

Northern NGO advocacy: perceptions, reality, and the challenge

Ian Anderson

Perceptions

Northern NGO advocacy¹ has come a long way since the early 1970s campaigns, which John Clark describes as being 'poorly financed and run by highly committed but inexperienced volunteers but [which were] highly effective at capturing the public imagination' (in Edwards and Hulme 1992: 197-8). NGO advocacy has become more focused, more strategic, and has made more effective use of the media. NGOs have learned to gain access to and use the political processes, structures, and institutions of their home countries, as well as those of the multilateral agencies. This evolution of NGO advocacy has led to more effective interaction between NGOs and official agencies; to alliances between Northern and Southern NGOs, as those in the South have expanded their advocacy into the international arena; and to alliances between the broad-based development and relief NGOs and specialised campaigning groups and networks, including environmental organisations.

NGO policy-reform successes are widely acknowledged; Clark (1991), Salman and Eaves in Paul and Israel (1991), Edwards (1993), UNDP (1993), and Smillie (1995) all recognise that Northern and Southern NGOs, often acting together, have materially contributed to influencing policy changes by Northern and Southern governments. Clark (1991: 150), tracing NGO campaigning from its origins in the 1970s, notes the baby-milk marketing code, the drafting of an international essential drugs list, trade liberalisation for clothing manufactured in the South, an EEC emergency food reserve for the provision of famine relief, action on global warming and rainforest destruction, debt relief to African countries, and

the imposition of sanctions to combat apartheid. To Clark's listing, Edwards (1993: 116) adds: influence on World Bank policies in relation to gender, participation, poverty, and the environment; cancellation of, or modification to, World Bank projects (notably dams and associated resettlement schemes), movement away from vertical interventions in health-sector investment (especially immunisation), improvements in food regimes for refugees and displaced persons, modification of IMF-imposed structural adjustment programmes to take greater account of their social consequences, and country-specific issues such as reconstruction aid for Cambodia and EU access for bananas produced in the Windward Islands. Smillie (1995: 229-30) notes NGO activity and influence at major UN environmental conferences, evidence given by NGOs to parliamentary studies and international inquiries, significant changes in African agricultural policy, and the improvements gained by Save the Children Fund (UK) in the standards of care required of organisations operating children's homes in Uganda. Salman and Eaves in Paul and Israel (1991), writing in a World Bank publication, cite examples of influence on a number of its projects. UNDP (1993: 84-99), in a chapter generally critical of NGOs, cites numerous beneficial advocacy initiatives by Southern NGOs, as well as gains by Northern NGOs. Amnesty International is singled out as having 'amply demonstrated the power of information to protect the rights of individuals and groups'. In referring to pressure from NGOs, which has brought about changes in the actions of multinational corporations, UNDP acknowledges that '[a]dvocacy clearly is – and probably will continue to be – the NGOs' greatest strength' (op.cit.:88 and 98).

More recently, NGO campaigning has been extended to representation at major UN conferences, starting with the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, where some 1500 NGOs were accredited to participate, through to the 1999 World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Seattle, where, apart from the violent disruptions that attracted most media attention, NGOs concerned about the economic and social aspects of WTO policy and their impact on the environment, human rights, labour, and development were present and active. The recognition, through the award of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize, of the achievements of the coalition of NGOs that formed the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, and the award of the 1999 prize to Médecins Sans Frontières for its highly visible public support to people in emergencies, and the present outcome of debt relief as a result of NGOs' work on the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative are further evidence of the growing effectiveness of NGO advocacy.

Notwithstanding these accepted gains, much of the literature is severely critical of NGOs and their advocacy. Principal among the criticisms of shortcomings of Northern NGOs are relationships with official donors (which NGOs are seen to be afraid to criticise, while being heavily reliant on their funding); the absence of a clear advocacy strategy; the limited allocation of resources to advocacy programmes, resulting from pressure to be seen to be applying resources to more tangible, marketable humanitarian relief and development projects; the failure of NGOs to demonstrate, through evaluation of their advocacy, its effectiveness and impact; the failure of NGOs to build the alliances needed to broaden and strengthen their advocacy voices; and the failure of NGOs to develop credible alternatives to neo-liberal growth-oriented economic orthodoxies which, critics suggest, requires more research by NGOs and a more conscious linkage of NGO field experience and the development models adopted by them. In addition, Northern NGOs' role as legitimate advocates for the Southern poor has been under scrutiny, as Northern NGO advocacy has evolved and Southern NGOs have themselves become increasingly involved in advocacy beyond their national borders. Northern NGOs are being challenged on issues that include the changing nature of relationships between Northern and Southern NGOs and demands for new forms of alliance between them; Southern expectations of their Northern counterparts; and tensions concerning who should determine the development agenda.

There is in the literature a broadly accepted recognition that structural macro-reforms are essential, if the fundamental causes of poverty are to be redressed. Watkins (1995: 216 and 217) summarises the need for reforms as 'requiring a transformation in attitudes, policies and institutions' and 'a fundamental redirection of policy on the part of other foci of power including the UN, international financial and trade organisations, corporations (TNCs), official aid donors and NGOs'.

This is the challenge facing Northern NGOs in their advocacy: how, by employing strategies which maximise their effectiveness and impact, they will be able to 'address the structural causes of poverty and related injustice' (Oxfam International 1999: 4).

The reality

In the course of conducting doctoral research on the policy impact of the Washington Advocacy Office (WAO) of Oxfam International (OI), I surveyed larger Northern NGOs for the purposes of testing generalised

criticisms of their advocacy. I obtained data covering the period 1981 to 1996, to provide benchmarks for detailed research into the WAO and its advocacy programme since its establishment in 1995; and to place the OI affiliates in the context of Northern NGOs, especially those with substantial international networks and affiliations.² For this purpose the survey sought data in respect of the allocation of income from government and private sources; the allocation of expenditure between development and relief programmes, advocacy, and other expenditures; advocacy strategy, policy objectives, staffing, and selection criteria for issues and alliances; the topics upon which NGOs had advocated; evaluation of advocacy; and, in the case of national Oxfams, the nature and extent of co-operation between affiliates, and with the WAO.

The relationship between income from government sources and advocacy expenditures

By attempting to establish a correlation between official donor income and the resources allocated to advocacy, the survey sought to test the criticism that the increasing proportion and scale of NGO funding from official donors creates a dependency which constrains NGO advocacy. The survey sought to establish whether there is a correlation between official donor funding and advocacy resource allocation, without attempting to assess whether, as Edwards and Hulme (1995: 20) argue, NGOs' dependence on official funding 'emasculate[s] NGO attempts to serve as catalysts for the poor'.

From the response data, no correlation between government funding and advocacy expenditures could be established, and in fact significant apparent contradictions were indicated. As might be reasonably expected, respondents whose institutions received the highest levels of government funding generally reported the lowest levels of advocacy expenditures. However, among the Oxfams, Intermón, the affiliate which over the survey period reported the highest rate of growth in government funding (80.4 per cent per year, to 52.3 per cent of total expenditures in 1996) also, over that period, increased its advocacy expenditures to the highest proportion of all the OI affiliates (11 per cent). Conversely, Oxfam America, which accepts no government funding, halved its advocacy expenditures as a proportion of total expenditures over the survey period (from 10.4 per cent to 5.3 per cent in 1996), and on a non-inflation-adjusted basis barely increased advocacy expenditures over that period. Further support for the proposition that it is the NGO's policy orientation

rather than dependence on official funding which influences the level of its advocacy activity is found in the case of the two Canadian OI affiliates: they are similarly reliant on government funding and may be expected to be subject to similar government influences, yet one has consistently spent more than 5 per cent of total expenditures on advocacy, while the other's advocacy expenditures declined from 2.3 per cent in 1984 to 1.2 per cent in 1996.

Advocacy as a proportion of total NGO spending

It is Clark's hypothesis that, notwithstanding the broadly accepted view that advocacy is the strategy most likely to contribute to achieving significant reductions in poverty levels, NGOs have put few resources into it (Clark 1991:147).

This proposition would seem to be supported by the levels of reported advocacy spending. By 1996, when NGO advocacy might be expected to have reached a level of maturity, reported advocacy expenditures (which excludes grant expenditures for Southern or partner advocacy) among both OI affiliates and other respondents were overall 4.1 per cent of total expenditures, with the range varying from five respondents who reported zero or negligible advocacy expenditures, up to one reporting 12.5 per cent of total expenditures.

These levels of advocacy expenditures would support the view that NGOs themselves do not have sufficient belief in their advocacy to challenge the alleged constraints on their allocation of resources into advocacy. This allocation of resources to NGO advocacy may be compared for example, with Greenpeace, which embraces an action-oriented strategy, which exists as a 'catalyst for change', and which has demonstrated the ability to mobilise large numbers of people in pursuit of specific achievable objectives (Greenpeace 1996:1 and 3).³ Greenpeace therefore employs a wholly advocacy-focused strategy, compared with development and humanitarian relief NGOs whose level of advocacy-resource allocation through to 1996, despite mission statements which include addressing the structural causes of poverty, at least appears to confirm Clark's view, expressed as follows:

Advocacy may be seen as important but it is not urgent. Consequently it is easily squeezed out by the day-to-day dilemmas and crises arising from the project activities, from donor pressures and from media enquiries. (Clark 1991: 147)

Advocacy strategy and staffing alliances: issues for advocacy

Much of the literature is critical of NGOs for being slow to adopt and clarify advocacy as a strategy. In particular, Edwards (1993: 165) identified a failure to combine 'different forms and levels of action in mutually supportive and reinforcing ways within a single strategy for change ... working simultaneously and in a co-ordinated fashion at local, national and international levels, both in detailed policy work and public campaigning, educational and media activity'.

Of the respondents providing data, 17 out of 23 claimed to have an advocacy policy. In addition to the 'yes/no' response in this respect, information was sought on the rationale, objectives, and policy for selecting topics for their advocacy. Predictably, the responses on advocacy objectives referred to influencing decision makers and public opinion to bring about change to the benefit of the poor. In selecting issues or subjects for advocacy, most respondents linked their advocacy to field experience, to their assessment of the prospects of successfully bringing about positive change, and to influencing opinion within their home-country constituencies. However, despite the linkage of advocacy with field experience, only two indicated that they consulted with Southern NGOs in selecting topics for their advocacy; a fact which would tend to support the questioning of Northern NGOs' legitimacy to claim to speak as advocates for the Southern poor, and criticisms of their failure to build effective partnerships with Southern NGOs.

Consistent with generally increased advocacy expenditures over the survey period, in every case where NGOs reported employing dedicated advocacy staff, total staff resources were greater in 1996 than in 1984, and generally the proportion of specialist advocacy staff at middle and senior management levels rose over the survey period.

Notable from the responses was the growth in the number of NGO advocacy topics over the survey period, and the very wide range of topics covered by their advocacy. In the period 1993–1996, several issues emerged around which Oxfams and other NGOs have coalesced: debt advocacy (in which almost all Oxfams reported active co-operation with the WAO since its establishment in 1995, and on which six non-Oxfams also reported advocacy), trade-related issues, and landmines.

Unsurprisingly, the survey responses in relation to advocacy alliances were overwhelmingly positive, with all respondents indicating some form (without being asked to comment on the depth and effectiveness)

of co-operative advocacy relationships within their home country or region, and with Northern umbrella bodies or their own international network. The least-reported form of alliance was with Southern organisations, with which only 14 of the 23 respondents on this topic indicated an advocacy alliance.

In summary, the survey responses suggest that for the majority of participating NGOs advocacy has – through a combination of the allocation of human and financial resources, the recognition of advocacy as a strategy, and advocacy alliances – been integrated into the fabric of their organisations in pursuit of their missions to reduce poverty and offer humanitarian relief. While the survey findings therefore suggest that over time NGOs are to a progressively greater extent recognising, integrating, and providing resources for advocacy, they do not shed light on the effectiveness or impact of that advocacy.

Evaluation

A recurrent theme in published criticisms of NGOs is the need for them to be more thorough, rigorous, and objective in evaluating their work, and the need to publish evaluation results as an essential component of NGO transparency. Among others, Clark (1991), Edwards and Hulme (1995), and Saxby in Sogge (1996) argue that this is necessary and, in Clark's view, to the advantage of NGOs. Edwards and Hulme (1995) and Smillie (1995) stress the need for greater attention to evaluating NGO advocacy as a prerequisite for NGOs being able more effectively to communicate their advocacy achievements. Without this, NGOs will be unable to win greater private and official donor support for the allocation of resources to advocacy.

In the survey, NGOs were asked to advise whether they consistently evaluate their advocacy (or at least claim to), the basis used for evaluation, and to which stakeholders the results are made available. The findings support the criticisms noted above. Only half (11 out of 23) of the NGOs which responded reported that their advocacy is formally evaluated, and of these only four stated that their advocacy was always evaluated. Survey responses indicate that release of evaluation results to stakeholders is much less of a priority to NGOs than commentators believe would be useful as a means of demonstrating effectiveness and transparency. Apart from funding agencies, to which six respondents reported that they made advocacy evaluations available, the survey responses indicate very little release of advocacy evaluations within

NGOs' own networks, to donors, Southern partner organisations, researchers, or the media.

Summary observations from the survey

Within its limitations, the survey has provided useful insights into Northern NGOs and their advocacy. The number of NGOs that recognise advocacy as a strategy to be employed in pursuit of their objectives, the increasing resources being allocated to advocacy, and the specialised and more senior staff being employed in advocacy all suggest that NGOs are heeding the calls for increased strategic priority to be given to advocacy.

The responses indicate that, although they clearly have some way to go, NGOs are increasingly addressing two⁴ of the strategic weaknesses identified by Edwards (1993:168): the absence of a clear coherent advocacy strategy and the allocation of resources necessary effectively to implement that strategy; and the failure to build the alliances needed to broaden and strengthen their advocacy voices.

The third strategic weakness identified by Edwards, the 'emasculatation' of advocacy for fear of reductions in official funding on which many are so dependent, was not substantiated by the survey. The lack of correlation between official funding and advocacy expenditures, and, indeed, the contradictions noted above, suggest that it is the organisational culture and its priorities, rather than reliance on official funding, that determines the emphasis placed upon advocacy, and resources allocated to it. While the survey found no correlation between official funding and advocacy expenditures, it was beyond its scope to examine the nature of the advocacy and the extent to which the advocacy messages may be influenced by dependence on official donors. Thus, it is possible that the content of advocacy, rather than the decision to engage in and allocate resources to it, may be influenced by dependency on official donor funding (Minear 1987: 207).

The further major flaw in NGO advocacy that was identified in the literature is the failure of NGOs to demonstrate to themselves and their stakeholders, through evaluation, the effectiveness of their advocacy as justification for the financial and human resources dedicated to it. Evaluation, documentation, and publication of advocacy experience, in addition to helping to demonstrate both the effectiveness of NGOs' advocacy and their accountability, may help to 'facilitate scaling-up by others' (Edwards and Hulme 1994; Edwards and Hulme 1992: 224; Archer 1994: 232). Without the foundation provided by consistent,

thorough evaluation of their advocacy, NGOs will be unable to assess its effectiveness, or address the criticisms made of it. Without being able to demonstrate their advocacy achievements through evaluation, NGOs are unable to fully commit the strategic priority and resources needed to realise the structural macro-reforms which are acknowledged to be essential if they are to have a substantial impact on world-wide poverty and related injustice. Until NGOs themselves have sufficient confidence in the effectiveness of their advocacy both to communicate and demonstrate their advocacy achievements, advocacy will surely remain a relatively minor component of NGO strategy, notwithstanding its potential contribution to their stated missions. If consistent, thorough evaluation of their advocacy is a prerequisite for such a level of informed confidence, the survey responses suggest a need for much greater priority to be given to advocacy evaluation by NGOs.⁵

The challenge

This then is the challenge to NGOs' advocacy programmes: to evaluate the effectiveness of their campaigning, lobbying, and development education so that they are able confidently to demonstrate their advocacy achievements. By so doing, NGOs would be liberated from the constraints imposed by the beliefs of private and official donors that resources ought not be diverted away from tangible, currently more marketable, humanitarian relief and development projects. Having reached this level of demonstrable knowledge of their advocacy achievements, NGOs will be much better placed strategically to assess and determine the issues upon which they should be advocating, to set their advocacy goals, to plan desired outcomes, and to make more informed judgements about the people, organisations, and institutions that they should be seeking to influence, and the methods and forms of organisation and alliance that will be most effective. This increased level of confidence in their advocacy will enable NGOs to invest greater resources in advocacy programmes which contribute to the realisation of their poverty-reduction goals. Anything less will consign NGOs to being no more than bit players in the necessary transformation of the institutions, policies, and practices which sustain poverty and powerlessness.

Notes

1 For these purposes, advocacy is assumed to incorporate campaigning, lobbying, and development education as the three principal streams of activity by which NGOs have sought to influence structures and policies and to bring about change in the interests of eradicating poverty and its underlying causes.

2 The survey was distributed to all 11 OI affiliates, plus 54 development NGOs listed in the 1992 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Directory, whose entries referred to advocacy activity, and whose 1990 budgets were not less than that of Oxfam Canada, which in that year was the lowest of OECD country-based Oxfams, and so indicative of a Northern NGO which encompassed the full range of development NGO activity. Further, because the OI affiliates include Oxfam Hong Kong as the only one not based in an OECD member country, two members of international NGO networks based in Newly Industrialised Economies were included in the survey, making a total of 56 NGOs not related to Oxfam. Fifty-two of the 67 (77 per cent) of the surveyed NGOs responded, although 29 of the NGOs not related to Oxfam did not provide data.

3 It may be argued that this comparison is unfair, because Greenpeace and other organisations such as Friends of the Earth and Amnesty International have effecting change as their sole *raison d'être*, without the 'encumbrance' of development and humanitarian relief programmes, which were the purposes for which Northern NGOs were generally founded. Nevertheless, NGOs which claim to address the structural causes

of poverty in the course of pursuing their mission and employ advocacy as the strategy for effecting change to improve the lives of people living in poverty have a duty to do so most effectively. Advocacy is not an optional extra for those NGOs, but is essential to bringing about the change in structures, policies, and practices which institutionalise poverty.

4 Of the four strategic weaknesses of NGO advocacy identified by Edwards, their failure to develop credible alternatives to neo-liberal economic growth-oriented orthodoxies was beyond the survey's scope.

5 Roche (1999), in a chapter devoted to impact assessment and advocacy, outlines current approaches to evaluating advocacy, by reference to number of case studies. This work, which makes the case for assessing advocacy (applicable to both development programmes and humanitarian emergencies), presents a number of qualitative, quantitative, and participatory approaches to evaluation. Through these case studies Roche therefore demonstrates that at least some NGOs are giving greater priority to advocacy evaluation than is indicated by the survey responses. Roche (p.193) recognises the need for NGOs to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their advocacy by stating: 'NGOs need to demonstrate that their advocacy work is not only effective but also cost-effective and has impact in the sense of making positive difference to people's lives. They must show that lasting change in policy and practice actually results in improving the lives of men and women living in poverty and that this achievement is due, at least in part, to

their research, capacity-building, and lobbying efforts. NGOs also need to know under what conditions they should advocate on behalf of others and when they should be strengthening others to speak for themselves. They have to demonstrate that they are going about this work in a professional and competent manner, and use the monitoring of this work to learn and to improve future performance.'

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