

Strengthening Participation for Policy Influence

Trócaire supports Southern civil society organisations (CSOs) to carry out advocacy on issues of rights, poverty and inequality. At an international level, we tackle the structures underpinning injustice through our direct advocacy with Northern governments and global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Trócaire increasingly aims to integrate support to our civil society partners at country level with international advocacy work.

Recently, Trócaire evaluated a four-year programme of work which used the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) initiative as a framework to combine Trócaire's support for partners' advocacy work on social and economic justice at country level with its efforts to influence World Bank and IMF policy at an international level. The evaluation was carried out largely internally to institutionalise learning. Some elements were evaluated externally, for objectivity, including Trócaire's international advocacy work.

This briefing summarises key lessons from this experience. It is likely to be useful to international CSOs who aim to integrate their own international advocacy with the work of field staff and partners at country level. However, it will also be useful to Southern CSOs involved in advocacy oriented at international institutions, and donors who support civil society work on participation, advocacy and social and economic justice.

• Content of Briefing

This briefing paper looks at lessons learned by Trócaire under the following headings:

1) Strengthening CSO advocacy at country level.

2) Linking country-based and international advocacy.

• Background

The PRSP initiative was established by the World Bank and IMF in 1999 as a precondition for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. While Trócaire recognised the many weaknesses of the PRSP, it also recognised that it had potential to increase civil society's participation in, and influence over, policy-making at national level. Furthermore it offered the opportunity to hold the World Bank and IMF to account for their commitments under the PRSP approach. As a result, Trócaire's PRS project was established in early 2002. The overall aim of the project was to: *'Strengthen participation in the PRSP process in selected countries in order to contribute to increased social / economic justice and space for civil society, by working with partners and other key stakeholders in participatory advocacy.'*

Specific objectives included building the capacity of partners and Trócaire staff to carry out advocacy for social and economic justice, and influencing World Bank and IMF policy on conditionality and debt cancellation.

A cross-organisational team was set up, made up of the Coordinator in the Policy & Advocacy Unit in Ireland and a Civil Society / Advocacy Officer in both Rwanda and Honduras. Partners and staff in countries including Nicaragua, Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi were also involved. However Trócaire did not have dedicated staff for the PRS project in these countries.

Summary:

- Northern CSOs can significantly help Southern CSOs demand accountability, influence policy and increase citizen participation.
- At country level, civil society needs to increase engagement on an organised basis with the political processes which govern policy-making and implementation.
- In doing this, it is essential to develop strong linkages between CSOs working at local level and those working on policy issues at national level.
- At global level, it is possible for CSOs to have a significant advocacy impact on institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, with relatively few resources.
- However a key challenge is to root international CSO advocacy more thoroughly in Southern CSO priorities and analysis.

Honduras- Key lessons:

- It is possible to empower the very poor and marginalised, by resourcing and providing technical accompaniment to CSOs involved in participatory work at a local and sectoral level.
- It is essential to work with civil society to increase capacity for policy analysis and political influence at a national level, while maintaining strong links to the participatory models of working at local level.
- Support for alliance-building among CSOs is key, particularly for building effective local-national links.

1. Strengthening CSO advocacy at country level

1.1 Honduras

• Context

After Hurricane Mitch, Honduras qualified for HIPC debt relief. The association of the PRS with a future flow of funds under HIPC meant that poverty became part of the public policy discourse in Honduras for the first time. There was some institutionalisation of the PRSP through the establishment of a Consultative Council with legal oversight over HIPC funds. However the PRS failed to achieve broad political ownership from the outset, being seen largely as a condition for gaining access to debt relief. A change of administration after recent elections has seen political commitment to the PRS diminish further.

Nonetheless, the PRS process has been extremely important for civil society in Honduras. Key civil society actors engaged with the PRS concept from the start, which led to activity around use of public resources and the right to participate at many levels: community, municipal, sectoral and national. Civil society gained significant space in the above-mentioned Consultative Council.

• Trócaire's work in Honduras: impact and lessons learned

In Honduras, Trócaire worked with a wide range of partners, at local, sub-national and national levels, providing support for institutional development and advocacy capacity-building. The intention was to help civil society challenge the intensely unequal systems of policy-making and implementation in Honduras.

Trócaire's support to partners was key in helping them to generate evidence-based advocacy strategies, including through the production of Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) and regional (e.g. sub-national) PRSPs. These were used effectively at local, sub-national and national levels to lobby government (and donors) for both increased resources and greater civil society access to decision-making processes.

Trócaire learned that it was possible to empower the poorest of the poor through their involvement in the creation of concrete proposals on the use of resources at local level. The participatory methodologies for drawing up the regional PRSPs and PPAs have had an important impact on CSO capacity in terms of planning, negotiation, awareness and learning. These methodologies facilitated the development of regional and sectoral agendas, and contributed to CSO alliance building. Civil society actors have learned how to relate and position themselves relative to government, particularly at sub-national level. Furthermore, these documents impacted significantly on the discourse around poverty and the PRSP at national level.

However, many challenges remain, particularly in scaling up advocacy initiatives from local to national level, and creating durable and effective CSO networks. Furthermore, while civil society now plays an important role in monitoring planning and budgeting procedures, it is not adequately addressing the content of public policies and decision-making within the political system. This is critical if civil society is to keep poverty on a political agenda which is dominated by elite interests.

1.2 Rwanda

• Context

The PRS approach was adopted by the Government of Rwanda at an early stage, and unlike in Honduras, achieved significant political ownership. The PRS remains the Rwandan government's key organising framework for development policy and aid coordination in Rwanda.

The PRS has provided an avenue for civil society to engage with government on practical development issues. However, in the aftermath of a genocide, it is inevitable that there will be a deep level of mistrust in any society. The post-genocide context, therefore, considerably constrains the space for civil society advocacy on social and economic justice, with the Government generally preferring to keep a close watch on dissent within both political and non-political spheres. The mistrust and tension which continues to

permeate wider society also heightens the sensitivity and delicacy of civil society interventions. On the whole, civil society is quite weak and poorly organised, but gaining in capacity gradually.

• **Trócaire's work in Rwanda: impact and lessons learned**

In Rwanda, Trócaire worked very closely with a small number of civil society partners on advocacy for social and economic justice. The partners selected were those which were seen as having a pivotal role in rebuilding civil society in the post-genocide era. Working with partners on basic organisational development was key, as the genocide and subsequent exodus of many Rwandese had diminished the skill-base in civil society.

Trócaire provided: support for basic organisational development; accompaniment and technical support for service delivery, strategic planning and advocacy; external resource persons or subject matter specialists through short-term consultancies; and facilitation of regional exposure visits. Specifically, supporting organisations to become well-functioning entities, with a sound management structure and accounting systems, was fundamental to Trócaire's approach. Not only was it seen as a foundation for all further work on capacity building and advocacy by an individual CSO, it was also seen as key to building overall capacity and institutional space for civil society.

Trócaire found that partners' advocacy initiatives were most likely to have an impact when focused around a particular sector. A sectoral focus allowed for concrete, issue-based engagement with individual ministries, who often proved open to dialogue when presented with sound arguments grounded in evidence. It also built partners' skills and confidence in carrying out advocacy work. Examples included partners' work on widow's rights, micro-finance and labour rights.

An important finding was that success in engaging with the government by one CSO, on a particular policy topic, was interpreted more widely in civil society as a success for

all. This was because creating space for wider policy dialogue hinged on building government understanding of, and trust in, civil society.

Trócaire also realised the importance of helping to build strong, representative alliances. Though a crucial area of work it is deeply problematic and complex in Rwanda, mainly because of internal fractures and poor capacity levels. Nonetheless, assiduous support has meant that CSO umbrellas and forums are becoming stronger and making relevant and organised contributions to policy discussions.

A key role played by Trócaire was the facilitation of dialogue between government and civil society. Becoming a trusted partner of government was seen by Trócaire to be very important. However, all international CSOs need to be aware of the fragility of relationships with authorities in post-conflict situations. All policy frameworks and dialogue processes are underpinned by deeper concerns for personal and state security, for both government and wider society.

2. Linking country-based and international advocacy

The intention behind Trócaire's PRS project was to ensure PRS-related international advocacy work was fed by country-based advocacy issues, and vice versa. However, the PRS project was grounded in the reality that country-based programme officers would have to respond to a local advocacy agenda, which did not necessarily have links at an international level. Equally, at an international level, issues arose which demanded an advocacy response from Trócaire, but which may not have had immediate relevance to the work at country level. Nonetheless, some of Trócaire's experiences provide key lessons for overcoming this and other tensions going forward.

The advocacy issues Trócaire focused on at international level included: IMF and World Bank implementation of PRSP principles; the role of the IMF in low-income countries; conditionality; and aid effectiveness

Rwanda- Key lessons:

- Ongoing accompaniment in organisational development is often fundamental to achieving higher level progress in CSO advocacy work.
- Working on sectoral entry points for evidence-based advocacy is key, and helps build overall institutional space for improving government-civil society relations.
- Building strong, representative alliances is very important, but extremely difficult in a post-conflict situation, requiring sensitivity and patience.
- International CSOs in a post-conflict situation need to attempt to build trust with authorities, but must remain sensitive to the overriding political context which affects these relationships.

Further information

This Briefing is based on the following report: 'Strengthening Participation for Policy Influence - Lessons learned from Trócaire's PRS Project, 2002 - 2006'.

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International advocacy- Key lessons:

• Root advocacy in country agendas

An international CSOs' capacity to be 'ahead of the curve' in addressing emerging issues at international level was seen as important by policymakers. However, this is often in tension with country-driven work, as a focus on emerging international issues reduces space for attention to partners' ongoing concerns.

International advocacy by Northern-based CSOs needs to be firmly embedded in the concerns and agendas of Southern partners, without losing sight of the changing international context. Doing this requires dedicated staff with a policy and advocacy mandate in-country, who are closely linked to head office policy and advocacy staff, and improved dialogue with partners on agenda-setting for collaborative advocacy work.

• Build cross-organisational teams

Like many Northern-based CSOs, Trócaire traditionally had a separation between 'programme' staff working with partners, and 'policy' staff working on international advocacy. Trócaire found that creating teams involving both programme and policy staff builds impact and learning at both programme and policy level. However, there is a need for strong team processes of strategic planning, review and learning. This is particularly important when staff are working in different country contexts. Clear job descriptions are crucial when working in cross-organisational teams.

• Produce effective research reports

Research reports on specific policy topics are key tools for CSO advocacy at the IMF and World Bank. According to IMF and World Bank staff, CSO reports are taken into consideration when they are thoroughly researched, illustrate a solid understanding of IFI processes, offer a range of perspectives, give useful insight into what is happening on the ground, use evidence-based arguments and make realistic recommendations.

Such reports are particularly useful to reformers within the institutions. Reports which use inflammatory language or which consistently criticise the IMF and World Bank without offering alternatives tend to reinforce anti-reform hard-liners in those institutions.

A critical element in global analysis is

access to timely material from country level. For Trócaire, having dedicated advocacy officers with the capacity to carry out country-specific analysis has been very effective for both country-level and international-level advocacy with the IMF and World Bank.

• Use research reports effectively

Influencing policy requires systematic distribution of research and analytic work, both at country and international levels, as part of a broader strategy of engagement with policy-makers.

• Step up focus on content rather than process

To date, CSOs have had a greater impact on IMF and World Bank policy formulation and implementation processes than on actual policy content. This is often related to a lack of capacity for analysis of policy content in both Northern and Southern CSOs. It needs to be addressed through targeted capacity building and links to academic institutions. Increasing capacity for macro-economic analysis is particularly pertinent.

• Balance 'insider' with 'outsider' approach

Adopting an 'insider' approach to IMF and World Bank advocacy, using direct engagement with their staff to try to influence change in specific policy areas, can be useful for establishing credibility and trust with policy-makers. As a small international CSO, this was an effective approach for Trócaire. However, impact could be increased through combining this with a more political, campaigns-oriented 'outsider' approach.

3. Conclusion

Trócaire has learned that its cross-organisational approach, combining policy and programme expertise, can pay off both in terms of citizen empowerment locally and policy influencing internationally. However, it is clear that there is a need to build on such experiences to develop broader strategic programmes around social and economic justice and poverty eradication, with clear policy change objectives at national and international level. The work needs to be based more firmly in country level analysis and support to partners, while maintaining a crucial link to international policy.