M&E OF ADVOCACY

Monitoring and evaluating advocacy work involves unique challenges. These can usually be overcome provided expectations are realistic. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation carried out during advocacy interventions should enhance and support real-time decision-making. Advocacy evaluations should include critical and informed assessments of how organisations contributed to change.

This is the first of a series of papers focusing on the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of advocacy work. It covers some of the theoretical issues surrounding advocacy and M&E. Later papers in the series cover more practical applications of M&E.

Diversity of advocacy approaches

There are different definitions and understandings of what advocacy is, and what it involves. For some people and organisations it mainly focuses on efforts to change policy, or the implementation of policy. This means it predominantly takes place in policy- or law-making spaces. In these spaces, advocacy approaches tend to focus on policy analysis, research and evidence, and building relationships with those in positions of power.

For others, advocacy can also involve efforts towards a wider range of potential changes. These can include mobilising the public (sometimes called campaigning), shaping social norms, altering power dynamics, or changing the *'frame'* through which issues are discussed. These advocacy approaches try to put pressure on individuals and systems to engage with an issue and make it a priority.

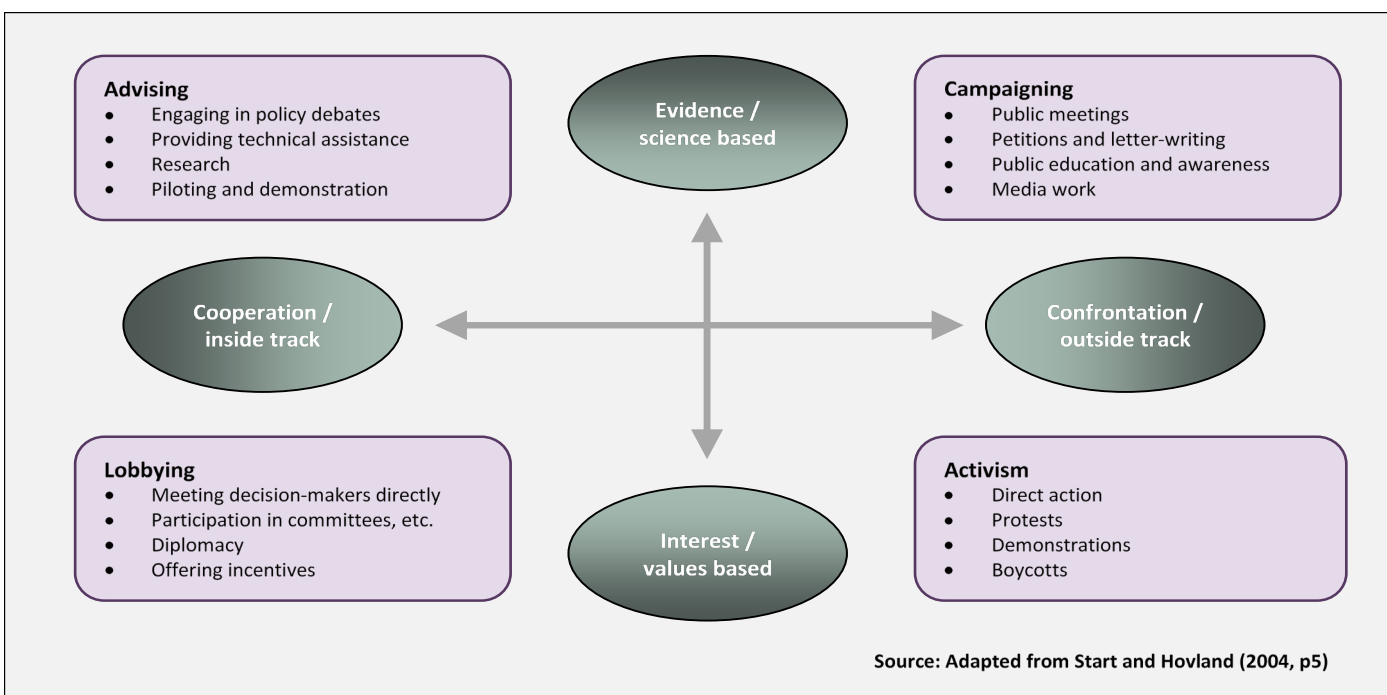In its training courses, INTRAC defines advocacy as:

"an organised process of influencing selected people or institutions in order to achieve desired policy, practice, social, behavioural or political changes that will benefit particular groups or causes."

The diagram below is one way of classifying or understanding advocacy approaches. It distinguishes between:

- inside-track approaches, which work closely with decision-makers, and outside-track approaches, which seek to influence through pressure and confrontation; and
- evidence-led approaches and those based around values and interests.

Although the diagram only provides a rough categorisation, it does demonstrate that there are many different ways in which CSOs can carry out advocacy work.

In international development interventions, advocacy can be a discrete, stand-alone initiative. But it can also be integrated within a programme or project. For example, advocacy may be carried out in a service-delivery

Advising
- Engaging in policy debates
- Providing technical assistance
- Research
- Piloting and demonstration

Evidence / science based

Campaigning
- Public meetings
- Petitions and letter-writing
- Public education and awareness
- Media work

Cooperation / inside track

Confrontation / outside track

Lobbying
- Meeting decision-makers directly
- Participation in committees, etc.
- Diplomacy
- Offering incentives

Interest / values based

Activism
- Direct action
- Protests
- Demonstrations
- Boycotts

Source: Adapted from Start and Hovland (2004, p5)

programme, e.g. negotiating with local government or engaging local leaders to get their buy-in. Or projects may pilot different development approaches and then advocate for these to be integrated within wider government systems. CSOs do not always call this work *'advocacy'* for fear of being perceived as acting politically, particularly as in some countries advocacy by CSOs is prohibited.

Advocacy can take place at any level where meaningful change can happen, e.g. local, national, regional and international levels. Sometimes, it may seek to link these levels. For instance, it may attempt to bring local experience to influence international processes. Or it may seek to ensure that international frameworks are understood, and used to demand accountability at the local level.

Clearly, the type and level of advocacy work has a huge influence over how M&E is carried out within an intervention. Different methods need to be employed to monitor a piece of work based around lobbying of local decision-makers than, for example, a global, public campaign.

Advocacy outcomes

Within advocacy literature, the term **advocacy outcomes** is used as shorthand to refer to changes resulting from advocacy work. That convention has been used throughout the rest of this paper. There are many different kinds of advocacy outcome.

Whilst processes of change are rarely linear, advocacy initiatives often start out by trying to raise awareness of an issue to get engagement from policymakers. They then attempt to negotiate policy changes which, when implemented, feed through into changes in people's lives.
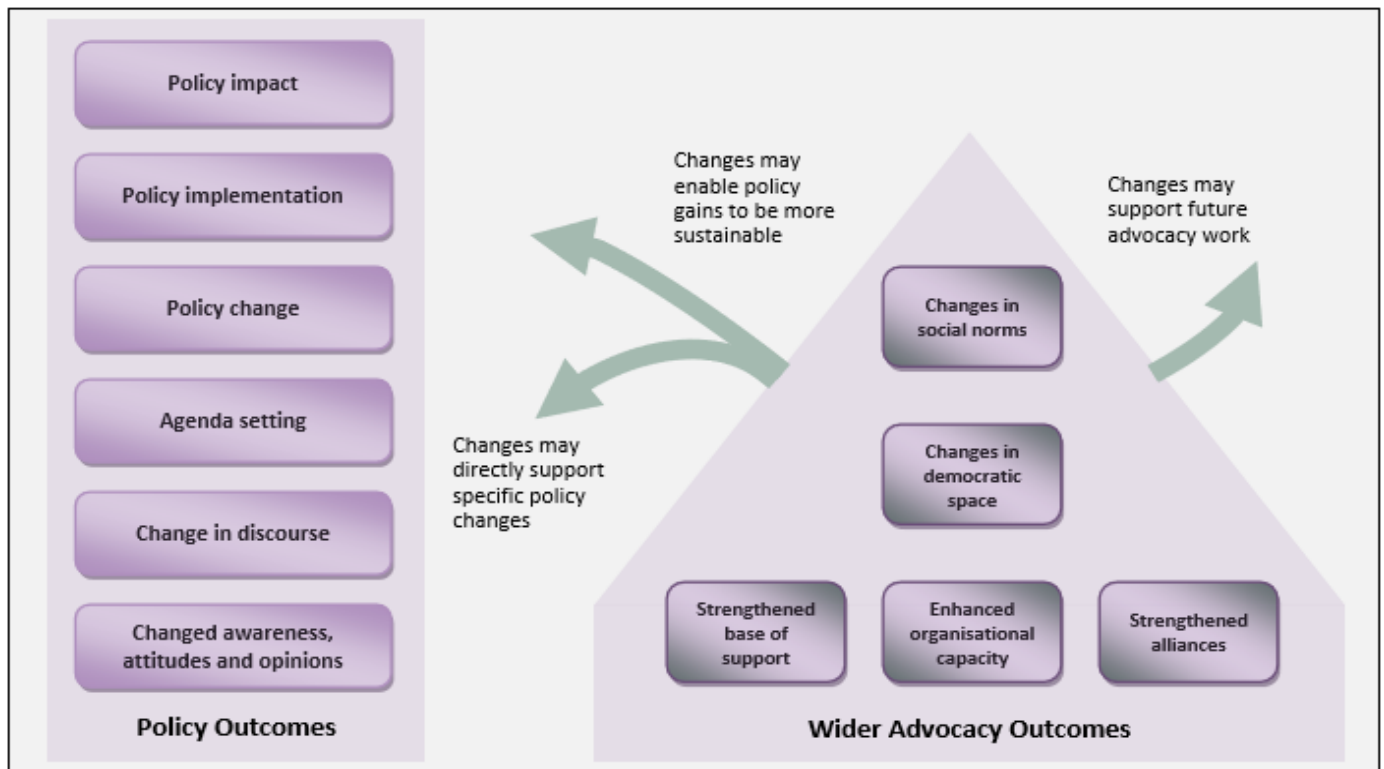
However, it is widely recognised that policy changes may not feed through into policy impact unless supported by other shifts in the context. If there is insufficient public support for a policy or legal change then its implementation will probably have limited impact, or it will be long and protracted. For example, to have the desired effect, advocacy efforts to change laws on child marriage have to be accompanied by efforts to build public support for ending child marriage. The changes will also require multi-sectoral effort and long-term monitoring. It is therefore important to have strong organisations and alliances that are engaged in ensuring that that the policy change feeds through into impact in people's lives.

Undertaking advocacy on particular issues can also help to shift power dynamics and influence changes in democratic space and/or governance. These wider enabling outcomes are described in the table opposite, alongside the more policy-oriented outcomes, and are summarised in the diagram on the following page.

Consideration of these different types of advocacy outcomes again reinforces how varied advocacy work might be, and therefore how varied M&E needs to be. The

Policy Outcomes	
Changed awareness, attitudes and opinions	Raising awareness of an issue, or helping decision-makers or the public to understand issues in greater depth. The intention is to persuade people to change their minds, attitudes or opinions.
Change in discourse	Changes in the way people discuss issues, or use language.
Agenda setting	This may involve getting an institution to agree to develop a new proposal, or sponsor a new policy. It might also mean ensuring that issues are discussed publicly.
Policy change	The introduction of a new policy, the amendment of an existing policy or, in some circumstances, opposition to a new, proposed policy.
Policy implementation	The funding, implementation and sometimes enforcement of policies. They may be new policies that have just been introduced, or existing policies. Outcomes may also cover how policies are represented in strategies, programmes and plans.
Policy impact	The impact that policies, when implemented, have on peoples' lives – particularly the people and communities an advocacy intervention is designed to help. Policy impact might also focus on changes to the economy or the environment (Coffman 2014).
Wider Outcomes	
Strengthened base of support	Changes in the extent to which the public, institutions or key decision-makers support (or oppose) particular policies.
Enhanced organisational capacity	Enhanced capacity of CSOs or coalitions to plan and carry out advocacy work. Capacity development may focus on many different areas of work, such as advocacy skills, leadership or strategic planning.
Strengthened alliances	The extent of coordination and collaboration amongst local, regional or international groups that support (or oppose) a policy or set of policies. It might include the extent to which different groups present common messages or pursue common goals.
Changes in democratic space	Enhanced participation of CSOs in policy dialogues, increased political legitimacy, or the improved attitudes and behaviours of public officials towards civil society involvement.
Changes in social norms	Lasting shifts in relationships, control and influence, and radical change in areas such as whose agendas are recognised, whose voices are heard, and whose are excluded (Schlangen and Coe 2014).

type of M&E needed to assess progress towards policy change is very different from the kind of M&E needed to assess changes in capacity or democratic space. This is why any general advice on advocacy-related M&E needs to recognise the importance of context. It is neither useful nor possible to provide generic advice or guidelines that will be applicable in all situations.

Policy Outcomes

- Policy impact
- Policy implementation
- Policy change
- Agenda setting
- Change in discourse
- Changed awareness, attitudes and opinions

Wider Advocacy Outcomes

- Changes in social norms
- Changes in democratic space
- Strengthened base of support
- Enhanced organisational capacity
- Strengthened alliances

Changes may enable policy gains to be more sustainable

Changes may support future advocacy work

Changes may directly support specific policy changes

Challenges and Opportunities

As well as the huge variety of different kinds of advocacy interventions, there are several other challenges that need to be recognised when monitoring and evaluating advocacy work, if they are to be successfully overcome. Some of the more common ones are as follows.

- Advocacy is about influencing others, and others can choose not to engage or not to be influenced. So, for example, producing a high-quality research report or policy analysis does not guarantee that a politician will read it or engage with it. This makes it difficult to set specific objectives beyond simple activities or outputs (deliverables). What is achievable, and over what timescale, is largely determined by the context and level of engagement of key audiences.

- As a related point, change within advocacy interventions is often non-linear, unpredictable and dynamic. It can be hard to predict how change will happen, especially if the context is regularly changing. It may be hard to set useful indicators at the start of an intervention, or to define accurate milestones or targets. Advocacy interventions often have unintended consequences, and work frequently has to be stopped, reversed, slowed down or accelerated.

- Measuring or quantifying advocacy outcomes can be difficult. Many things are highly context dependent. For example, the value of media coverage, how politicians speak out on an issue, or the number of petition sign-ups all need to be understood within an overall advocacy strategy and within the particular context.

- In advocacy work, change processes are often long and drawn out. There may be many steps between initial advocacy work and ultimate changes in peoples' lives. And there is often a cumulative effect of advocacy work over time. This can make it hard to assess progress within the timeframe of a typical advocacy project or intervention. In addition, the objectives of advocacy interventions frequently change over time, in response to evolving contexts.

- Within advocacy work, change may be subjective, especially if it involves shifts in power relations, or any other kind of political change involving winners and losers. Sometimes, whether a change is positive or not depends on the viewpoint. Equally, there may be different opinions about how far a CSO has contributed to an advocacy outcome.

- It is rarely possible for a CSO to demonstrate attribution to a policy change or other advocacy outcome. Advocacy outcomes are frequently dependent on the actions of many different agencies, as well as changes in the external environment. In addition, many advocacy interventions are run through coalitions, networks or loose alliances, working around similar themes. This means there may be many different contributors to change. Disentangling this can be hard.

- Advocacy interventions tend to be fast-moving, and advocates frequently need to respond rapidly to evolving situations. This means M&E carried out in support of advocacy work needs to operate in real-time, delivering information in a timely manner that can contribute towards ongoing decision-making.

- Donor reporting is often conducted according to fixed timescales, and relies on adherence to firm plans. Yet advocacy work needs to be responsive to constantly evolving situations, which means that strategies and

plans need to be adjusted on a regular basis. Consequently, there is sometimes a fundamental mismatch between donor expectations and the kind of flexible planning and M&E needed for advocacy work.

These challenges do not mean that monitoring and evaluating advocacy work is impossible. But they do mean some thought needs to be given to how to approach M&E. From a technical point of view, solutions can be quite simple (see box below). However, putting this into practice is rarely straightforward, especially in the current results-based climate, which tends to reward predictability and certainty.

Challenge	Solution
Change processes are long and drawn out, and advocacy outcomes are often unpredictable	Be clear about what change is hoped-for over different timescales, from the short-term to much longer horizons; but don't obsess over defining specific, timebound objectives.
Change is often non-linear and dynamic	Ensure plans are very flexible, so they can regularly be changed; try to minimise targets at the activity or output level, as these will constrain ongoing adaptation.
Change may be subjective	Seek to triangulate information as far as possible, but accept that any assessment of change may be subjective to some degree – what matters is having evidence to back up claims.
Advocacy outcomes are often dependent on many factors	Focus on contribution. Don't try to 'prove' attribution to advocacy changes.
Quantifying advocacy outcomes can be difficult.	Don't try to quantify everything; use appropriate forms of qualitative inquiry to generate credible findings
Donor reporting may emphasise certainty and predictability	Negotiate with donors where possible to enable more adaptive approaches to M&E; try to retain as much flexibility as a donor allows.

It is also important to recognise that there are some aspects of advocacy work that make it easier to monitor and evaluate than other kinds of work. For example:

- Advocacy work is often focused on clear, identifiable policy outcomes that are easy to measure, and can be established as a matter of record, such as introducing a new policy, amending an existing one, or opposing a new, proposed one.

- Some advocacy work is targeted at a limited number of stakeholders. It may be easier to assess the change in behaviour of a few individuals or organisations than to assess changes across numerous households, as is often the case in service delivery work.

- Within advocacy circles, it is accepted that plans, objectives, indicators and targets need to change regularly. This is not always the case with service

delivery work, where staff may be constrained by plans drawn up at the start of a project or programme.

- Finally, as outlined in the next section, good M&E within advocacy work often relies more on common sense and good management than the adoption of complex tools and techniques.

The point is not that monitoring and evaluating advocacy is necessarily more difficult than monitoring and evaluating other kinds of development intervention. Rather, it offers different opportunities and challenges, and therefore needs to be approached differently.

The purpose of advocacy M&E

In some ways the purpose of advocacy-related M&E is no different from the purpose of any kind of M&E. That is to:

- check whether work is on track;
- adjust work as necessary;
- learn, in order to improve performance in existing or future work;
- demonstrate accountability to different stakeholders, such as donors and supporters;
- enhance communication with other stakeholders; and
- generate financial and political support.

As far as ongoing monitoring is concerned, the primary purpose is to ensure that advocacy M&E supports real-time, ongoing adaptation in response to evolving situations, including changes resulting from advocacy activities, as well as changes in the external environment. This often means changing or adapting advocacy strategies and plans. In order to do this, advocates need to know:

- what is changing, how and why in the environment around them;
- what external events are influencing their advocacy work;
- who else is working on the advocacy issues;
- what their advocacy allies are doing;
- how well activities are being implemented;
- how problems and challenges are evolving;
- what opportunities are becoming available;
- whether the actions they are taking are having the desired effect, and if not, why not; and
- what else is changing because of their work.

For example, there could be a need for a major shift as a result of a media report, a new coalition forming, or the announcement of a policy consultation. Or if a meeting with a Minister or a local government official goes badly, advocates need to try and understand why, and improve for the next meeting, or a meeting with a different stakeholder.

Although these practices could be seen as part of an M&E approach, they often are not considered that way by advocates. Indeed, most advocacy data collection is done through standard processes that cross the divide between management and M&E – such as interviewing stakeholders,

observing change at meetings and events, scanning the environment for changes, and reviewing change through workshops or team meetings.

When developing or strengthening an M&E approach for advocacy, it is therefore important to understand what advocates are already doing in terms of monitoring, reporting and learning, and see where practical additional processes can be added. This may involve, for example, gathering more systematic, triangulated feedback, having regular learning and reflection meetings, or identifying changes that were expected as a result of advocacy activities. Coe and Schlangen (2019, p3) argue that:

> *"the key contribution [M&E] specialists can make is to find the best ways to create space for busy people to reflect critically on their work, draw out information, and apply the learning to future work in a timely way."*

Of course, there may also be times when more formal M&E approaches are needed. Sometimes it may be necessary to carry out a formal evaluation or study to help assess contribution to an advocacy 'win'. At other times it might be necessary to carry out a large survey of a targeted population, engage in detailed media analysis, or undertake complex social network analysis. But when engaged in advocacy work, these tend to be the exceptions rather than the rule.

Evaluating advocacy

Although a lot of advocacy M&E focuses on the provision of accurate, real-time information, there is also sometimes a need to conduct a formal review or evaluation to assess what has changed, and how an advocacy intervention contributed to that change.

Assessing what has changed can range from very easy (e.g. recording a change in policy) to very difficult (e.g. evaluating deep cultural shifts in social norms and attitudes). On the other hand, defining attributability for change is usually impossible in advocacy work, where almost every finding is open to different interpretations (Schlangen and Coe 2014).

In these circumstances, the role of an evaluator is not to explore all of the different perspectives or explanations for a change, and decide which one is true. Rather, it is to weigh up how well the evidence supports different perspectives, make a judgement that can then be defended, and use any findings to stimulate learning and reflection (Coe and Schlangen 2019). In many circumstances this also involves presenting alternative explanations of how change might have come about.

This means that advocacy evaluation requires, amongst other things: (see Teles and Schmitt 2011)

- a deep knowledge of, and feel for, the politics of an issue;
- strong networks of trust among different stakeholders;

- a sense for the right time horizon against which to measure change; and
- a recognition of the *"complex, foggy chains of causality in politics"*.

The work of an advocacy evaluator is often likened to that of a lawyer or a journalist: collecting information and weighing up evidence in order to present a balanced, coherent, logical case. But because findings in advocacy evaluation can rarely be 'proved', it is always important to acknowledge the level of uncertainty about findings.

Ultimately, CSOs and donors need to accept that the best that can often be achieved is for an advocacy evaluation to reach a critical or informed estimate of change, and contribution to change. This will usually be based around a qualitative assessment. As with any qualitative analysis, a great deal will depend on the skills, honesty and integrity of those tasked with making the assessment.

Once the case has been made, it can be put into the public domain. This will then allow others to discuss, support, amend or reject the findings, based on the strength of the argument, and the evidence on which it is based.

Summary

M&E for advocacy work is not the same as M&E for service delivery projects. As with any M&E carried out in complex or rapidly changing environments, ongoing advocacy M&E requires real-time systems that are capable of supplying information for ongoing decision-making. Where more formal evaluations or reviews are required, the task is often to reach a critical assessment of change, and contribution to change, based on the best available evidence, and a deep appreciation of the context.

There are many challenges associated with advocacy M&E. But they can sometimes be over-stated. If advocacy M&E is judged against the standards of M&E conducted in straightforward service-delivery interventions then it will inevitably fall short. Instead, it needs to be judged on its own terms, or if necessary benchmarked against the expectations and standards of M&E carried out in other forms of complex social development work, such as peacebuilding or governance.

Ultimately, an effective advocacy M&E approach should be judged according to:

- whether ongoing monitoring systems are capable of supplying real-time, reliable information and analyses that help advocates make decisions on a regular basis; and
- whether advocacy evaluations are capable of presenting a critical and informed assessment of change, and contribution to change, backed up by evidence, with due regard to the contribution of others, and any uncertainties involved.

Arguably, the hardest thing about advocacy M&E is not conducting it, but rather agreeing on the level of internal and/or external expectations.

Further reading and resources

The next paper in this section of the M&E Universe looks at how to design or develop an M&E system for an advocacy intervention. Other papers deal with the M&E of advocacy activities, assessing contribution to advocacy outcomes, and evaluating advocacy portfolios. Other relevant papers in the M&E Universe cover the use of M&E for adaptive management, and how to deal with donor demands.

▶ **M&E systems for advocacy work**

▶ **Monitoring advocacy activities**

▶ **Contribution to advocacy outcomes**

▶ **M&E of advocacy portfolios**

▶ **Donor demands**

▶ **Adaptive management**
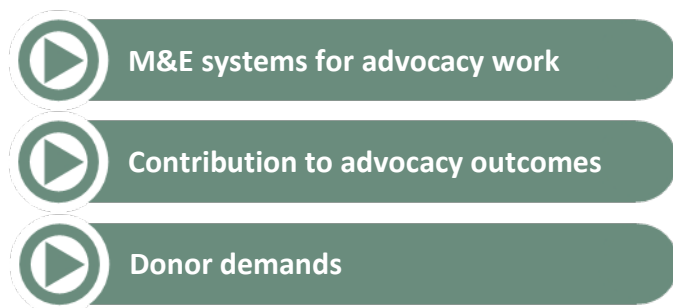
An excellent recent publication covering the theoretical aspects of advocacy M&E can be found in the paper by Coe and Schlangen (2019) referenced below. This can be found at https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/no-royal-road-finding-and-following-the-natural-pathways-in-advocacy-evaluation/.

References

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