and that claims of contribution are often wildly over-exaggerated. Advocacy M&E is not always as difficult as some people make out. But it does rely on a

level of integrity and honesty. CSOs that are serious about M&E need to strive to make sure that findings on contribution are as robust as possible (or at least as robust as they need to be), given the level of resources available for M&E, and the purposes for which the findings will be used.

The key message for actors such as government representatives, donors, boards and senior managers is to be realistic about what can be expected from advocacy M&E. It is hard to be honest about findings in the face of demands from people who do not appreciate the complexities or nuances of advocacy work, or the limitations of M&E.

## *Further reading and resources*

Some of the different tools and methodologies used to evaluate changes resulting from advocacy interventions are contained in the accompanying paper on M&E tools for advocacy work. Process tracing and contribution analysis are both covered in the section of the M&E Universe dealing with complex methodologies. Some of the issues surrounding uncertainty are dealt with in a paper on 'Dealing with uncertainty' in the M&E Debates section of the M&E Universe.

These papers can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

| ▶ M&E of advocacy | ▶ M&E systems for advocacy work |
| ▶ M&E tools for advocacy work | ▶ Monitoring advocacy activities |
| ▶ M&E of advocacy portfolios | ▶ Dealing with uncertainty |
| ▶ Contribution analysis | ▶ Process tracing |

The article by Coe and Schlangen (2019), referenced below, provides an excellent overview of some of the issues surrounding the evaluation of advocacy work, and contains sections on assessing contribution and handling uncertainty. It can be accessed from the Center for Evaluation Innovation website at https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/no-royal-road-finding-and-following-the-natural-pathways-in-advocacy-evaluation/

## *References*

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- Mayne, J (2008). *Contribution Analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect.* Brief 16, Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative.

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INTRAC is a specialist capacity building institution for organisations involved in international relief and development. Since 1992, INTRAC has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge on monitoring and evaluation. Our approach to M&E is practical and founded on core principles. We encourage appropriate M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts, and we work with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs.