

# Policy Engagement

## How Civil Society Can be More Effective

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Julius Court, Enrique Mendizabal,  
David Osborne and John Young





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The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is Britain's leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues. Our mission is to inspire and inform policy and practice which lead to the reduction of poverty, the alleviation of suffering and the achievement of sustainable livelihoods in developing countries. We do this by locking together high-quality applied research, practical policy advice, and policy-focused dissemination and debate. We work with partners in the public and private sectors, in both developing and developed countries. See: [www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk)

ODI's Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme aims to improve the use of research in development policy and practice through improved: knowledge about research in policy processes; communication and knowledge management; awareness of the importance of research; and approaches to capacity development in this area. This paper was written as part of a programme, supported by our Programme Partnership Agreement with DFID, which aims to improve the capacity of Southern civil society organisations to influence pro-poor policy. See: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid)

## Join the RAPID Network

We hope this report provides insights and stimulates others to work in this area. An emerging network, coordinated initially by ODI, will focus on:

- Generating greater awareness of the importance of evidence use by CSOs.
- Providing more 'how to' information to CSOs interested in informed policy influence.
- Working with others to build systematic capacity in this area.
- Undertaking new research on informed CSO policy engagement.
- Supporting policy engagement on issues where CSOs can have an impact.

For further information, see: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid)

To get involved, email: [rapid@odi.org.uk](mailto:rapid@odi.org.uk)

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# Contents

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|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary</b>  | <b>iv</b> |
| <b>1 Introduction: Policy Engagement for Poverty Reduction</b>              | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>2 CSOs, Evidence Use and Policy Influence</b>                            | <b>5</b>  |
| Key Terms   | 5         |
| Why and How Evidence Matters for CSOs                                       | 7         |
| <b>3 Current Situation: Opportunities and Constraints</b>                   | <b>13</b> |
| A Changing Context  | 13        |
| Civil Society and Policy Engagement: Current Situation                      | 14        |
| Main Barriers to CSO Policy Engagement and Evidence Use                     | 15        |
| <b>4 Practical Approaches to Resolve Key Obstacles</b>                      | <b>25</b> |
| Policy Entrepreneurship in Challenging Contexts                             | 25        |
| Improving Understanding of Policy Processes                                 | 29        |
| Better Strategy: Targeting the Policy Process                               | 31        |
| Using Better Evidence   | 33        |
| Communicating for Policy Influence  | 35        |
| The Power of Networks   | 36        |
| Building CSO Capacity   | 37        |
| <b>5 Conclusion and Looking Forward</b>                                     | <b>43</b> |
| <b>References</b>   | <b>45</b> |
| <b>Annex 1: Select Background Materials</b>                                 | <b>47</b> |
| <b>Annex 2: RAPID Framework: How to Influence Policy and Practice</b>       | <b>48</b> |
| <b>Annex 3: Interesting CSO Organisations</b>                               | <b>49</b> |
| <b>Acknowledgments and Authors' Biographies</b>                             | <b>50</b> |
| <b>Acronyms</b>   | <b>51</b> |
| <b>Figures and Tables</b>   |           |
| Figure 1: The Policy Cycle: Key Components and Actors                       | 7         |
| Figure 2: CSOs, Evidence and Pro-Poor Impact                                | 8         |
| Figure 3: How Organisations Seek to Influence Policy                        | 14        |
| Figure 4: Main Obstacles to CSO Engagement in Policy Processes              | 15        |
| Figure 5: Main Obstacles to Using Research and Evidence to Influence Policy | 16        |
| Figure 6: CSO Needs for Effective Policy Engagement                         | 38        |
| Table 1: Types and Benefits of Pilot Projects                               | 27        |
| Table 2: Targeting Components of the Policy Process and Evidence Needs      | 32        |

# Executive Summary

Civil society organisations (CSOs) make a difference in international development. They provide development services and humanitarian relief, innovate in service delivery, build local capacity and advocate with and for the poor. Acting alone, however, their impact is limited in scope, scale and sustainability. CSOs need to engage in government policy processes more effectively.

With increased democratisation, reductions in conflict, and advances in information and communication technologies, there is potential for progressive partnerships between CSOs and policymakers in more developing countries. However, CSOs are having a limited impact on policy and practice, and ultimately the lives of poor people. In many countries they act on their own or in opposition to the state, leading to questions about their legitimacy and accountability. Their policy positions are also increasingly questioned: researchers challenge their evidence base and policymakers question the feasibility of their recommendations.

The first part of this report shows why and how better use of evidence by CSOs is part of the solution to increasing the policy influence and pro-poor impact of their work. Better use of evidence can: (i) improve the impact of CSOs' service delivery work; (ii) increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of their policy engagement efforts, helping CSOs to gain a place and have influence at the policy table; and (iii) ensure that policy recommendations are genuinely pro-poor.

The second half of the report outlines how CSOs can engage more effectively in policy processes. It includes strategic and practical advice regarding how CSOs can overcome the main challenges to policy engagement. These challenges and some effective ways of addressing them are outlined in the following table.

In some countries, adverse political contexts continue to be the main barrier to informed policy engagement. But often, the extent of CSOs' influence on policy is in their own hands. By getting the fundamentals right – assessing context, engaging policymakers, getting rigorous evidence, working with partners, communicating well – CSOs can overcome key internal obstacles. The result will be more effective, influential and sustained policy engagement for poverty reduction.

## Approaches for Effective Policy Engagement

| Key obstacles to CSOs  | Potential solutions for effective policy engagement   |
|--|---|
| <b>External</b>  |   |
| Adverse political contexts constrain CSO policy work.                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Campaigns</i> – to improve policy positions and governance contexts (page 25).</li> <li>• <i>'Boomerangs'</i> – working via external partners to change national policy (page 26).</li> <li>• <i>Pilot projects</i> – to develop and test operational solutions to inform and improve policy implementation (page 27).</li> </ul> |
| <b>Internal</b>  |   |
| Limited understanding of specific policy processes, institutions and actors. | Conduct rigorous context assessments. These enable a better understanding of how policy processes work, the politics affecting them and the opportunities for policy influence. We outline key issues and some simple approaches to mapping political contexts (page 29).   |
| Weak strategies for policy engagement.                                       | Identify critical policy stages – agenda setting, formulation and/or implementation – and the engagement mechanisms that are most appropriate for each stage. We provide a framework that matches the different approaches and evidence requirements to key stages of the policy process (page 31).   |
| Inadequate use of evidence.  | Ensure that evidence is relevant, objective, generalisable and practical. This helps improve CSO legitimacy and credibility with policymakers. We outline sources of research advice and mechanisms for how CSOs can access better evidence (page 33).  |
| Weak communication approaches in policy influence work.                      | Engage in two-way communication and use existing tools for planning, packaging, targeting and monitoring communication efforts. Doing so will help CSOs make their interventions more accessible, digestible and timely for policy discussions. We provide examples and sources of further information (page 35).   |
| Working in an isolated manner.   | Apply network approaches. Networks can help CSOs: bypass obstacles to consensus; assemble coalitions for change; marshal and amplify evidence; and mobilise resources. We outline the key roles of networks (from filters to convenors) and the 10 keys to network success (page 36).   |
| Limited capacity for policy influence.                                       | Engage in systemic capacity building. CSOs need a wide range of technical capacities to maximise their chances of policy influence. We outline some key areas where CSOs could build their own capacity or access it from partners (page 37).   |



Children sign up to join the Bal Mazdoor children's union. Maintained by an NGO called Butterflies, the union acts as a forum through which children can voice concerns and fight for their rights.



# Introduction: Policy Engagement for Poverty Reduction

Civil society organisations (CSOs) make a difference in international development. They provide humanitarian relief and basic services, innovate in service delivery, build capacity and advocate with and for the poor. Recent years have also seen their role and spheres of influence mushroom. For example, CSOs in Ghana, Zimbabwe and Kenya now provide 40% of all healthcare and education services in those countries.<sup>1</sup> There are an estimated 22,000 development NGOs in Bangladesh alone which provide some service (credit, health or education) to between 25-30% of the population. It is said that NGOs reach 20% of the world's poor. Development NGOs have annual global revenues of some US\$12 billion.

By acting alone, however, CSO impact is limited in scope, scale and sustainability. History has shown that, ultimately, effective states are vital for sustained developmental progress. Progressive government policy and effective implementation matter. But there is mixed progress across the developing world towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Work remains to be done to make policy and practice more pro-poor. CSOs need to engage policy processes more effectively.<sup>2</sup>

The last 15 years have seen significant changes in the contexts affecting the relationship between CSOs and policymakers. Challenging political contexts continue to constrain the work of CSOs. But with globalisation, democratisation, decentralisation, reductions in conflict and advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs), there is potential for progressive partnerships in more and more developing countries (with the public and private sector).<sup>3</sup> CSOs have become aware that policy engagement can often have a greater impact than contestation. Moreover, policy advocacy by CSOs can spur more widespread benefits than their service delivery effort alone.

The problem is that CSOs are having a limited impact on public policy and practice, and the lives of poor people. Despite evidence of more open and accessible policy contexts, assessments highlight that CSOs are often failing to influence policy processes in developing countries. This limited impact was highlighted by CSOs themselves in our workshops and survey. This implies scope for more effective and sustained policy impact.

Why are CSOs having limited policy influence? The evidence in this paper suggests that this is partly to do with political factors in a particular country, but that part of the responsibility also lies with CSOs themselves. All too often, CSOs appear to act on their own, leading to questions about their legitimacy and accountability. Many also query the policy positions put forward by CSOs – researchers question their evidence base and policymakers question their feasibility.

This report argues that better use of evidence by CSOs is part of the solution to increasing the policy influence and pro-poor impact of their work. Better utilisation of research and evidence in development policy and practice can help save lives, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life.<sup>4</sup> Although some CSOs use research effectively, there is a concern that others ignore or abuse evidence in their policy engagement. Others are unaware of the importance of using

evidence well. In order to have a greater impact, civil society must improve their interaction with, and effect on, public institutions, actors and policies – and do so based on rigorous evidence.

The aim of the report is to:

- show why evidence matters for CSOs work in international development;
- present strategic and practical advice regarding how CSOs can ensure their policy engagement is more effective, influential and sustained.

We hope the report encourages debate but also that it inspires and informs CSOs towards greater evidence-based policy engagement.

The report is based on a range of studies on key issues around the topic of civil society, evidence and policy influence. This includes literature reviews; a survey with responses from 130 CSOs; case studies; thematic studies; practical action research projects; and a series of 22 learning workshops involving over 800 people in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This synthesis report concentrates on the key findings and lessons learned from the process.

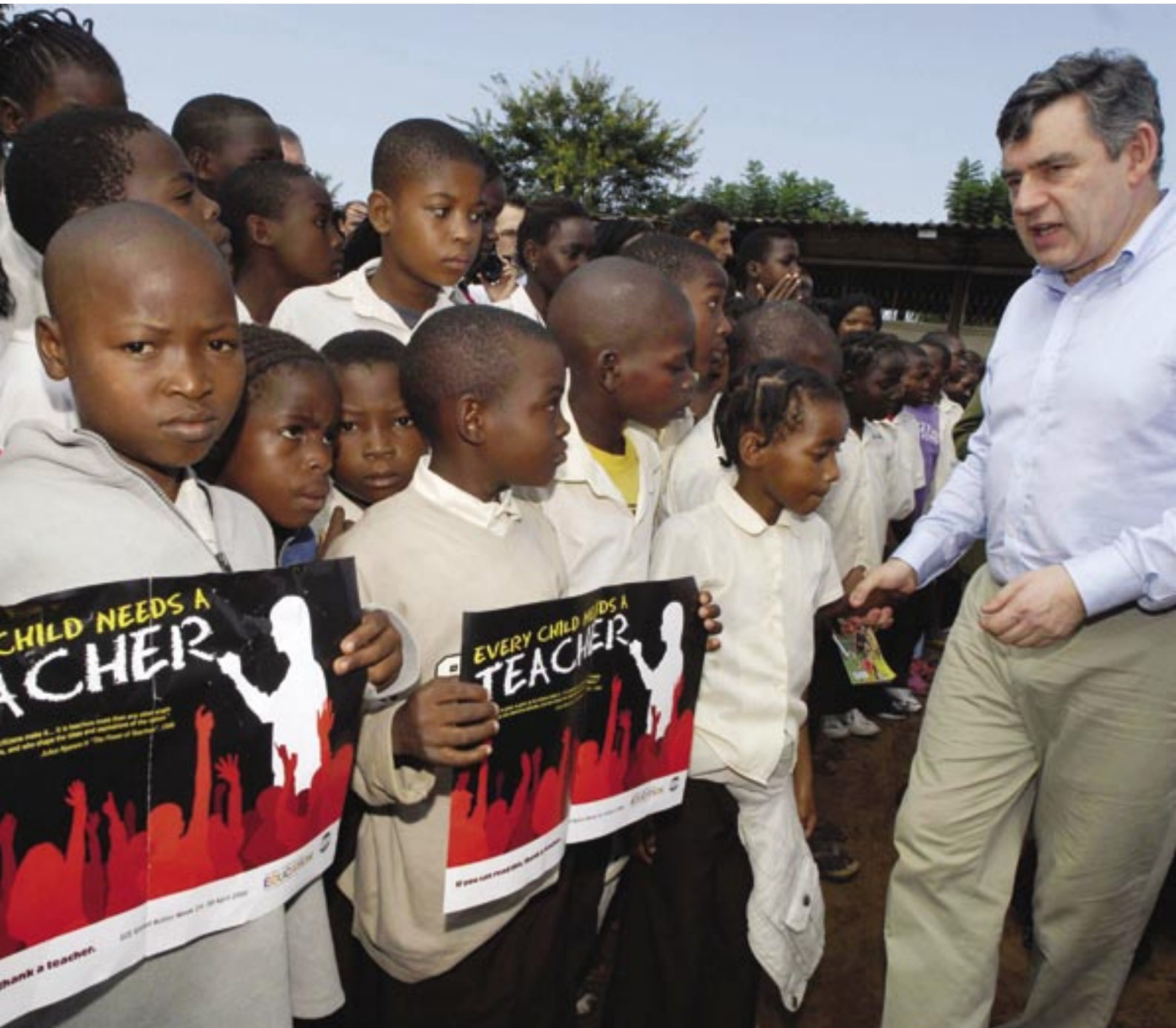
The report is set out as follows. Section 2 outlines what we mean by civil society, evidence and policy influence and provides a framework for linking these core issues. Section 3 discusses the current situation facing CSOs and the opportunities and challenges for CSO engagement in policy processes. It concludes with the main barriers facing CSOs. Section 4, comprising half the report, focuses on the kinds of practical actions that CSOs can take to overcome the key barriers. Section 5 concludes and argues that the future looks positive and success is largely in CSOs own hands.

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#### Notes

- 1 Figures are sourced from Edwards (2004). The Bangladesh estimate is from DFID (2000). Other figures are from Fowler (2000).
- 2 Although there are two sides to the relationship, our recommendations focus on what CSOs can do.
- 3 The focus of this report is on the relationship between CSOs and public policy. Therefore, although important, we give little attention to the private sector and CSO-private sector links.
- 4 This has been the focus of the RAPID programme at ODI. In previous work we identified evidence as being among four key sets of issues that matter for the uptake of ideas into policy and practice, the others being political context, links and external influences (Court, Hovland and Young, 2005). Recent work has further emphasised the importance of CSOs in bridging research and policy (Court and Maxwell, 2005). See: [www.odi.org/rapid](http://www.odi.org/rapid)





Pupils at Forces Primary School urge Gordon Brown, British Chancellor of the Exchequer, to support the 'Every child needs a teacher' campaign. Brown was in Mozambique to launch a new 'Free education for all' initiative.



# CSOs, Evidence Use and Policy Influence

## Key Terms

‘CSOs’, ‘evidence’ and ‘policy influence’ are broad terms. It is important to specify here what we mean and to outline how they relate to each other.

### Civil Society Organisations

CSOs refer to ‘any organisation that works in the arena between the household, the private sector, and the state, to negotiate matters of public concern’.<sup>5</sup> CSOs include a very wide range of institutions and operate at many different levels, including the global, regional, national and local. Civil society includes NGOs, community groups, research institutes, think tanks, advocacy groups, trade unions, academic institutions, parts of the media, professional associations, and faith-based institutions. Our focus is on CSOs who are active in international development.

We categorise CSOs according to the functions that they play. The main CSO functions in development are:

- **representation** (organisations that aggregate citizen voice)
- **advocacy** (organisations that lobby on particular issues)
- **technical inputs** (organisations that provide information and advice)
- **capacity building** (organisations that provide support to other CSOs, including funding)
- **service delivery** (organisations that implement development projects or provide services)
- **social functions** (organisations that foster collective recreational activities)

### Evidence

Evidence, as defined in dictionary terms, refers to an indication of the basis for knowledge or belief. But this is unhelpful for our purposes as we focus on evidence that informs policy and practice in development.

We take that view that policy and practice should be informed by research-based evidence.<sup>6</sup> But we adopt a very general, though widely accepted, definition of research as ‘any systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge’.<sup>7</sup> This may include any systematic process of critical investigation and evaluation, theory building, data collection, analysis and codification related to development policy and practice. It also includes ‘action research’, i.e. self-reflection by practitioners oriented towards the enhancement of direct practice and ‘voice and consultations’. The key is that evidence is collected in a rigorous and systematic way.

Policy and practice which are informed by systemic evidence are more likely to produce better outcomes (see Box 1 on Health in Tanzania). Better utilisation of evidence in policy and practice can help policymakers identify problems, understand their causes, develop policy solutions, improve policy implementation, and monitor strategies and performance. More generally our work shows that evidence can lead to improved policy and practice, saving lives and reducing poverty in developing countries.<sup>8</sup>

### Box 1: The Importance of Evidence: The Case of TEHIP

In 1993, the World Development Report, *Investing in Health*, highlighted a minimum package of cost effective health interventions. This led to the Tanzania Essential Health Interventions Project (TEHIP), to promote evidence-based health planning and practice in Rufiji and Morogoro, two districts in Tanzania. Evidence from surveys on the burden of disease led health planners to reorient their budgets to better reflect the most serious diseases such as malaria interventions and a range of childhood illnesses. The results were striking. The health service reforms contributed to over 40% reductions in infant mortality between 2000 and 2003. The evidence-based interventions in TEHIP enabled a vast improvement in human health and well-being. Not surprisingly, the initiative is now being rolled out across the country.

Source: RAPID Case Study ([www.odi.org.uk/Rapid/Tools/Case\\_studies/TEHIP.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/Rapid/Tools/Case_studies/TEHIP.html)). For further details on TEHIP, see: [www.idrc.ca/tehip](http://www.idrc.ca/tehip)

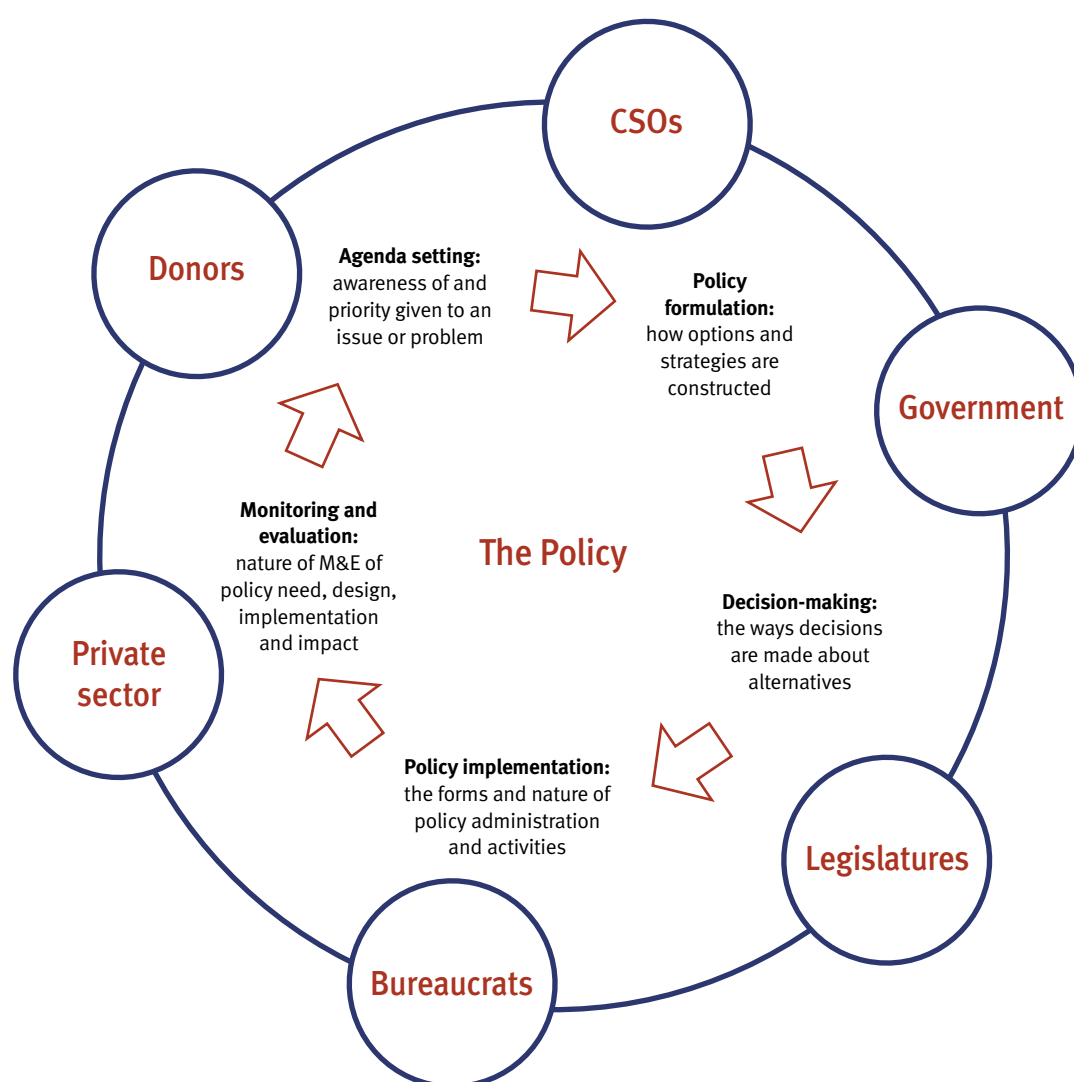
## Policy Processes and Policy Influence

We use the term ‘policy’ to denote ‘a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors’.<sup>9</sup> This goes beyond documents or legislation to include activities on the ground. It also includes changes in the behaviours of the key policy actors. While the private sector is also relevant, the focus of this report on the relationship between CSOs and policymakers in the public sector.

The ‘policy process’ is usually considered to include the following main components: agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (see Figure 1). ‘Policy influence’ refers to how external actors are able to interact with the policy process and affect the policy positions, approaches and behaviours in each of these areas.

In reality, policymaking does not work through these components in a linear manner. In developing countries in particular, the processes are often more informal. Nevertheless, the depiction is useful since it identifies the different components that are critical to policy processes.

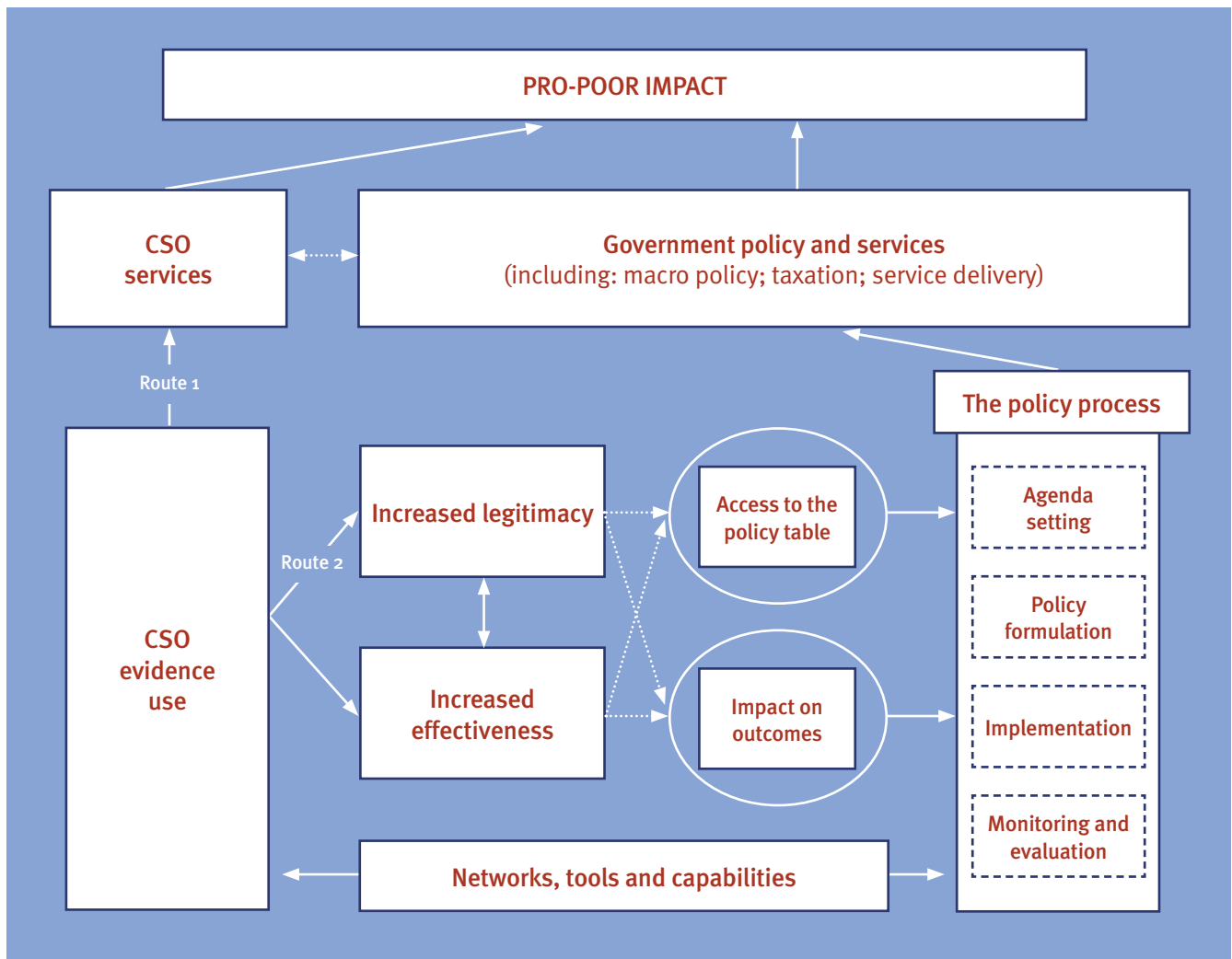
A key point is that each policy component involves a range of actors, institutions and processes. Some actors are important across the policy process, while others only play a key role at certain points. For CSOs seeking to influence policy it is vital to understand the institutions and actors involved in policy processes – both on a formal and informal level. Doing so helps to recognise the incentives and pressures on those involved, as well as and the type of evidence and communication approach needed to maximise the chances of policy influence.

**Figure 1: The Policy Cycle: Key Components and Actors**

## Why and How Evidence Matters for CSOs

This section provides a synthesis of the links between civil society, evidence and policy influence. The basic conclusion is that: (i) better outcomes stem from better policy and practice; (ii) better policy and practice occur when rigorous, systematic evidence is used; (iii) CSOs that use evidence better will have greater policy influence and greater pro-poor impact. Figure 2 outlines our framework, while some of the key points are outlined in more detail below.

As the framework below shows (see Figure 2), our ultimate aim is that development occurs and poverty is reduced. We know a lot about the kind of policies that are likely to be ‘pro-poor’ – i.e. those that improve the assets and capabilities of the poor. These may include, for example, policies that promote broad-based economic growth, improve basic services and provide safety nets. Promoting an enabling political and policy environment as well as ensuring the voices of the poor are heard in policy discussions are also key aspects of a pro-poor agenda.

**Figure 2: CSOs, Evidence, Policy and Pro-Poor Impact**

How do CSOs fit into this picture? There are two main routes, as illustrated above. First, many CSOs are directly engaged in service delivery that can have a direct pro-poor impact. Our work highlights that better evidence leads to better programmes, which in turn leads to greater impact for CSOs engaged in direct service delivery (Route 1). It is not hard to see why as rigorous evidence can help CSOs understand problems more clearly, design better interventions, make practice more effective and monitor their results.<sup>10</sup> It can also help them better share lessons with others. Just as with state organisations, an increased knowledge of what works, why and how can help CSOs improve the pro-poor impact of their own interventions.

But the problem is that the impact of individual CSOs (and usually the sector as a whole) is limited in scope, scale and sustainability. An effective state is vital for development progress – from delivering health and education to economic management to providing systems of justice. Thus, a second and vital route for pro-poor impact is informed CSO engagement with government policy processes, as outlined on the right of our diagram. If effective, this can lead to a much broader pro-poor impact. Such engagement can help identify new problems, develop new or better strategies, and make government implementation more effective. But rigorous evidence matters here too.

Why does evidence matter so much for CSOs engaging in policy influence activities? One key reason is that evidence enhances CSO legitimacy, and legitimacy matters for policy influence.<sup>11</sup>



There are various sources of legitimacy (political, legal, technical and moral) for CSOs. For example, some CSOs claim their legitimacy from representing a particular group and argue that the size and views of their membership can give weight to policy arguments. Use of rigorous evidence can also increase the technical legitimacy of a CSO. Being seen as a source of expertise can help CSOs create a space in policy processes and give them greater weight in relating to other policy actors.

Furthermore, evidence can help address concerns regarding the effectiveness of CSO engagement in policy processes. This is especially true as researchers and policymakers highlight that, too often, policy changes suggested in CSO lobbying campaigns would not benefit the poor, are based on ideological positions or narrow evidence, or have a naïve understanding of political contexts and budget constraints. For these reasons their suggestions are often never implemented.

### Box 2: Evidence and Policy Influence: *Coalition 2000* in Bulgaria

The *Coalition 2000* initiative was launched in 1998 to counteract corruption in Bulgarian society through a process of co-operation among NGOs, governmental institutions and citizens. In 2003, the Corruption Monitoring System of *Coalition 2000* identified the education sector as a corruption-prone area. University professors and school teachers were consistently rated by the general public in the top five most corrupt professions in Bulgaria.

Based on this evidence, and to support governmental efforts to tackle the problem, *Coalition 2000* developed and tested a set of instruments for teaching on corruption for use in secondary and tertiary education. This included designing textbooks, on-line study materials, manuals, and teaching programmes.

These experiences demonstrated to public institutions the benefits of introducing the topic into civic education curricula. They also underscored the usefulness of creating new anticorruption programmes and ready-made teaching materials for the Ministry of Education and Science. As a result, anticorruption classes were introduced in the official curricula of the Bulgarian secondary schools in the fall of 2004.

Source: RAPID Case Study by Dimitrova (2005) and [www.anticorruption.bg](http://www.anticorruption.bg)

If CSOs are to use evidence to bring about pro-poor policy they need to:<sup>12</sup>

- **Identify** the political constraints and opportunities and develop a political strategy for engagement.
- **Inspire** support for an issue or action; raise new ideas or question old ones; create new ways of framing an issue or ‘policy narratives’.
- **Inform** the views of others; share expertise and experience; put forward new approaches.
- **Improve** add, correct or change policy issues; hold policymakers accountable; evaluate and improve own activities, particularly regarding service provision.

At the **agenda setting** stage, evidence can help put issues on the agenda and ensure they are recognised as significant problems which require a policymaker response. CSO inputs can be even more influential if they also provide options and realistic solutions. Better use of evidence can influence public opinion, cultural norms and political contestation and indirectly affect policy processes.

At the **policy formulation** stage, evidence can be an important way to establish the credibility of CSOs. Here, evidence can be used to enhance or establish a positive reputation. CSOs can adapt the way they use evidence to maintain credibility with local communities and with

policymakers, combining their tacit and explicit knowledge of a policy issue. A key issue is to outline the theory of change – how the proposed policy measure will result in pro-poor impact. CSOs may also present evidence of their political position, as much as their competence, in order to be included within formulation discussion.

At the **implementation** stage, evidence helps CSOs translate technical skills, expert knowledge and practical experiences, so as to inform others better. CSOs have often been successful innovators in service delivery that informs broader government implementation. The key to influencing implementation of policy is often to have solutions that are realistic and generalisable across different contexts.

Finally, evidence can be further used to influence the **monitoring and evaluation** of policy. It helps to identify whether policies actually improving the lives of their intended beneficiaries. For example, many CSOs have pioneered participatory processes that transform the views of ordinary people into indicators and measures, garnering the interest of the media or other external groups. This can make help improve policy positions and make policy processes more accountable.

We can see that evidence can have a beneficial effect on CSOs – internally and externally – by aiding them to gain access to the policy process and have a greater impact. But it is also clear that policy processes are complex, with varied and different points of entry. CSOs are only one set of actors and evidence is only one of numerous factors that matter for policy influence. What is the current context facing CSOs? How are CSOs trying to maximise their impact? What are the key opportunities and challenges? These questions are addressed in the next section.

### Sources for Further Information

- Relevant background papers for this report are available from RAPID at: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid)
  - *Civil Society, Policy Influence and Evidence Use: What do we know?* (Court, Mendizabal and Osborne, 2006)
  - *How Civil Society Organisations Use Evidence to Influence Policy Processes: A literature review* (Pollard and Court, 2005)
- ‘Bridging Research and Policy in International Development’, Special Issue of the *Journal of International Development (JID)* 17(6) (Court and Maxwell, 2005)
- *Bridging Research and Policy in Development: Evidence and the Change Process*, ITDG Publishing (Court, Hovland and Young 2005)

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**Notes**

- 5 This definition is taken from DFID's Information and Civil Society Department website ([www.dfid.gov.uk](http://www.dfid.gov.uk)). The categorisation of functions is taken from the World Bank. We know that, in reality, life is more complicated and that CSOs have complex relationships with other actors. For a review of the literature and more detailed discussion, see Pollard and Court (2005).
- 6 Hereafter, when we say evidence we are referring to research-based evidence.
- 7 This is taken from OECD (1981). See Court et al (2006) and Sutcliffe and Court (2006) for further discussion.
- 8 See for example: Court, Hovland and Young (2005); Court and Maxwell (2005).
- 9 Our definition is taken from Anderson (1975). For more detailed discussion on policy issues see Hill (1997), Sabatier (1999), Sutton (1999). Pollard and Court (2005) contains a synthesis.
- 10 David Brown has particularly focused on practitioner-researcher engagement. See Brown (2000), for example.
- 11 The issue of CSOs and legitimacy is taken up in Court, Mendizabal and Osborne (2006). It draws particularly on discussions of legitimacy in Brown (2000) – who highlights the four sources of CSO legitimacy – and Van Rooy (2004).
- 12 This section draws on Court, Mendizabal and Osborne (2006) and Pollard and Court (2005).



Micro-credit bank (VBC) in Cambodia is supported by the Lutheran World Federation. There are 27 members in the village of Anlung Reg, including, from right: Run Orl, Bun Sarath and Ly Yieng.



# Current Situation: Opportunities and Constraints

## A Changing Context

The last 15 years have seen significant changes in the relationship between CSOs and policy makers. What are some of the key trends and what do they mean for CSOs?<sup>13</sup>

*Democratisation* has been the most striking and most important trend. The number of democratic regimes has more than doubled and there are now estimated to be more than 122 electoral democracies.

There have been substantial *reductions in violent conflict* – within and between states – although Africa remains the most troubled continent. These reductions have meant drops in socio-economic turmoil and threats to personal security.<sup>14</sup> Along with democratisation, this has led to improved environments within which CSOs can work.

*Markets* are spreading and economies are increasingly open. Twenty years ago fewer than three billion people lived in a market economy, whereas over six billion do today. This has brought new actors into political processes and created demand from firms and governments for policy inputs.

The rapid development of *information and communication technologies* (ICTs) has transformed access to and use of information. The availability and cost of accessing information has fallen providing new ideas and catalysts for action.

Recent moves towards government *decentralisation* – with greater decision making power and finance provided at local levels – have built upon and often extended the scope for CSOs to influence policy at the local level. Decentralisation and devolution have increased citizen participation and promoted civil society activity as people have responded to opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives.

Despite this there is increasing concern that the *war on terror* is leading to an increased politicisation of international relations. There is also less emphasis in some developing countries to ensure open political contexts and engage with civil society groups.<sup>15</sup>

These trends are certainly not proceeding in the same direction at all places at the same rate. They are broad brush strokes. In some places there has not been change. Political contexts remain problematic or corrupt in many developing countries even if they are seen as democratic in form. The potential benefits of some trends – as with decentralisation or advances in ICTs – have not always been realised.

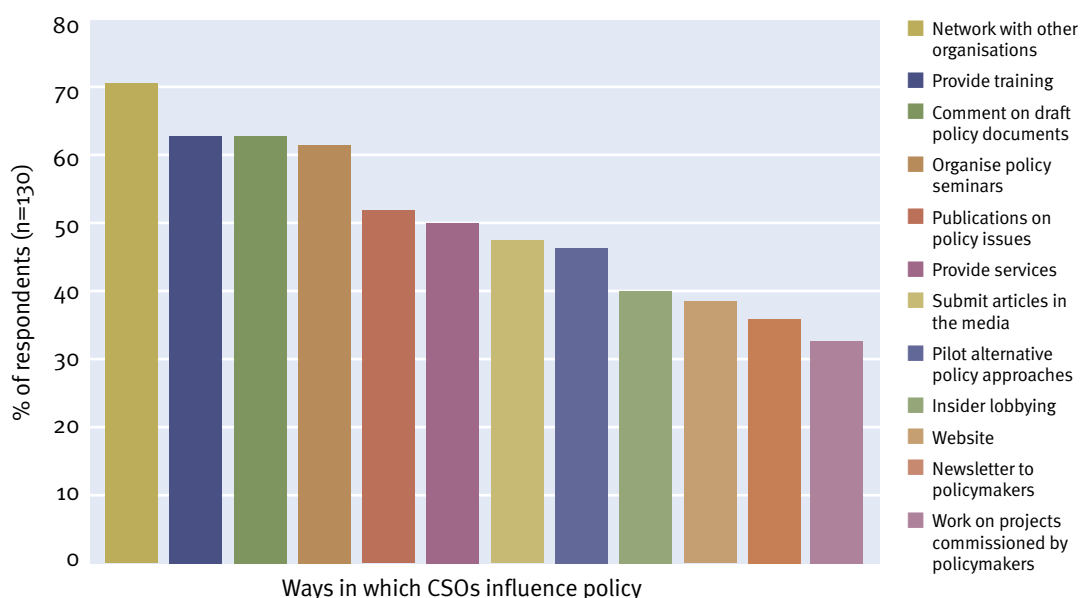
Despite this injection of realism, the trends are significant and generally positive for CSOs. And they have resulted in significant changes in the contexts faced by many CSOs.

## Civil Society and Policy Engagement

We have seen that the operating environment for civil society is improving in an increasing number of countries. The number of CSOs is growing. The nature of civil society is changing, as is their engagement in policy processes.<sup>16</sup> Many CSOs have become aware that policy engagement can lead to greater pro-poor impacts than contestation. Many more CSOs are moving beyond service delivery. We see more and more examples of CSOs engaging in informed advocacy as an important route to social change and a means of holding governments to account. Sometimes this is leading to impressive outcomes.

For many CSOs, policy influence is a part of their organisation's agenda. In our survey, the average CSO was working to influence between four and five different policy issues. The main areas of work were governance and rural livelihoods, with education, health, gender and economic policy issues also important. And CSOs are using a range of different approaches to try to influence policy (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: How Organisations Seek to Influence Policy**



Source: Kornswieg et al (2006)

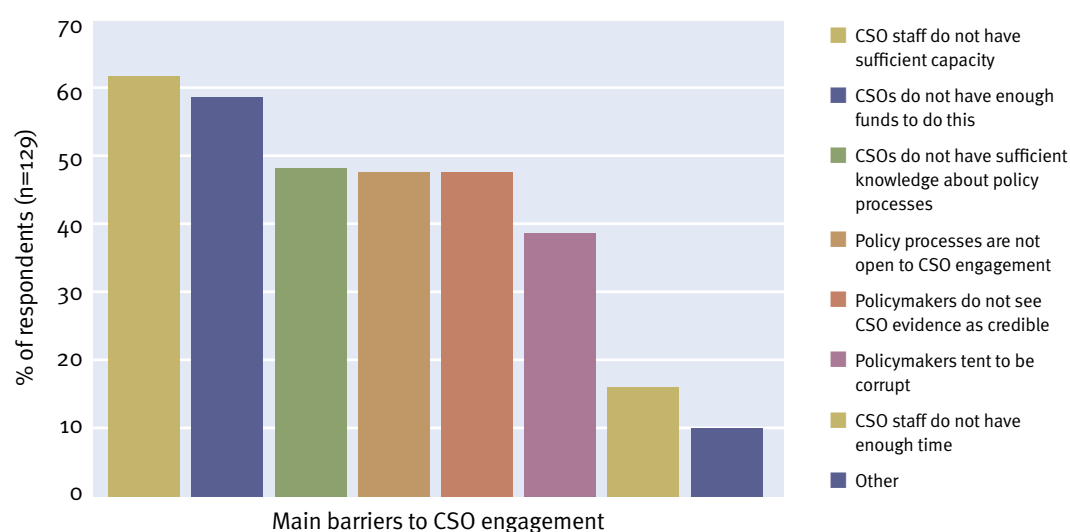
The problem is that CSOs are having a surprisingly limited impact on policy and the lives of poor people. Despite evidence of more open and accessible policy contexts, recent assessments highlight that CSOs are often failing to influence policy processes in developing countries.<sup>17</sup> Civil society and the state often live rather separate lives, with governments continuing to set the policy agenda much on their own. Civil society, meanwhile, many not necessarily be pro-poor – as witnessed by the discussion on ‘uncivil society’.

A recent study<sup>18</sup> carried out governance assessments in 16 developing countries accounting for 51% of the world's population. In general CSO contexts (freedom of expression and freedom of association) were rated as quite open. However, governance stakeholders noted that CSO input into policymaking was low in general. The CIVICUS Civil Society Index project (which carries out comprehensive assessments of civil society issues) also found that civil society impact remains low in many countries. Indeed, few respondents to our survey (25%) said CSOs were successful at influencing policy in their country. This certainly implies scope for greater engagement and policy influence.

## Main Barriers to CSO Policy Engagement and Evidence Use

Why are CSOs having limited influence on policy despite increasingly open political contexts? Based on the literature, case studies, participatory workshops and our survey, we identify a number of key reasons. Some relate to political factors and others relate to CSOs themselves. Contexts also vary across countries and policy issues.

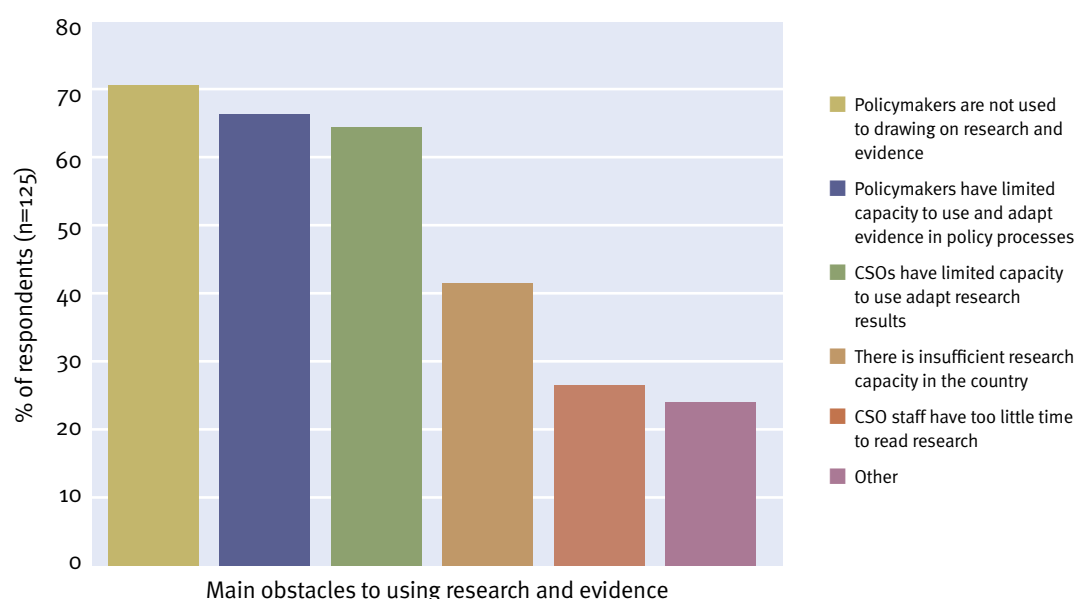
**Figure 4: Main Obstacles to CSO Engagement in Policy Processes**



Source: Kornswieg et al (2006)

Figure 4 highlights the main obstacles to CSO engagement in policy processes. Interestingly, the most common barriers were internal to CSOs, with respondents listing insufficient capacity and funding (62% and 57% respectively) as their biggest constraints. Others cited the closed nature of the policy process as an impediment to their participation, with 47% of respondents noting policymakers do not see CSO evidence as credible. (See Box 3 for how progressive policymakers can respond to these issues).

We asked a similar question regarding the main obstacles to using evidence to influence policy (Figure 5). Here the most important issues to respondents were the policymakers' lack of experience (70%) and capacity (66%) in using evidence. The lack of CSO capacity was the other major issue.

**Figure 5: Main Obstacles to Using Research and Evidence to Influence Policy**

Source: Kornswieg et al (2006)

### Problematic political contexts

Despite advances in political freedoms, many developing countries have contexts that constrain CSO work and engagement in policy processes. At one extreme, there is still a tendency for some governments to arrest or intimidate citizens who propagate views different from those in power. More generally, policy-making processes simply are not transparent and/or open for CSO participation.<sup>19</sup> Or they are only open or responsive to the needs of certain elites or groups.

Our work highlights that political context is a crucial factor regarding CSO work and evidence use. Policy processes are inherently political. Contestation, institutional pressures and vested interests are highly significant, as are the attitudes, capacities and incentives among officials.<sup>20</sup> Not only can policymakers be resistant to CSO engagement in policy processes, they are also often resistant to research.

In countries, where the political context is problematic, CSOs need to adapt their policy influence strategy. As an NGO representative from Cambodia put it: *'In a largely corrupt political environment, evidence is still useful but reduced in effectiveness as the motives of those with political responsibility are not always determined by evidence-based advocacy.'* In such environments evidence use will be constrained and CSOs will need to make judgements about how they can best influence policy.



### Box 3: What Can Progressive Policymakers Do?

Our work has identified that problematic policy processes are a key constraint on CSO policy engagement.

While this report focuses on civil society, the implications for policymakers are also clear. To help CSOs better engage with policy processes, progressive policymakers should:

- promote political freedoms where these are not in place;
- work to make policy processes more transparent and open for CSO engagement;
- provide access to information to CSOs;
- promote a culture of openness and incentives and mechanisms for stakeholder consultation;
- move from opinion-based policies towards evidence-based policy approaches; and
- invest in capacity building for government officials and bureaucrats on this topic.

Source: Sutcliffe and Court (2006), which also provides a toolkit for progressive policymakers.

### CSOs have limited understanding of policy processes (and interest in engagement)

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has noted: *‘To change the world, we must first understand it’*. This applies as much to the policy process as it does to a specific policy issue. The problem here is that CSOs often have a surprisingly limited understanding of policy processes. As a result, they fail to engage in an effective manner and, as a result, use evidence in an ineffective way.

For example, many CSOs in Kenya concentrate on changing laws in parliament. This was widely seen as the main goal of policy influence. However, such a strategy seems misguided given the inefficiency of the institution. (It had passed four laws in three years at the time of our work). Furthermore, laws seemed to have limited impact on what actually happens on the ground. In such cases, it might be more practical to engage different groups of policymakers (government or civil servants). More generally, almost half the respondents to our survey (47%) identified the lack of understanding of policy processes by CSOs as a key barrier to effective policy engagement.

As Mavuto Bamusi of the Malawi Economic Justice Network put it: *‘Being aware of the political environment is also very important. There are times when our findings have not been taken seriously, or have been set aside, because the political timing was not right or the research came at an inopportune time in terms of the politics around the research findings.’*

Often CSOs have not undertaken a rigorous assessment of the policy context. This may be because they are unaware of the importance of doing so and the approaches available to them. Or they may feel that given their capacity constraints they cannot invest the effort needed to understand the policy process. All too often, CSOs want to act on their own, while others remain in a mode of ‘opposition’ to government and resist rather than engage with policy processes. Although such contestation is justified in some instances, in others CSOs have yet to respond to the new opportunities that have arisen. This has led to a growing number of questions about the legitimacy and accountability of CSOs.

A poor knowledge of policy processes constrains CSOs strategy and, ultimately, their policy influence. This is why to maximise their policy influence CSOs need to understand the policy processes better and be strategic about their engagement. Only then can they provide the right advice to the right people in the right way at the right time.

#### Box 4: Different Approaches to Influencing Policies: EFL in Sri Lanka

The Environment Foundation Limited (EFL) is a CSO comprising mainly of lawyers working on environmental policy issues in Sri Lanka. EFL uses three types of methods to influence policy through: participation, representations and, most importantly, litigation. Participation includes CSOs being asked to contribute to policymaking committees or working groups. Representations are made by volunteer groups when it is known that a policy is being drafted or under discussion, but there has not been a policymaker demand. EFL resorts to litigation where policy changes are sought by seeking action through the judiciary process. While litigation is seen as a last resort, it is used as part of the larger package of tools used to influence policy. Litigation is mostly used where a policy exists. But even where it does not, legal action can serve to secure court orders that can influence future policy. For example, one legal challenge introduced evidence regarding the effects of the proposed patenting of indigenous plants and micro-organisms on the WTO's Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs). The Sri Lankan government used this evidence to develop an alternative position on this issue.

Source: CSPP South Asia Workshop, Sri Lanka, July 2005 ([www.odi.org.uk/cspp/Activities/Consultations/Sri\\_Lanka/Workshop.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/cspp/Activities/Consultations/Sri_Lanka/Workshop.html))

### Inadequate use of evidence by CSOs

Many CSOs have a wide repository of knowledge, including real expertise in an issue area or an understanding of the concerns most important to their constituents. Using this effectively could help ensure their own work is more effective, that they have greater access to policy processes and that policy decisions are more informed by relevant evidence. Yet, evidence is still inadequately used.

Even when CSOs are aware evidence is important, they may not know what type of evidence will be most influential. Often policymakers tend to have a 'hierarchy of evidence' with a preference towards 'hard' empirical research, such as quantitative data, clinical trials, or surveys. They like envisioning solutions based on first hand evidence of policy approaches that have been shown to work in real life. By contrast, CSOs tend to produce and rely upon soft evidence (anecdotes and case studies) that comes low in the 'hierarchy' and focuses more on problems rather than solutions. In many instances, this results in forms of evidence put forward by CSOs being ignored. This is illustrated in the PRSP case below.

#### Box 5: CSOs, Evidence and PRSPs

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) processes in poor countries are promoted, in part, to strengthen national ownership through participation of civil society. Although the first wave of PRSPs generally had limited scope for CSO participation and CSOs had little impact on policy content, the process opened a space for policy dialogue and enabled CSOs to analyse government policies. As a result, in countries such as Bolivia and Tanzania, second-stage PRSP processes have enjoyed much greater participation from CSOs – and greater influence by CSOs on government policy. In case studies of PRSP processes, we found that grassroots evidence or experiential evidence presented by CSOs at consultations was often dismissed by technical officials as partial and inaccurate. There was a hierarchy of evidence, with experiential evidence relegated to the bottom of the ladder. A key lack of CSO capacity was in the area of macroeconomic analysis. These limitations meant that many CSOs were not able to conduct rigorous analysis on policy or budget documents and propose realistic policy alternatives. It was often the case that CSOs felt more comfortable discussing the 'soft policy' areas such as health and education, on which they had direct knowledge through their service delivery experience. In order to ensure evidence-based advocacy is effective, CSOs need to build capacity to generate the influential types of evidence.

Source: Curran (2005)

The need for CSOs to understand what forms of evidence are acceptable in different contexts is more important when we consider that policymakers frequently doubt the feasibility and practicality of proposals made by CSOs. CSOs need to recognise that one key to policy influence is to develop topically relevant and high quality evidence.

### Poor communication by CSOs

Not only are policymakers often unimpressed with the policy advice they receive, they are often dissatisfied with the way they receive it. Policymakers bemoan the inability of many CSOs to make their findings accessible, digestible and in time for policy discussions. Within this context, a key challenge for CSOs is one of better communication. The starting point for this is to package and target generated evidence to key audiences through the use of clear and concise messages.<sup>21</sup>

Our survey highlighted that most CSOs' efforts to influence policy were indirect. The main responses to how they approached policymakers included: 'work on projects commissioned by policymakers' (35%), 'newsletter to policymakers' (38%), and 'insider lobbying' (41%). The findings show that many CSOs spend more time and effort on indirect, lower impact policy influence activities than working directly with policymakers.

A good communication strategy is not simply a question of increasing the volume of communication products. In fact, in certain situations esoteric communication materials can dramatically *hinder* CSOs chances of being taken seriously. CSOs credibility and chance to participate in policy debates can also be undermined if they communicate incorrect information, submit evidence of dubious or low quality, or fail to understand the language policymakers use. Similarly, if CSOs fail to understand the time constraints and schedules facing policymakers' their communication efforts will be certain to fall by the wayside. This is why it is important for CSOs to communicate *better* if they are to have any chance of influencing and informing policy.

Moreover, internal communication is a process through which CSOs can learn a great deal. Any evidence that CSOs gather has to pass through internal organisational channels. As such, internal communication and coordination is key to the policy engagement process and should involve several internal units of a CSO, from research and policy units to the marketing and media departments. Despite the crucial role internal communication plays within effective policy influencing, efforts by CSOs often fall short of the mark because they fail to embrace this strategy.

In sum, the importance of good communication – and the lack of skills to do this – has been repeatedly emphasised by participants at ODI workshops and in our research work. If more CSOs effectively communicate rigorous evidence then even those on the politically margins can be better included in policy debates.

### Weak links to other actors

Development transformations tend to occur when four factors *come together*: political leadership, public engagement, effective practice and good ideas. There is a wide body of literature and wealth of practical experience that highlights the importance of networks and links across groups of actors.<sup>22</sup> From the G8 to anti-globalisation protests to Al Qaeda, networks are an exceptionally effective organisational model.

The same is true in international development. A good example is the Huairou Commission. Until the mid-1990s grassroots women's groups were kept out of discussions at the global level. In less than 10 years, the Huairou Commission has gone from an informal, loose coalition into

a global network of more than 11,000 grassroots women's groups. In doing so it has deepened collaboration and provided women's groups with their own platform for networking.

Many CSOs see networking as important for their policy engagement, especially with similar actors with whom 'bonding' networks have proven useful for information sharing and learning. But they work together all too rarely – caused in part by a perception of competition for funding and influence.

The main problem, however, is that civil society practitioners, policymakers and researchers all too often appear to live in parallel universes and do not engage across boundaries. This is partly caused by the different incentives and approaches that characterise the different communities. This limited 'bridging' by CSOs to researchers and policymakers results in reduced effectiveness of their policy engagement strategies. It also results in CSOs failing to enjoy the possible benefits that can accrue from effective networks. Networks, coalitions and partnerships often enjoy greater political weight and success than a single organisation or individual.

#### Box 6: The Importance of Networks for Policy Influence: Evidence from Kenya

During the DFID-Trocaire-ODI Workshop for Policy Entrepreneurs in Nairobi, Kenya, CSOs were asked to consider the best approaches to policy influence. Participants noted that **strategic networking and coalitions; engaging with policymakers directly; and joining global campaigns** were key methods through which CSOs could generate policy influence. Each of these areas emphasised the importance of effective linkages for CSOs. In the workshop conclusion, linkages and networks were identified as highly relevant at each stage of the policy process. However, an important outcome of the discussion was the identification by Kenyan CSOs that weak linkages and networks remain one of their key challenges.

Source: DFID-Trocaire-ODI Workshop for Policy Entrepreneurs, 2005 ([www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Events/Policy\\_Entrep\\_Kenya/Index.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Events/Policy_Entrep_Kenya/Index.html))

### Technical and financial capacity constraints

Overcoming the issues identified above will not be easy. Ideally, CSOs need to understand a policy context; access or generate rigorous evidence; package it for different audiences; engage with policy processes; and network and communicate with a range of partners. This requires financial investments and a wide range of technical capacities.

CSOs have significant constraints on technical and financial capacities that can limit their ability to engage with policy processes and use evidence effectively. In our survey, CSOs noted that policy influence through research and evidence was substantially limited because 'CSOs have limited capacity to use and adapt evidence in policy processes' (65%) and 'CSOs do not have enough funds to do this' (59%). Given their resources, big international NGOs sometimes crowd out the voices of smaller, indigenous ones.

### Box 7: Capacity Differences and Influence in Cambodia

The low capacity of local NGOs means that international NGOs (INGOs) – or those local NGOs with international funding – often have the strongest voice on policy. This can mean that smaller, sometimes more representative organisations are excluded from having influence. For example, many international organisations working in Cambodia emphasise the protection of the forest rather than its utilisation. This led to a lack of thought concerning efforts to ensure access to, and benefits from, forest resources for poor people. The result has been that the welfare and expectations of a population emerging from two decades of conflict has been largely ignored in the policy debate.

Source: Luttrell and Brown (2006)

In summary, we have identified a number of significant opportunities for CSOs in the policy engagement process. While there are increasingly more open political contexts within which to work, CSOs continue to face a number of constraints. To achieve greater pro-poor impact, they will have to do more to realise the opportunities offered by improved contexts and overcome the barriers they face. In the next section, we focus on strategic and practical solutions that CSOs can use to enhance their engagement with policy processes.

### Sources for Further Information

- Relevant background papers, annotated bibliographies and studies for this report are available from RAPID at: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid)
  - *CSOs, Policy Influence and Evidence Use: A Short Survey* (Kornsweig et al, 2006)
  - *Civil Society, Policy Influence and Evidence Use: What do we know?* (Court, Mendizabal and Osborne, 2006)
  - Reports from CSPP Regional Consultations ([www.odi.org.uk/cspp/Activities/Consultations](http://www.odi.org.uk/cspp/Activities/Consultations))
  - ODI Case Studies ([www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Projects/PPA0104](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Projects/PPA0104))
- More on the CIVICUS Civil Society Index project is available at: [www.civicus.org](http://www.civicus.org)



## Box 8: Policy Entrepreneurship

In addition to better use of evidence, there are four key styles of policy entrepreneurship that can inform the way CSOs engage in policy processes. These are outlined below – with examples of who typifies them most.



### Storytellers

Successful policy entrepreneurs need to be good storytellers. This is because narratives inform policy. Narratives are simple, powerful stories that help policymakers understand a complex reality. Scheherazade was a consummate storyteller. She managed to survive the daily threat of beheading by telling the Sultan the most wonderful stories.



### Networkers

We know that networks matter. Good networkers are likely to have more policy influence than those who are not. One ultimate networker was Paul Revere. The night that Revere rode out in 1775 to raise the militia against the British in America, another rider also set out: William Dawes. In all the villages that Revere went to, the militia turned out and defeated the British. In the villages that Dawes went to, no one turned out to fight. Why? The answer is that Revere was networked. He was well known, well connected and trusted.



### Engineers

To be convinced policymakers need to see things working in practice. So policy entrepreneurs need to practically test their ideas if they expect policymakers to heed their recommendations. Who better to represent this way of working than Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The best story about him is apocryphal. Brunel was very much engaged in the debate about whether paddle wheels or screw propellers were more efficient and powerful for moving boats. In order to test that theory, he is supposed to have built one of each, tied them together and put them in the Bristol Channel to see which would tug the hardest.



### Fixers

The fourth and final model of the policy entrepreneur is the 'fixer'. Examples could include Rasputin and Machiavelli. This model is about understanding the policy and political process, knowing when to make your pitch and to whom. Rasputin famously became indispensable to the Russian Tsarina. He presented himself as the only one with a solution. CSOs need to understand and respond to contexts to be effective in policy engagement.

CSOs need to use all these policy entrepreneurship styles at different times. It helps to be adept at all styles – training can help here. But it is not necessary. The key is to find partners within your team or network who can complement your skills.

Source: Maxwell (2005)

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**Notes**

- 13 This section draws on the discussion in Court et al. (2005). The figures on democracy are for 2006 from Freedom House ([www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)).
- 14 See Mack (2005).
- 15 A discussion of the security context and implications for CSOs is articulated in Fowler (2005).
- 16 The work of Edwards (2004) is perhaps the most comprehensive source on this. Salamon (1993) was an early writer on the growth of civil society. See also Howell and Pearce (2002) and Hulme and Edwards (2002) on civil society and international development. Coston (1998) and Najam (1999) look at NGO-government relationships. Khan (1997) draws lessons from NGOs' engagement in policy processes in India. See Anhier et al (2001) and Wild (2006) for work on global civil society.
- 17 In addition to the evidence we present, there is growing literature on this issue. Robinson and Friedman (2005), for example, found that few CSOs exhibit sustained engagement in policy processes and even fewer actually influence policy outcomes.
- 18 See Hyden, Court and Mease (2004). For more on assessing governance see: [www.odi.org.uk/wga\\_governance](http://www.odi.org.uk/wga_governance).
- 19 A study in Ghana listed the lack of access to information as *the* main barrier to evidence-based advocacy by CSOs (Luttrell, 2006). This is partly due to the lack of transparency and restricted information accompanying public policy processes. This forces a reliance on informal sources of evidence, and limits effective engagement in policy processes.
- 20 See Court (2006) for a summary of work on political context issues. This section also draws particularly on the work of Grindle (1980) and Hyden et al (2004).
- 21 This section draws on Hovland (2003) and more generally on RAPID work on communications in development.
- 22 The importance of networks is outlined in Court et al (2005). Further work on networks is in Perkin and Court (2005) and Mendizabal (2006).



A project in Tamil Nadu, India, supported by the Ford Foundation, encouraging communities to create a visual understanding of their businesses. Most of the villagers are illiterate.

# Practical Approaches to Resolve Key Obstacles

We have seen that CSOs face a number of key constraints in engaging with policy processes and using evidence. In some cases, there is little that CSOs can do. But many of the challenges can be overcome by CSOs themselves. Based on the literature, consultations and case studies, we outline a number of strategic and practical ways CSOs might address key barriers they face. As this list is inherently selective we have provided further sources of information throughout the chapter.

## Policy Entrepreneurship in Challenging Contexts: Campaigns, Boomerangs and Policy Pilots

As identified previously, the political context is a crucial factor. It defines the scope for CSOs ability to engage policy processes and to gather and use evidence in that process. In some cases, the context is problematic – political rights may be limited or policy processes closed. Decisions may be highly centralised and dependent on the will of a few groups or individuals or policy implementation may be ineffective.

In a few contexts, there is very little CSOs can do. However, even in many troubled political contexts, CSOs can still influence policy. There may be opportunities to engage with particular organisations and individuals to inform and improve policy positions. This requires particular innovation, strategy and care. In this section we outline three options: campaigns to try to change policy; ‘boomerang’ strategies (engaging with external partners to try to change policy in a country); and policy pilots.

### Campaigns

A campaign is as a series of actions aiming to bring about a (policy) change. Campaigns are seen as valuable instruments for CSOs to mobilise the political will necessary to improve development policy and practice. Campaigns can help by increasing awareness and support, bypassing traditional channels and pooling resources. As a result, many NGOs and CSOs in international development employ campaign strategies. Perhaps one of the most effective campaigns at the global level was the international campaign to ban land mines.

What makes campaigns effective? Campaigns need to reflect social, political and economic contexts. Although they will vary, our review identified some common themes. To maximise their chances, campaigns need to:

- Identify a **clear problem** – and a solution.
- Understand the **political context** – what are the interests, institutions, processes and individuals that matter. Are there windows of opportunity? Successful campaigns almost always require some kind of engagement with government (rather than confrontation alone).
- Stay engaged through the **whole policy process**. To truly have an impact campaigns need to



go beyond agenda setting and actually ensure that policies are developed and implemented (see Box 9).

- Form **effective coalitions** that increase the legitimacy and political clout of a campaign. There can be tensions between decisive leadership and consensus decision-making, but a ‘structured campaign’ can help to build strong and sustainable relationships.
- Generate **relevant and credible evidence**. Rigorous evidence is vital to campaigns as it helps to win the battle about what and how important a problem is.
- **Communicate** effectively. It is crucial the target audience and strategy are clearly identified – whether directly engaging policymakers or putting pressure on them through the media. Often popular communications, such as media, rallies and celebrity support, are key.
- Be **persistent**. While CSOs often expect change to happen right away, most successful campaigns take a long time and require a continuous and persistent approach.

#### Box 9: Do CSO Campaigns Really Lead to Changes on the Ground?

Many major international campaigns have been criticised for focusing on noble goals but not having much impact on the lives of poor people. Is this fair? A short study reviewed the impact of three campaigns: Jubilee 2000 debt relief campaign; the Global Campaign for Education (GCE); and ActionAid’s TRIPS campaign. The study revealed that disproportionate amounts of effort were put into the agenda-setting stage at the expense of implementation and monitoring stages. Therefore, despite significant success at the agenda-setting level, the net impact of two of the campaigns in terms of tangible results was relatively minimal. The Jubilee campaign was not initially successful in changing the situation on the ground (it resulted in minimal debt relief at the time). But it did prepare much of the ground for the substantial debt cancellation in 2005 and 2006.

Source: Pitt et al (2005)

### Boomerang strategies

A growing number of CSOs are linked into ‘transnational advocacy networks’ as a means to build new links among actors in civil societies, states and international organisations. These broaden the options CSOs have to engage with partners in the international system. Using their links within transnational advocacy networks can provide CSOs with the opportunity for sophisticated policy influence campaigns, otherwise known as boomerang strategies.<sup>23</sup>

A boomerang strategy should be tried where CSOs work to influence their own government (State A), but are blocked. According to the boomerang strategy, CSOs in State A would then work with CSOs in State B. These CSOs then try to influence State B in order that it influences State A. They may also enlist an intergovernmental organisation to help influence State A. By engaging with external partners CSOs try to have greater influence on policy issues in their own country.

Clearly, assessments need to be made about whether such strategies are feasible in specific cases, and whether engaging external partners will add to influencing activities. However, it is an option worth considering and one that is being used more and more among CSOs.



### Box 10: Boomerang Strategies for Environmental Protection in Peru

Labor, a CSO in the city of Ilo in southern Peru had a real influence through a ‘boomerang’ approach. Since 1981, Labor had been lobbying to highlight the environmental damage caused by a mine belonging to the Southern Peru Copper Corporation (SPCC), one of the main copper producers in the world. Despite gaining the support of the local government, Labor was unsuccessful in convincing the national government and the company of the merits of its case. The turning point came when Labor and Ilo’s municipal government won a suit against SPCC in the Second International Water Tribunal in Amsterdam in 1992. At this event, Labor presented the research based evidence that the government had dismissed over the last decade. Having exposed SPCC’s negative environmental impact in an international forum, the mining company introduced an environmental strategy, in cooperation with the Peruvian government, to reduce its air and water pollution. The ‘boomerang’ effect had enabled Labor to utilise an international process to influence government authorities and the private sector in Peru.

Source: RAPID Case Study by Loveday and Molina (2006)

## Pilot projects

There are often gaps between government plans and the actions on the ground. Governments often do not have the capacity or will to implement their strategies. Government organisations can also be risk adverse to try new ideas or approaches. CSOs can bridge the divide by implementing pilot projects as policy experiments. Doing so provides a way for CSOs to demonstrate operational solutions to policy problems.

Pilot projects are seen as ways to try new approaches and help make development organisations more learning-oriented.<sup>24</sup> These can help with policy development, piloting delivery and the identification of what works. They allow new approaches to be tested and for the phased introduction of better informed and more effective government programmes. The benefits of this approach were highlighted in a number of case studies where CSOs that instituted pilot projects successfully influenced government policy.

**Table 1: Types and Benefits of Pilot Projects**

| Type of pilot project             | Benefits provided   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Experimental projects             | Investigate possible courses of action and prove especially useful when uncertainty exists about feasible solutions and the effects of different interventions. |
| Demonstration projects            | Are useful to exhibit the effectiveness and increase the acceptability of new approaches.   |
| Replication or diffusion projects | Involve widespread replication (after sufficient knowledge is obtained) in order to test full-scale roll out of an idea.  |

**Box 11: Piloting New Approaches: Animal Healthcare in Kenya**

NGOs introduced a new model of community-based livestock services in Kenya during the 1980s and 1990s. The community-based animal healthcare approach was an outstanding success. Evidence generated by operational schemes contributed to the rising popularity of decentralised animal healthcare programmes with donors and field veterinarians. Later community animal health worker schemes allowed government staff and others to learn first hand about conditions in pastoral areas and how effective and complimentary such schemes were to the government system. This contributed to severe pressure on the Kenya Veterinary Board and resulted in a positive new policy framework. Despite the merits of the programme, however, it took more than 15 years to convince policymakers to develop policies and legislation to support this to happen.

Source: Young et al (2003)

Clearly, not all pilot projects are successful. Results may be limited or useful only in specific conditions. Learning what does not work is as important as learning what does work. A recent review of UK government pilots highlighted a number of key considerations for CSOs to address when designing and developing an effective pilot programme.<sup>25</sup> Pilots should be:

- preceded by systematic evidence gathering
- presented with an explicit purpose in advance
- focused on innovative projects
- allowed to run their course
- independent
- given budgets and timetables that allow for adequate training of staff to avoid systematic errors
- open minded and view the revelation of policy flaws as a success, not a failure
- made easily accessible to facilitate reference to past successes and failures

If CSOs engage such best practices, then pilots can be very effective. They can help governments improve their approaches to service delivery in an informed manner, and they can help enhance the pro-poor impact of CSOs' own work.

Except for the most difficult contexts, there is still scope for CSO engagement in policy processes. Even in challenging contexts progressive policy change is still possible (see Box 12).

### Box 12: Innovative CSO Engagement in Challenging Contexts

Civil society networks in Pakistan have capitalised on the International Youth Day to get key policymakers to support their campaign for a new youth policy. After many years of little progress, the President's own interest in the issue spurred authorities into action.

In Uzbekistan, a CSO drew attention to domestic violence (something that was not on the government's agenda) by addressing violence within the military. The CSO promoted the use of non-violent conflict resolution tools to lessen the likelihood soldiers would engage in domestic violence. In doing so, the NGO successfully highlighted its cause and secured resources not normally available for domestic violence.

In Nepal, a research centre trained grassroots CSOs in non-violent conflict resolution. Demonstrations raised awareness about the discrimination people faced, and forced the issue onto the political agenda. Policymakers have since called upon the research centre to contribute to policy development by offering solutions to such issues.

Sources: See RAPID Case Studies by Shahab (2006), Ismoilov (2006) and Thapaliya et al (2006)

### Sources for Further Information

- See CIVICUS website for information, approaches and resources ([www.civicus.org](http://www.civicus.org))
- *Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers* (Start and Hovland, 2004)
- *The Good Campaign Guide* (Kingham and Coe, 2006)
- For more on RAPID work, especially case studies see: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid)

## Improving Understanding of Policy Processes: Context Assessments

We have noted that political and institutional issues were the most important set of factors affecting CSO engagement with policy and policy influence. The main problem here is that CSOs often have a surprisingly limited understanding of policy processes – and the incentives and constraints on key actors and institutions. As a result, they fail to engage policy processes in a strategic manner or use evidence in an effective way.

A practical starting point is for CSOs to generate rigorous assessments of political contexts and policy processes. What issues should they look out for? And how should they do it?

Recent work has identified five key clusters of issues that CSOs could focus upon:<sup>26</sup>

- **Macro political context:** extent of political freedoms; pro-poor commitment of the elite or government; what drives change; culture of evidence use; impact of civil society.
- **Specific policy context:** the climate surrounding the relevant stage of the policy process (agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation); extent of policymaker demand; degree of consensus or resistance; and importance of the issue to society.
- **Implementation:** nature of bureaucratic processes (transparency, accountability, participation, corruption); incentives, capacity and flexibility of organisations to implement policy; degree of contestation; and feasibility of a specific policy reform.

- **Decisive moments in the policy process:** character of the policy process on an issue; predictability of the policy process; existence of policy windows; and sense of crisis regarding a particular issue.
- **The way policymakers think:** extent that policy objectives and cause-effect relationships are clear; openness to new evidence; capacity to process information; policymaker motivations; and types of evidence they find convincing.

If CSOs are able to build a portfolio of information within these clusters, they will be able to better understand the policy process and opportunities for policy entrepreneurship.

How can they do it? There are a growing number of context-mapping tools available to CSOs. These may, however, be of varying levels of use.<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that each context tends to be distinct and that each tool is designed for different purposes. As such, CSOs must remain aware that varying tools are appropriate in each situation.

The context mapping approaches focus primarily on the national level, as do the existing data on democracy and governance issues. These are a useful start for broad strategy development. Stakeholder analysis apart, they are unlikely to provide enough actionable information for specific policy processes. CSOs will mostly need to generate their own data on issues related to political contexts. The challenges of collecting data on specific political and institutional issues and policy processes are substantial. There are emerging lessons regarding approaches and specific tools that might be used. These include interviews, document reviews, surveys, focus groups, participatory exercises, policy mapping and stakeholder analysis. Each has its own value according to aim, but to ensure credibility efforts should use a range of methods and triangulate the findings.

### Box 13: Policy Process Mapping and SME Policy Development in Egypt

This case describes the findings of a workshop to promote evidence-based policy for the small and medium enterprise (SME) sector in Egypt. This included a range of approaches to assess the political context and policy processes for SME policy in order to help with strategy development in the Government of Egypt.

Initially a literature review and discussion groups identified a number of features that made policy processes challenging. Secondly, participants used a simple approach to develop a policy process map for SME policies in Egypt. This identified the key actors that were important for policy formulation (mostly central government) and implementation (local bureaucracies). Participants also used the RAPID Framework (Annex 2) to develop a detailed understanding of: the policymaking process; the nature of the evidence they have, or hope to get; all the other stakeholders involved in the policy area; and external influences.

The participants also completed a political context questionnaire. This helped reinforce an understanding of local realities and identify new issues to consider. Based on this understanding, participants used a range of tools (e.g. Forcefield and SWOT analyses) to identify key objectives and develop strategies and action plans to achieve them.

Source: Evidence-based Policy Making Workshop for SMEPOL, 2005 ([www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Events/SMEPoL\\_Egypt](http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Events/SMEPoL_Egypt))

In summary, we have highlighted some sets of issues and approaches to properly assess contexts. Since the information needed will vary, we refrain from providing what could be interpreted as blueprints for action. Rather we provide the means to identify: issues emerging from the literature and preliminary work; and approaches for collecting political context data. Each CSO needs to decide which tools are appropriate, and adapt them accordingly. Drawing on preliminary insights here, it should be possible for CSOs to assess their policy contexts more clearly and identify the types of approaches that might maximise their chances of policy impact.

### Sources for Further Information

- *Assessing Political Contexts* (Court, 2006) provides an outline of issues and approaches
- *Mapping Political Contexts: A toolkit for CSOs* (Nash, Hudson and Luttrell, 2006)
- *Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers* (Start and Hovland, 2004)

All available from: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid/publications](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/publications)

## Better Strategy: Targeting the Policy Process

Many CSOs prefer to act alone or actually in opposition to policy processes. When they do engage with an existing policy process, CSOs are often not very strategic. Here, the earlier example of Kenyan CSOs concentrating on changing laws in parliament, despite its inefficiency and limited impact on what actually happens on the ground, is instructive. What can CSOs do better?

Improvements can be made by being strategic about: whether to engage; which part of the policy process actually matters for the lives of poor people; which component of the process a CSO is trying to engage with; and what mechanism and evidence tends to matter at that stage? In Table 2, we give a generic indication of the different policy components, CSO opportunities and different evidence needs.



**Table 2: Targeting Components of the Policy Process and Evidence Needs**

| Policy stage and key objectives for actors aiming for influence                              | CSOs can help ...  | Evidence must be ...  |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Agenda setting:</b><br>Convince policymakers that the issue does indeed require attention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marshal evidence to enhance the credibility of the argument</li> <li>• Extend an advocacy campaign</li> <li>• Foster links among researchers, CSOs and policymakers</li> </ul>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crystallised as a policy narrative around a problem</li> <li>• Credible</li> <li>• Suitable for the political environment</li> <li>• Communicated effectively</li> </ul>                                   |
| <b>Formulation:</b><br>Inform policymakers of the options and build a consensus              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act as a 'resource bank'</li> <li>• Channel resources and expertise into the policy process</li> <li>• Bypass formal obstacles to consensus</li> </ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High quality and credible</li> <li>• Contain cost-benefit assessments</li> <li>• Adapted to maintain credibility with communities and policymakers</li> <li>• Both tacit and explicit in origin</li> </ul> |
| <b>Implementation:</b><br>Complement government capacity                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance the sustainability and reach of the policy</li> <li>• Act as dynamic 'platforms for action'</li> <li>• Innovate in service delivery</li> <li>• Reach marginal groups</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant and generalisable across different contexts</li> <li>• Operational – how to do it</li> <li>• Directly communicated with policymakers</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Evaluation:</b><br>Review experience and channel it into the policy process               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link policymakers to policy end-users</li> <li>• Provide good quality, representative feedback</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent over time – through monitoring mechanisms</li> <li>• Objective, thorough and relevant</li> <li>• Communicated in a clear, conclusive and accessible way</li> </ul>                              |
| <b>Underlying:</b><br>Capacity building for CSOs aiming to influence policy                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a dynamic environment for communication and collaborative action</li> <li>• Provide support and encouragement</li> <li>• Provide a means of political representation</li> </ul> | (Evidence needs will vary according to the capacity building initiatives)   |

Source: Adapted from Perkin and Court (2005) and Pollard and Court (2005)

This framework can be used to help CSOs identify where their interventions would have most impact. To do this, CSOs must stay engaged in the implementation stage and ensure that their efforts actually result in changes to the lives of poor people.

### Box 14: Political Contexts and Space for CSO Engagement in Budget Processes

The budget plays a central role in the process of a government fulfilling its functions. A certain policy which is given great importance in national policy strategies will need to be backed by the necessary budget resources in order to have an impact. Therefore understanding how budgets are constructed and implemented is crucial for CSOs seeking to influence policies and their implementation.

Looking at case studies of CSO influence in budget processes in different countries involving the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) and the Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis (IBASE), reinforced the basic point that the roles that civil society can play to influence policy are heavily shaped by the political and institutional context. In the case of budgets, that includes issues related to the credibility, robustness and transparency of budget systems and processes, and the roles and interests of different actors (government, Parliament, audit institutions, the media, etc.). South Africa's historical moment after 1994 provided opportunities and openings for IDASA that were not available elsewhere. In the post-apartheid years, rules were being redefined to shape a more inclusive, accountable government that would underpin South Africa's new political regime. This provided access to policy processes (especially within Parliament) and allowed IDASA reasonable success in budget advocacy. By contrast, there were few real openings of democratic space at the national level in Brazil to allow for genuine dialogue around budget priorities. As a result, IBASE has had more limited policy impact.

Source: de Renzio (2005)

### Sources for Further Information

- International Budget Project builds civil society budget capacity ([www.internationalbudget.org](http://www.internationalbudget.org))
- For more on RAPID work, especially case studies see: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid)
  - *Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers* (Start and Hovland, 2004)
  - *Civil Society, Policy Influence and Evidence Use: What Do We know?* (Court, Mendizabal and Osborne, 2006)
  - *How Civil Society Organisations Use Evidence to Influence Policy Processes: A literature review* (Pollard and Court, 2005)
  - *Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations* (Hovland, 2005)

## Using Better Evidence

While many CSOs have the potential to generate and use evidence much more effectively than they do, they are not doing so. Many policymakers are frustrated with the nature of the evidence they receive to inform policy processes. Using different types of evidence more effectively would help CSOs influence policy and practice in a pro-poor manner.

What would make evidence more useful for policymakers?<sup>28</sup> Some key characteristics include:

- **Availability.** Does a body of (good) evidence exist on a particular issue?
- **Accuracy.** Does the evidence correctly describe what it purports to do?
- **Objectivity.** How objective is the source?
- **Credibility.** What approach was taken to generate evidence and how reliable is the evidence? Is the evidence contested? Can we depend on it for monitoring, evaluation or impact assessments?

- **Generalisability.** Is there extensive information or are there just selective cases or pilots?
- **Relevance.** Is the evidence timely, topical and have policy implications?
- **Practical usefulness.** Is evidence grounded in reality? Do policymakers have access to the evidence in a useful format and are the policy implications of the research feasible and affordable?

CSOs will need to address these. How can they do it? There are three sets of suggestions: sources of research advice; how CSOs can strengthen their own think tank functions; and how they can access capacity through networks, partnerships or consulting on specific pieces of work.

For individuals or projects, there are a number of sources for how CSOs can generate rigorous evidence for their policy influence initiatives. Three particularly good resources are:

- *Research for Development: A Practical Guide* (Laws, Harper and Marcus, 2003)
- *START: Simple Toolkit for Advocacy Research Techniques* (Tweedie, 2005)
- *Participatory Research and Development* (Gonsalves et al, 2005)

At the organisation level, CSOs can strengthen their own think tank functions. Think tanks are a well developed organisational model whose purpose is to deliver credible research-based evidence and advice to policymakers in the right format at the right time.<sup>29</sup> Think tanks are often a frequent feature in successful cases of policy influence. Think tanks feed such analysis into policy processes via briefings, meetings, short papers, and public communications. Many development NGOs in the North have set up research departments to help them fulfil think tank functions. This has also been an emerging trend in the South (see Box 15 below).

#### Box 15: The Think Tank Approach to Policy Influence: IDPAA in Bangladesh

Proshika is a large well-known NGO in Bangladesh. It has been operating since 1976 particularly in the areas of micro-credit and education. In 1994, Proshika established the Institute for Policy Analysis and Advocacy (IDPAA) in order to ‘balance its micro-level interventions with efforts to challenge macro-level policy constraints on poverty reduction’. IDPAA has undertaken a range of issues and ‘helped place Proshika at the forefront of NGO and civil society activism in Bangladesh during the past five years. A key challenge going forward is to link the think tank work with Proshika’s massive grassroots network’.

Source: Lewis (2001). For more see: [www.proshika.org/Idpaa\\_prg.htm](http://www.proshika.org/Idpaa_prg.htm) and [www.proshika.org](http://www.proshika.org)

It requires significant financial and technical capacity to generate credible research and fulfil think tank functions. Smaller organisations that cannot afford to establish their own think tanks might be able to organise by sector, area of interest, or even common geographical coverage and produce think tank like research together. CSOs can also benefit from the opportunities provided by think tanks by improving their access to such institutions through networks, partnerships or consulting on specific pieces of work. We return to the theme of networks later.

### Sources for Further Information

- *Research for Development: A Practical Guide* (Sophie Laws, Caroline Harper and Rachel Marcus, 2003)
- *START: Simple Toolkit for Advocacy Research Techniques* (Tweedie, 2005) provides a useful eight-step guide
- See also the work of the *Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)*, which encourages civil society participation in policy processes in South Asia ([www.pria.org](http://www.pria.org))
- The *International Development Research Centre (IDRC)* has a range of examples and resources on research approaches available on its website ([www.idrc.ca](http://www.idrc.ca))
- *Bridging Research and Policy in International Development: An Analytical and Practical Framework* (Young and Court, 2004) (See Annex 2)

## Communicating for Policy Influence

Policymakers are often frustrated by the inability of many CSOs to communicate effectively in policy processes. To have greater influence, CSOs will need to make their points accessible, digestible and in time for policy discussions. A key challenge for CSOs is one of communicating better – packaging and translating evidence generated into targeted products with clear messages.

To better communicate CSOs need to ask several questions. Why is their evidence and knowledge not being used successfully to inform policy and practice? Has it been appropriately targeted? Has it been communicated clearly? Is it easily accessible? What does it take for research to inspire? What makes some forms of evidence easy to ignore and other forms difficult? There is no single generic solution to these questions. The best answers vary from project to project and situation to situation. We offer two sets of suggestions – one strategic and the other practical.

**Engage in two-way communication:** Experience suggests that two-way communication with a target audience is crucial if CSOs want to influence policy. Such communication helps by aiding CSOs to understand the perceptions, needs and requirements of each policymaker in each context. CSOs will often have to engage with many different target groups, including scientists, researchers, national-level policymakers, donors, NGO staff and the beneficiaries themselves. Each of these groups has different communication needs. They access information in different ways, they have different perceptions of credibility, and they are used to seeing research results in different formats and at different times. Therefore, the more CSOs are able to engage with each group in a meaningful process of communication, the more likely they are to learn how to maximise the interest in, and impact of, their research. This takes time and effort, but it is vital.

**Practical suggestions:** RAPID has also developed a toolkit for successful communication for researchers and CSOs. We have identified and developed tools and resources that can help CSOs improve their communication. These include:

- planning tools (such as stakeholder analysis and force field analysis)
- packaging tools (such as visioning scenarios)
- targeting tools (such as websites, blogs, and media engagement)
- monitoring tools (such as Outcome Mapping)

By utilising these tools, CSOs can change the effectiveness of their evidence generation and policy influencing activities.

### Sources for Further Information

- Relevant background papers, annotated bibliographies and studies for this report are available from RAPID at: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid)
  - *Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers* (Start and Hovland, 2004)
  - *Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations* (Hovland, 2005)
- The Communications Initiative – an online resource for effective communication for development – is available at: [www.comminit.com](http://www.comminit.com)

## The Power of Networks

Networks matter. We know they can help CSOs: bypass obstacles to consensus; assemble coalitions for change; marshal and amplify evidence; and mobilise resources. For many CSOs that previously focused on service delivery, networks have enabled them to join in with lobbying activities. The problem is that CSOs, policymakers and researchers sometimes seem to live in parallel universes.

Greater networking would help with policy influence. Developing effective links and trust-based relationships with policymakers, the media and other stakeholders is necessary for CSOs to engage fully with policy processes. CSOs can do this by making the most of existing links, by getting to know other actors, and working through existing networks and coalitions. They also need to identify key personalities who can help, and generate new linkages and partnerships with likeminded individuals and organisations.

There are six non-exclusive functions that networks can play to improve CSO policy influence.<sup>30</sup>

- **Convenors** bring together people or groups of people. For example, Coalition 2000 in Bulgaria brings together CSOs, government institutions, the private sector and donors in various coordinated initiatives to fight corruption (See Box 2).
- **Filters** ‘decide’ what information is worth paying attention to and organise unmanageable amounts of information.
- **Amplifiers** help take little-known or little-understood ideas and make them more widely known or understood. Advocacy or campaigning NGOs such as the Jubilee Campaign are amplifying networks.
- **Facilitators** help members carry out their activities more efficiently and effectively.
- **Community builder** networks promote and sustain the values and standards of the individuals or organisations within them. For example, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) promotes best practice and minimum standards of learning accountability and performance among humanitarian agencies.
- **Investor or provider** networks offer members the resources they need to carry out their main activities. The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), for instance, provides technical assistance, skills and funding to its policy research partners.

Networks often play more than one role, and usually carry out several functions simultaneously in order to maximise their chances of influencing policy. But different network functions require different structures for maximum effectiveness. Networks designed for (and effective at) one role may not be good at others. Introducing new functions might compromise the original objectives.



Because of this specific networks will need to carefully consider how many and which functions they can carry out successfully.

As we can see, the potential for effective networks is high. However, it is important for actors to recognise that networks do not guarantee success. Although influencing policy is rarely straightforward we know more and more about what works. There are 10 commonly cited network ‘keys to success’:

- **Clear governance agreements** that set objectives, identify functions, define membership structures, make decisions and resolve conflicts.
- **Strength in numbers** lends greater political weight to a cause or policy issue.
- **Being representative** is a key source of legitimacy and thereby influence.
- **Quality of evidence** affects both credibility and legitimacy.
- **Packaging of evidence** is crucial to effective communication.
- **Persistence** over a period of time is often required for policy influence.
- **Key individuals** can facilitate policy influence.
- **Informal links** can be critical to achieving objectives.
- **Complementing** official structures rather than duplicating them makes networks more valuable.
- **ICT** are increasingly vital for networking.

In developing countries, networks face substantial challenges. Economic, social and political environments are more difficult. Capacity is more limited. Resources are scarcer. In such instances the right kind of network is crucial. But it is important to remember that different keys open different types of policy doors.

### Sources for Further Information

- Relevant background papers, annotated bibliographies and studies on networks are available from RAPID at: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Projects/PPA0103](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Projects/PPA0103)
  - *Networks and Policy Processes in International Development* (Perkin and Court, 2005)
  - *Understanding Networks: The Functions of Research Policy Networks* (Mendizabal, 2006)
- The *Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)* website is: [www.alnap.org](http://www.alnap.org)

## Building CSO Capacity

We have seen that for effective policy influence CSOs need to be able to: understand the policy process in their specific context; generate high-quality, relevant research, or have access to such research; and link to and communicate with policymakers and other actors. This requires a wide range of technical capacities.

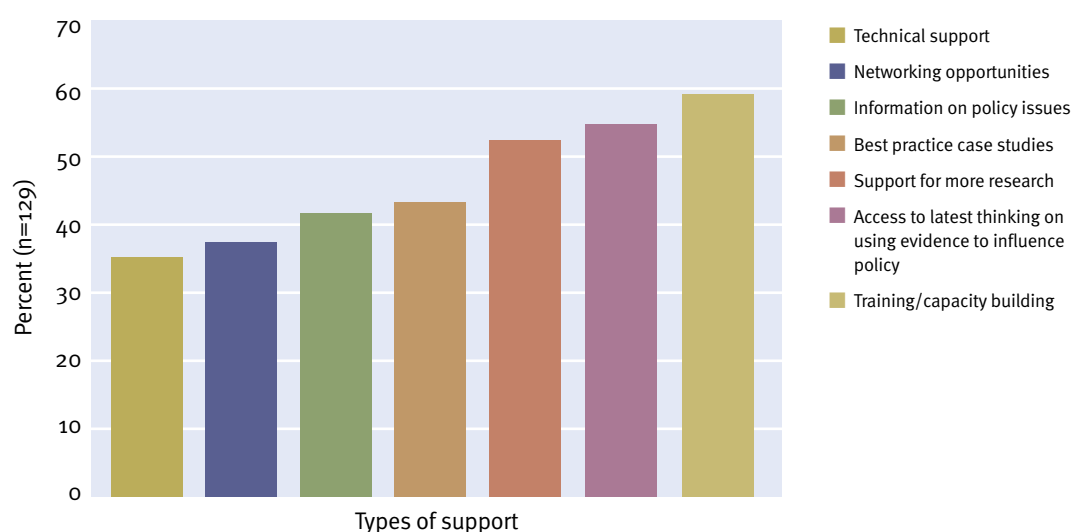
From our survey, 65% of CSOs noted lack of capacity as an important constraint on their ability to influence policy. We believe that CSOs can address these constraints by either building their own capacity or networking with other actors to benefit from external capacity.

## Building or accessing capacity

Although there are obvious financial constraints, INGOs such as Oxfam, ActionAid, World Vision, and SCF are all strengthening the capacity of their research departments in order to enhance their policy influence activities. For example, ActionAid also worked to help local CSOs in Kenya influence cashew nut policy by supporting the incorporation of three leading researchers in the field. This helped overcome the severe technical constraints of other stakeholders, including farmers and other CSOs, and resulted in the development of an evidence-based policy.

What kinds of capacity do CSOs say they need? In our survey, individual and institutional training emerged as the most sought after, followed by access to the latest thinking on policy influence and support for more research on policy issues. See Figure 6 for details.

**Figure 6: CSO Needs for Effective Policy Engagement**



Source: Kornswieg et al (2006)

Networks can help their members with the resources needed to engage with policy processes and use evidence. Effective networking allows CSOs to access specific capacity lacking in their context. For example, if an organisation lacks the capacity to generate high quality research, then networking with a think tank will generate an organisational structure able to deliver academically credible research-based evidence to the CSO. Accessing capacity via networks is also gaining in importance due to questions about the niche and duplication of effort by individual CSOs.

### Box 16: Building Systemic Capacity: Responding to HIV/AIDS

The Primary School Action for Better Health project in Kenya, developed and managed by the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT), is funded by the Department for International Development (DFID). The project's overall purpose is to bring about positive behaviour changes in sexual relationships of upper primary pupils so that the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission will be reduced. It aims to provide accurate information on prevention, promote abstinence and delay the onset of sexual activity.

Capacity and awareness building is carried out through a highly participatory process that involved teachers, students and community leaders. It has been implemented in 5000 primary schools across Kenya. The process itself is closely informed by research based evidence appropriately presented for each stakeholder group to incorporate lessons into their own activities.

The project has institutionalised a new attitude towards HIV/AIDS education in primary schools, effectively changing teachers and pupils' knowledge attitudes and behaviours. The programme management is now being transferred to the Ministry of Education.

Source: RAPID Case Study ([www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Tools/Case\\_studies/PSABH.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Tools/Case_studies/PSABH.html))

## New Thinking on Capacity Building<sup>31</sup>

Capacity-building approaches have traditionally focused on improving the leadership, management and operation of an organisation. There remains need for training, action research projects and institutional strengthening. Recent thinking is that capacity building efforts also need to be considered from a systems perspective, recognising the dynamics and connections among various actors and issues. In this sense, capacity building extends to cover broader systems, groups of organisations and inter-organisational networks.

Based on our review and experience, we believe that to be successful, capacity building requires broad-based participation and a locally driven agenda; it needs to build on existing local capacities; it requires ongoing learning and adaptation; it is a long-term investment; and, last but not least, it needs to integrate activities at different levels to address complex problems. These principles highlight the importance of a systems perspective, long-term support based on strategic partnership, effective coordination between the actors offering capacity building and those whose capacity is being enhanced. The question of roles and how they are negotiated is centrally important in capacity building.

### Box 17: How Can Donors Help?

While not the explicit focus of this report, we believe donors could:

- Encourage and support recipient governments to open up political contexts.
- Encourage and support improved policy processes – to make them more progressive (forward looking, outcome oriented, evidence-based, joined up and inclusive).
- Diversify support to the civil society sector more broadly (not just NGOs) and ensure support is provided in ways that encourage cooperation and networking among CSOs rather than duplication (systemic capacity building).
- Ensure support is for *informed* engagement by CSOs.
- Facilitate and support the formation of policy research networks to strengthen the linkages between research policy and practice.

Source: Authors

### Sources for Further Information

- Relevant background papers, annotated bibliographies and studies for this report are available from RAPID at: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid)
  - *CSOs, Policy Influence and Evidence Use: A Short Survey* (Kornsweig et al, 2006)
  - *Capacity Development for Policy Advocacy: Current Thinking and Approaches among Agencies Supporting Civil Society Organisations* (Blagescu and Young, 2006)
  - Reports from CSPP Regional Consultations: [www.odi.org.uk/cspp/Activities/Consultations](http://www.odi.org.uk/cspp/Activities/Consultations)
- The International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) aims to improve civil society performance. Visit: [www.intrac.org](http://www.intrac.org)

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### Notes

23 See Keck and Sikkink (1998) for more on boomerang strategies.

24 Ideas for this section are from include Rondinelli (1993) and Sutcliffe and Court (2006).

25 See Strategy Unit (2003).

26 See Court (2006) for more information on political context assessments.

27 See Mapping Political Contexts: A Toolkit for CSOs (Nash, Hudson and Luttrell, 2006).

28 This section draws on the work of Shaxson (2005: 102) and the RAPID programme (see Court et al, 2005; Sutcliffe and Court, 2006).

29 See Young (2005). For further sources of information, see: Managing Think Tanks (Struyk, 2002).

30 This section draws on Portes and Yeo (2001), Perkin and Court (2005), and Menizabal (2006).

31 This section is taken from Blagescu and Young (2005).







Masai women queue up outside a polling station in Kajiado district, holding their voting cards. NGOs worked with the Electoral Commission to inform the electorate and monitor election processes.

# Conclusion and Looking Forward

We know that civil society organisations (CSOs) are enormously important players in international development. The problem is that CSOs are having a limited impact on policy and practice, and ultimately the lives of poor people. This is partly because problematic policy processes in some developing countries constrain, undermine and block CSO work. In many contexts, however, it is largely about the ways CSOs work.

The report has argued that better use of evidence by CSOs is part of the solution towards increasing the policy influence and pro-poor impact of their work. Evidence matters for CSOs working in international development. First, it can help improve the impact of their direct service delivery work. Second, and more importantly, evidence helps increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of CSOs, thereby making them more influential in policy processes. This can help CSOs gain a place at the policy table and give greater credibility to their contributions. And, it can help ensure that policy recommendations are actually likely to help the poor.

There are a number of obstacles, however, which restrict CSO policy engagement. Adverse political contexts or problematic policy processes constrain CSO work. However, the main obstacles are often internal to CSOs. The report highlights ways to overcome these barriers and maximise chances of policy influence.

While it is not the focus of this report, the study highlights certain ways that progressive policymakers and donors could help. Progressive policymakers could help by: working to ensure political freedoms are in place; making policy processes more transparent; providing access to information and providing space for CSO contributions on specific policy issues. Donors could help by providing: incentives and pressure for governments to ensure political rights and a space for CSO engagement in policy; diversifying their support to the CSO sector (beyond NGOs); and ensuring funding for *informed* CSO policy engagement.

We hope this report provides insights and stimulates others to work in this area. We believe there is much work to be done. Priority areas include:

- Generating greater awareness of the importance of evidence use by CSOs.
- Providing more ‘how to’ information to CSOs interested in informed policy influence.
- Working with others to build systematic capacity in this area.
- Undertaking new research on informed CSO policy engagement – particularly around informed practice on the ground.
- Supporting informed CSO policy engagement on global policy issues.

In many ways, the extent of CSOs impact on policy is in their own hands. By getting the fundamentals right (assessing context, engaging policymakers, getting rigorous evidence, working with partners, communicating well), CSOs can work to overcome the key internal obstacles. The result will be greater policy engagement for poverty reduction.

## Approaches for Effective Policy Engagement

| Key obstacles to CSOs   | Targeted solutions for effective policy engagement   |
|---|--|
| <b>External</b>   |  |
| Problematic political contexts constrain CSO work.  | <p>Different responses include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Campaigns</i> – to improve policy positions and governance contexts.</li> <li>• <i>'Boomerangs'</i> – working via external partners to change national policy.</li> <li>• <i>Policy pilots</i> – to develop and test operational solutions to inform and improve policy implementation.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Internal</b>   |  |
| Limited understanding of specific policy processes and the politics affecting institutions and actors.              | Rigorous <i>context assessments</i> enable a better understanding of how policy processes work and the opportunities for policy entrepreneurship.  |
| Many CSOs remain in a mode of opposition to government and have weak strategies for engaging with policy processes. | <i>Better strategy</i> would help CSOs to identify critical policy components (agenda setting, policy formulation and implementation, monitoring and evaluation) and the different engagement mechanisms and evidence needs required to maximise their chances of policy influence.  |
| Inadequate use of evidence.   | <i>Better evidence</i> could help CSOs have a greater impact on policy processes. CSOs need to ensure that their evidence is: relevant, objective, credible, generalisable, and practical.   |
| Weak communication approaches in policy influence work.   | <i>Better communication</i> aids CSOs in making their points accessible, digestible and timely for policy discussions. Two-way communication is critical. CSOs should use existing tools for planning, packaging, targeting and monitoring communication efforts.  |
| CSOs work in an isolated manner.  | <i>Network approaches</i> help CSOs make linkages and partnerships with other stakeholders. CSOs need to be aware of the 10 keys to network success.   |
| Capacity constraints for policy influence.  | <i>Systemic capacity building</i> helps CSOs build their own capacity or access it through networking.   |

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# Annex 1:

## Select Background Materials

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### Other RAPID Working Papers and Background Papers

Blagescu, M. and J. Young (2005) *Partnerships and Accountability: Current Thinking and Approaches Among Agencies supporting Civil Society Organisations*, ODI Working Paper 255. London: ODI.

Kuruvilla, S. (2005) *Civil Society Participation in Health Research and Policy: A Review of Models, Mechanisms and Measures*, Working Paper 251. London: ODI.

Mendizabal, E. (2006) *Building Effective Research Policy Networks: Linking Function and Form*, ODI Working Paper. London: ODI.

### Selected CSO Studies

Bird, K. and U. Grant (2005) 'How CPRC country teams in India, South Africa and Uganda have been able to influence government policy and/or action in their country' in Bird, K. and U. Grant (eds) *Policy Influencing and Media Engagement Resource Pack*. London: Chronic Poverty Research Centre.

Curran, Z. (2005) *Civil Society Participation in the PRSP: The Role of Evidence and the Impact on Policy Choices*, CSPP Synthesis Study. London: ODI.

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Luttrell, C. (2006) *Understanding the role of civil society and evidence-based policy making in transition countries*, CSPP Synthesis Study. London: ODI.

Pitt, C., C. Loehr and A. Malviya (2005) 'Campaigns, Evidence and Policy Influence: Lessons from International NGOs', Unpublished report from partnership between LSE's MSc programme in Development Management and RAPID.

### RAPID CSO Case Studies

Dimitrova, N. P. (2005) *Introduction of Anticorruption Education in the Bulgarian Secondary Schools*, ODI: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/anti\\_corruption.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/anti_corruption.html)

Ismoilov, S. (2006) *Domestic Violence in Uzbekistan: An Innovative Approach to Decrease Violence against Women*, ODI: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/domestic\\_violence.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/domestic_violence.html)

Thapaliya, A., S. Jana and S. Ghimire (2006) *Local Struggle Towards Grass Root Democracy: A case of Terai dalit movement for right to community forestry in Eastern Nepal*, ODI: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/natural\\_resources\\_2.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/natural_resources_2.html)

Loveday, J. and O. Molina (2006) *NGOs, the Extractive Industries and Community Development: The case of NGO Labor in Peru*, ODI: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/pollution\\_peru.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/pollution_peru.html)

Shahab, Z. (2006) *Interventions of CSOs towards the First Youth Policy of Pakistan*, ODI: [www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/youth.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao104/youth.html)



## Annex 2: RAPID Framework: How to Influence Policy and Practice

| What CSOs need to know  | What CSOs need to do   | How to do it  |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Political Context:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who are the policymakers?</li> <li>Is there policymaker demand for new ideas?</li> <li>What are the sources / strengths of resistance?</li> <li>What is the policymaking process?</li> <li>What are the opportunities and timing for input into formal processes?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get to know the policymakers, their agendas and their constraints.</li> <li>Identify potential supporters and opponents.</li> <li>Keep an eye on the horizon and prepare for opportunities in regular policy processes.</li> <li>Look out for – and react to – unexpected policy windows.</li> </ul>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with the policymakers.</li> <li>Seek commissions.</li> <li>Line up research programmes with high-profile policy events.</li> <li>Reserve resources to be able to move quickly to respond to policy windows.</li> <li>Allow sufficient time and resources.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Evidence:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the current theory?</li> <li>What are the prevailing narratives?</li> <li>How divergent is the new evidence?</li> <li>What sort of evidence will convince policymakers?</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish credibility over the long term.</li> <li>Provide practical solutions to problems.</li> <li>Establish legitimacy.</li> <li>Build a convincing case and present clear policy options.</li> <li>Package new ideas in familiar theory or narratives.</li> <li>Communicate effectively.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build up programmes of high-quality work.</li> <li>Action-research and Pilot projects to demonstrate benefits of new approaches.</li> <li>Use participatory approaches to help with legitimacy and implementation.</li> <li>Clear strategy and resources for communication from start.</li> <li>Face-to-face communication.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Links:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who are the key stakeholders in the policy discourse?</li> <li>What links and networks exist between them?</li> <li>Who are the intermediaries and what influence do they have?</li> <li>Whose side are they on?</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get to know the other stakeholders.</li> <li>Establish a presence in existing networks.</li> <li>Build coalitions with like-minded stakeholders.</li> <li>Build new policy networks.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnerships between researchers, policymakers and communities.</li> <li>Identify key networkers.</li> <li>Use informal contacts.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>External Influences:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who are main international actors in the policy process?</li> <li>What influence do they have?</li> <li>What are their aid priorities?</li> <li>What are their research priorities and mechanisms?</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get to know the donors, their priorities and constraints.</li> <li>Identify potential supporters, key individuals and networks.</li> <li>Establish credibility.</li> <li>Keep an eye on donor policy and look out for policy windows.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop extensive background on donor policies.</li> <li>Orient communications to suit donor priorities and language.</li> <li>Try to work with the donors and seek commissions.</li> <li>Contact (regularly) key individuals.</li> </ul>  |

Source: Adapted from Young and Court (2004)

## Annex 3:

# Interesting CSO Organisations

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The **African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF)** is a network that brings cooperation agencies and experts together with national and regional institutions working in various areas of development. ACBF's principal objectives include investing in the capacity of its members for macroeconomic policy analysis and development; channelling funding; encouraging the development of research communities in the region; facilitating and investing in local initiatives in the area of research and training; and helping bridge the gap between researchers, trainers and governments. **Visit: [www.acbf-pact.org](http://www.acbf-pact.org)**

The **Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC)** is a regional NGO association of 21 national and regional NGO networks from 11 Asian countries. Founded in 1979, it is actively engaged in food security, agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture and rural development activities. ANGOC has developed skills in linking grassroots action with macro-policy interventions. ANGOC organises specialised courses, conferences and activities, in coordination with training institutions. **Visit: [www.angoc.ngo.ph](http://www.angoc.ngo.ph)**

The **Association of Latin American Development Organizations (ALOP)** is composed of NGOs from 20 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Its main objectives are the construction of a forum for dialogue and to strengthen NGOs and their capacity to influence policy process, both in the region and globally. Its main projects are the programme of strategic alliances for local development in Latin America, and the promotion and strengthening of the participation of civil society in the political dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Latin America. **Visit: [www.alop.or.cr](http://www.alop.or.cr)**

The **Centre for the Implementation of Public Policies promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC)** is an Argentinean think tank. CIPPEC was created in 2000 to carry out research and influence evidence-based policies in key public policy areas such as education, fiscal policy, health and governance. It has successfully put research into action by showing policymakers that change is possible and advising them how best to go about it. This has been achieved through the use of different types of evidence such as budgetary analyses, academic papers and opinion polls. **Visit: [www.cippec.org](http://www.cippec.org)**

**CIVICUS** is an international alliance dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world. Its main objectives are:

- Civic Existence – to promote the rights of citizens to organise and act collectively towards the public good;
- Civic Expression – to increase the effectiveness and improve the governance of civil society organisations, as well as their capacity to set and achieve their individual and collective goals;
- Civic Engagement – to foster interaction between civil society and other institutions in order to increase the voice of citizens in public life.

CIVICUS runs a number of programmes to achieve these goals. **Visit: [www.civicus.org/new/default.asp](http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp)**

The **Eastern and Southern Africa NGO Reflection and Development Centre (MWENGO)** aims to strengthen the technical and managerial capacity of NGO staff to be able to design, plan, implement and manage programmes that utilise resources efficiently and are more responsive and accountable to their constituencies. It also aims to build the capacity of NGOs to influence the policy process and participate in policymaking. Its key strategies include linkages and networking, research and development and communications. MWENGO also hosts two network forums. **Visit: [www.mwengo.org](http://www.mwengo.org)**

The **Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)** is a civil society organisation in South Asia that undertakes development initiatives that encourage and enable the poor's participation in policy processes by means of capacity building, knowledge building and policy advocacy. Two broad categories of interventions seek to:

- Strengthen civil society by developing and strengthening leaders among the poor;
- Reform governance institutions by sensitising, orienting and building the capacity of elected representatives and officials to respond to the voices of civil society.

It is an approach that addresses both the demand and supply of evidence based policymaking. It uses various tools including publication of a wide range of educational and academic books and journals, direct interventions, context monitoring through the media, and annual reports. **Visit: [www.pria.org/cgi-bin/index.htm](http://www.pria.org/cgi-bin/index.htm)**

# Acknowledgments and Authors' Biographies

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# Acronyms

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|          |   |
|----------|---|
| ACBF     | African Capacity Building Foundation  |
| ALNAP    | Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action |
| CARPA    | Christian Agricultural and Related Professionals Association                      |
| CASSAD   | Centre for African Settlement Studies and Development                             |
| CBA      | Centre for Budget Advocacy  |
| CMS      | Corruption Monitoring System  |
| CREA     | Centre de Recherches Economiques Appliqués  |
| CSO      | Civil society organisation  |
| CSPP     | Civil Society Partnership Programme   |
| DFID     | Department for International Development (UK)                                     |
| DSS      | Demographic Surveillance System   |
| EBP      | Evidence-based policy   |
| EPRC     | Economic Policy Research Centre   |
| GCE      | Global Campaign for Education   |
| GRC      | Governance Resource Centre  |
| HAI      | HelpAge International   |
| HIV/AIDS | Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome                  |
| IBASE    | Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis                              |
| ICT      | Information and communication technologies  |
| IDASA    | Institute for Democracy in South Africa   |
| INGO     | International non-governmental organisation                                       |
| IO       | International organisation  |
| NGO      | Non-governmental organisation   |
| LSE      | London School of Economics  |
| ODI      | Overseas Development Institute  |
| OECD     | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development                            |
| PPA      | Partnership Programme Agreement   |
| PRI      | Policy research institute   |
| PRSP     | Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper  |
| RAPID    | Research and Policy in Development Programme                                      |
| SCF      | Save the Children Fund  |
| SPCC     | Southern Peru Copper Corporation  |
| STD      | Sexually transmitted disease  |
| TEHIP    | Tanzania Essential Health Interventions Project                                   |
| TRIPS    | Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights                             |

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