

Research and advocacy: ideas from NGOs in Malawi

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Kate Gooding

Two ideas about NGO advocacy and research

1. Research can help advocacy: advocacy should use research
- ‘evidence based advocacy’
2. Advocacy can help research: NGOs’ advocacy can help disseminate research and promote uptake e.g.
“NGO advocacy can exert effective pressure on policy makers to act on the evidence quickly” (Zachariah et al. 2012)
– given as one reason for academics to collaborate with NGOs

Concerns about negative effects of advocacy on research e.g. simplification and distortion of findings, policy based evidence
- another day

Methods



- Based on fieldwork in Malawi in 2011-12 – case studies of 4 NGOs
- International and national, some link to health, all involved in service delivery, advocacy and research
- NGOs doing at least some research – not necessarily typical of NGOs involved in advocacy
- Interviews, observation, group discussions, document review

Doing research for advocacy

Purpose of research:

1. Identify advocacy issues
 2. Understand advocacy issues
 3. Prove advocacy issues
- May overlap
 - Which counts as evidence based advocacy?

Research or other evidence?

- Much advocacy uses other kinds of evidence e.g. individuals/groups affected by the issue, legal evidence, indications of public support

“So many documents were developed, policy documents were developed, but they were not convinced. Until the NGOs said OK, let us go to a hospital bed, get a victim. So we went to the hospital and got a victim who had had both hands chopped by her husband. She was brought before the leader of the opposition. When he saw that, immediately he instructed his team that they should enact that particular law.”

Disseminating research

Channels:

- Theatre for development
 - Workshops
 - Network meetings (NGOs/government/donors)
 - Behind-the-scenes meetings
 - Email lists and websites
 - Involving policy makers in the research process
- Need time, interest, connections, \$\$, etc.

Some interest in traditional academic routes:

- Journals – some interest, academics can help
- International conferences – international advocacy goals, funding to attend them



Advocacy or dissemination?

- Blurred line between advocacy, informing people and dissemination.
- Quiet approach to dissemination among international NGOs:

“It isn’t about holding a big workshop or having a campaign, you won’t see us doing that, the most you’ll see is us producing a research report and disseminating it fairly quietly.”

“We always have to emphasise that ‘we’re not pushing for policy direction, I think we just want to share this information, it’s for you good to know, so you know the lessons just in case, maybe in the future or whenever, you may find this information useful’.”

Reasons?

- Quieter approaches seen as more effective
- Confrontational advocacy could threaten service delivery
- Perceived legitimacy of international organisations
- No need for high profile campaigns to generate publicity and funding
- Some research does not give clear policy direction

Conclusions

- Interest in evidence based advocacy – but variation in the purpose of research and what counts as evidence
- An NGO involved in advocacy is not necessarily going to make a lot of noise about research findings



References

Zachariah, R., Ford, N., Maher, D., Bissell, K., Van den Bergh, R., Van den Boogaard, W., Reid, T., Castro, K.G., Draguez, B., Von Schreeb, J., Chakaya, J., Atun, R., Lienhardt, C., Enarson, D.A. & Harries, A.D., 2012. Is operational research delivering the goods? The journey to success in low-income countries. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 12(5), pp.415–421.