Learning for change: the art of assessing the impact of advocacy work

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Introduction

Advocacy work has become the latest enthusiasm for most agencies involved in international aid and development. Over the past decade NGOs have dedicated more resources and given a higher priority to influencing and advocacy work at all levels (local, national, and international levels). These trends have been driven by a number of factors.

Perhaps the most fundamental of these has been a deeper understanding of the causes of poverty and marginalisation. NGOs and many donors have come to recognise that several decades of aid projects, even those using improved methodologies for intervention, are neither addressing the determinants of poverty nor alleviating its symptoms on a sufficient scale. Indeed, the underlying causes of poverty and social exclusion remain very much intact.

The context for development work has changed dramatically, as Southern NGOs have increased in size and capacity. In many cases, they have (legitimately) displaced Northern NGOs as implementers, or even as channels for aid from government or multilateral agencies. As democracy and political pluralism have spread, Southern NGOs and social movements have become more assertive in challenging power structures within their own countries and increasingly at the international level.

With a diminished role as aid implementers, many Northern NGOs have sought a new role in advocacy. The recent success of campaigns (such as those on landmines, some World Bank projects, debt, and the Multilateral Agreement on Investment or MAI) has stimulated interest among Northern NGOs. The media profile and potential for public involvement in such campaigns have added attraction as a source of profile and funding. More substantively, some Southern

NGOs have called on their Northern counterparts to change the policies of their own home governments, recognising that international policy is still largely driven by the OECD countries. In some countries, such as the UK, increased advocacy work has also been made possible by a relaxation in the interpretation of the legal framework governing charities.

On the heels of the enthusiasm for advocacy is an emerging enthusiasm for understanding whether the substantial devotion of resources to these activities is having an impact. NGOs are asking whether advocacy and influencing initiatives are cost effective and whether they are contributing to the fulfilment of their mission (i.e. improving the lives of their intended beneficiaries). These are important questions to ask, not only for accountability purposes (such as how NGOs are using donors' or the public's funds), but also to learn from experience and improve the way advocacy work is undertaken. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact assessment (IA) can also help NGOs understand how far their work is supporting the efforts of others, particularly in strengthening civil society, and the degree to which advocacy and influencing work results in lasting improvements in the lives of poor and marginalised people.

There are two major problems in M&E when applied to advocacy. First, there is currently little experience or capacity. The 'market' (of internal staff, research institutes, and/or consultants) is just starting to respond, recognising that M&E is set to become a growth industry. The multinational consultancy agencies are pursuing the potentially lucrative sector of monitoring the impact of companies on workers, local communities, and the environment, and attempting to establish themselves as credible verifiers. Smaller consultancy firms that have experience in M&E for project work are now eyeing the potential for evaluating advocacy activities. Meanwhile, NGOs are adding internal staff and starting internal training and capacity building in M&E for advocacy.

Yet a second problem remains: how do you do it? This paper suggests some deep pitfalls and some broad approaches to M&E/IA for advocacy.

What is advocacy and how is it changing?

The deepest pitfall of advocacy is failing to understand the nature of the work it involves. This is scarcely surprising, given the paucity of

systematic research and analysis into its diverse forms, methods, institutional structures, and the dynamics of decision-making processes it seeks to influence. Further, the whole field of advocacy work is changing rapidly. The dominant role of major corporations, pressures to reduce the role of the State, new challenges for civil society, globalisation of media and entertainment, and new communications technologies are among the many factors introducing new challenges and new opportunities.

The complexity of the advocacy field can be illustrated across four dimensions:

- the increasing globalisation of advocacy work;
- the rise of a diverse civil society;
- the increasing diversity of advocacy structures;
- the increasing diversity in strategies.

The increasing globalisation of advocacy work

The last 20 years have seen the rapid internationalisation of economic activity and the commensurate growth in power of global economic institutions. In the past, civil society had a strong record of influencing human rights and social and environmental policies at the international level, particularly through UN processes. However, these 'soft' (aspirational) policies have largely been subordinated to the 'hard' (enforceable) rules made by international institutions and forums in the economic sphere. Economic decisions taken at the international level now affect the lives of much of the world's population. It is increasingly the case that ' ... major decisions affecting the lives of the disenfranchised, especially poor people, are being made in ever more distant places' (Watson 2001:123).

Patterns of development are being influenced by trade and financial flows and by the international rules that facilitate them. For example, the WTO provides a mechanism for governments to determine not only external trade rules, such as tariffs and quotas, but also national and local policies on subsidies, licensing laws, and a huge range of regulations across society. As the rules have become more pervasive and intrusive, civil society has increasingly challenged the underlying policies, the lack of transparency in decision making, and the very legitimacy of the institutions. Over the past two decades, such civil society advocacy has forced its way from the periphery to frame much of the discourse, and is now starting to change the policies and power structures.

The challenge of tackling these rules has necessitated a new approach to international advocacy work. New communications technologies, particularly the Internet, have allowed the formation of campaign networks that would have been unimaginable a decade ago. The interplay of local, national, and international campaigns means that there are many different campaign pathways and targets. Systems for coordination and accountability have been developed to encourage broad participation and a central role for the voices and demands of those primarily affected. It is important that M&E/IA systems recognise and support the huge diversity in forms of advocacy.

The rise of a diverse civil society

The strengthened capacity of civil society in the South has created new opportunities for effective advocacy across a wide range of local, national, regional, and international policies. The last ten years have seen the emergence of Southern NGOs as leading actors in international campaigns, including multinational advocacy groups from the South, such as the Third World Network. The traditional model of Northern NGO-led campaigns is changing rapidly to recognise that meaningful, sustainable policy change can only be achieved through strong Southern participation in all aspects of advocacy. Yet in many of the poorest countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, there are few opportunities for civil society to exert influence and little capacity to do so. Some NGOs are therefore emphasising the need for advocacy work to include capacity building, support for coalitions and broad-based movements, and the expansion of democratic space for civil society. The challenge is to integrate the processes of strengthening the movement with the actions to achieve policy change. This requires a more insightful assessment of advocacy work, respecting its multiple aims.

The increasing diversity of advocacy structures

The organisational structures of advocacy work are also changing rapidly. New technologies and new forms of coalition are greatly enlarging the range of potential strategies and tactics that can be used by international coalitions. For example, *The Economist* in December 1999 likened the campaign against a new round of WTO negotiations in Seattle to a 'swarm', involving a diverse range of autonomous civil society organisations. Formal hierarchies and rigid structures have largely been displaced by multiple and overlapping networks and coalitions, with new ways to formulate joint strategies, share research, and act quickly on the basis of new information. This is a departure

from the more traditional campaigns, where there has usually been a lead organisation and more clearly defined attribution of impact resulting from the work of any particular actor in the campaign.

The key ingredient that allows coalitions to function effectively across geographic, cultural, economic, and political divides is trust. Research on the success of civil society coalitions on the World Bank explains that these 'vertical coalitions' are facilitated by organisational chains of relatively short links that collectively span great distances (Brown and Fox 1999:8–11).

There is no doubt that information and communications technology has promoted a greater degree of specialisation among NGOs internationally, just as it has in the value chains of businesses in the international economy. It is no longer required that any particular group or organisation become an expert in all issues or cover all aspects in a particular campaign. For example, an important part of the strength of the anti-MAI campaign derived from the diversity of allies undertaking specialised advocacy roles in the coalition, such as 'insider' dialogue, research, public education, movement building, public campaigning, and networking. These roles also spanned issues that have often been perceived as distinct, such as international development, environment, human rights, the rights of workers, consumers, and women, faith-based social justice, local government, corporate social responsibility, etc. Within such coalitions, attribution of outcomes becomes impossible. Successes and failures are inherently shared by coalition members.

The increasing diversity in strategies

Alongside the increasing complexity of advocacy work is a greater appreciation of the diversity in strategies that can be used to achieve change. One of the most important insights in understanding the nature of advocacy work is that its success relies on the ability to transform the structures of power. The strategy adopted will therefore depend on the means by which the power has been created and maintained. A useful insight into different systems of power is provided by Gaventa (1995). Based on his work, we suggest three categories:

- A pluralist system, within which there is a relatively open competition for power.
- An élitist system, dominated by a privileged group that excludes and discriminates against others.

- An ideological system, relying on the dominance of political, economic, or religious beliefs to shape the consciousness of society.

These broad categories of the power structure require very different advocacy strategies. For example, professional lobbying may be effective within a pluralist system – a relatively open exchange of research and analysis lends itself to the development of specialist NGOs and research institutions, reasoned argument, and lobbying. However, such approaches are likely to be ineffective in a system dominated by élites, where the most effective advocacy strategies are likely to include subversion of the power structure through, for example, challenging its legitimacy or exposing it to ridicule. Similarly, advocacy in a system dominated by a particular ideology demands different strategies, such as mobilisation of those whose interests are excluded.

Likewise, different advocacy strategies are required in response to differing social, institutional, economic, and cultural circumstances. The diversity of advocacy approaches multiplies as campaigns cross national boundaries, involve new coalitions of civil society, and address new global challenges. A 'tick box' approach, listing the various components of a campaign that may have worked in a particular case, is clearly inappropriate. There is, or should be, an almost infinite range of different strategies and tactics that are used to achieve change.

The deep pitfalls of standard M&E/IA applied to advocacy work

The increasing power of civil society to influence policy has led to calls for NGOs to be more accountable. While the most vociferous calls often come from business leaders whose own accountability is limited to their largest shareholders, this does not detract from the need for NGOs to be more accountable, most importantly to their members and/or intended beneficiaries. In addition, the greater investment of resources in advocacy work has increased pressures for clear evaluation of its effectiveness. Therefore, NGOs are called upon to use the processes of M&E/IA to justify their advocacy work. This is a major challenge for most organisations. The traditional practices of M&E/IA are often inadequate and run the risk of providing misleading information. Some of the deepest pitfalls arise from potential misunderstandings of the nature of the advocacy process.

Advocacy is messy

The most common pitfall is to assume that political and institutional change occurs in a linear fashion, as in a recipe that is prepared through the addition of particular ingredients (research, lobbying, public concern, political pressure, etc.) and cooked (campaigned) for a certain period. This is rarely the case. Change often occurs in sudden leaps, in unexpected ways, and in response to the most unlikely circumstances. And campaigns typically evolve through a bewildering range of obstacles, opportunities, and responses. This is well illustrated in two case studies on the promotion of breastfeeding in Ghana and issues of child labour in the carpet industry in India (Chapman and Fisher 2000:152–157). These case studies make the point that campaigns cannot be understood as systematic, mechanistic, or pursuing a logical sequence. Typically, however, M&E/IA falls into this trap, assuming that impacts will be achieved within a given timeframe, based on an established plan (perhaps even a logical framework) with inputs producing outputs that result in impacts. The application of such a model may be misleading and even undermine the effectiveness of advocacy work. For example, undue emphasis on achieving targets against a plan may contribute to missing opportunities for achieving change in unexpected ways.

Advocacy relies on cooperation

A second pitfall is created by the obsession of many NGOs with assessing the impact of their own organisation in isolation from others. In some cases, for example, the impact of advocacy may be reduced to measuring the various forms of media coverage on a particular issue, with particular attention given to mentions of the NGO in question. While this may be important for institutional profile, such measures can encourage competitive rather than collaborative behaviour, providing incentives for campaigners to elevate their own profile over others or the coalition as a whole. More broadly, assessment of the impact of a single NGO as part of a coalition is difficult and all too often creates tensions. When international campaigns involve thousands of diverse civil society organisations from many different countries, it is difficult to attribute the impact of a campaign to any one type of campaigning method or national arena, let alone to a single NGO.

One size does not fit all

A third pitfall is the application of standardised M&E/IA tools, while different forms of advocacy may require different methods and

timescales. Those engaged in longer-term research and intermittent policy influence may prefer formal systems that rely on annual reports, quantifiable indicators, and measurement against plans. By contrast, those using public mobilisation or direct action to influence a rapidly evolving issue may develop informal systems that assess progress each week, using subjective judgements and flexible plans that enable them to react quickly and take advantage of new opportunities. The use of standard approaches to M&E/IA will rarely provide the most effective information for decision making.

Advocacy is often adversarial

The type of decision-making system being influenced also needs to inform the types of M&E/IA used. For example, where there is a high degree of cooperation and trust between an NGO and a government department, as in the case of British NGOs lobbying for a larger aid budget, it can be useful to ask decision makers about advocacy impact and effectiveness (Development Initiatives 1996). However, if this is attempted when the relationship is adversarial, the information could be maliciously misleading.

Rome wasn't built in a day

A fifth pitfall is overemphasis on short-term aims over less visible long-term process goals. On the one hand, the achievement of tangible outcomes is an important part of most advocacy work. Not only does it demonstrate some degree of success and thereby gain more support and resources, it also plays an important role in building a wider base of participants in the advocacy work. But on the other hand, short-term successes may be won at the expense of longer-term goals. Most often these include the less visible aims of building capacity among partners and contribution to more fundamental change in future. An interim review of ActionAid's Food Rights campaign illustrates this point. In this case, shorter-term desires to influence the Seattle WTO process are shown to have initially compromised longer-term institutional aims of deepening the campaign, developing people-centred advocacy, and creating strong micro-macro links (Harding 2000).

The conclusion is that reductionist and standardised forms of M&E/IA are likely to be inappropriate for advocacy work, and may even create perverse incentives that undermine effective joint action. Just as Logical Frameworks have undermined participatory, process-oriented approaches to project work, pressure from donors to apply

restrictive M&E/IA approaches will impede effective advocacy work. The challenge is to develop approaches that are useful to those engaged in advocacy and promote accountability to all stakeholders.

Broad approaches to effective M&E/IA for advocacy

So what can we say about the monitoring and evaluation of influencing and advocacy work? Four principles should guide the development of M&E/IA systems:

- Ensure that what the NGO values gets measured.
- Use methodological approaches that are appropriate to the type of advocacy work being carried out.
- Look at the whole – not just the parts.
- Make impact assessment an organisational priority.

Measuring what is valued

Clarity about the aims, strategies, and tactics of advocacy are essential for effective monitoring and evaluation. All too often an enthusiasm for advocacy means that NGOs 'work on' a particular issue without any clear idea of how their actions will achieve change. It is rare that NGOs are explicit about how advocacy will realistically achieve policy change, let alone clear about how that policy change will be translated into positive practice that helps poor people in the long term.

Even if advocacy is undertaken in a fluid and rapidly changing environment, it is important that each agency clearly articulates what it is trying to achieve and ensures what it values is measured (qualitative or indicative measures may be preferable to contrived ways to quantify the impact). One way of clarifying important process objectives is to identify and prioritise essential dimensions of the work at the outset. Policy or legislative change is one of the most obvious. However, depending on the type of advocacy (and the values of the NGO), a second dimension may be strengthening civil society by working in ways that create collaboration, trust, and unity among civil society groups. A third dimension could be helping to enlarge the 'democratic space' in which civil society groups can operate. And a fourth dimension could be the direct involvement of excluded people in advocacy to achieve their rights, rather than being 'consulted' by professional activists who are advocating on their behalf. Whatever the dimensions, each NGO should, at the outset, be clear about what it is trying to do and how this will be monitored.

Choose appropriate methodologies

What are the methodologies for assessing impact? As has been argued above, this needs to start from an understanding of the diversity in advocacy approaches. It is important to select appropriate methods for assessing change in different circumstances.

A wide range of stakeholders could be involved in an evaluation of advocacy work. These include NGO advocacy staff themselves, coalition members and partners, decision makers or influence targets, 'experts' (such as consultants or academics), the general public, representatives of those most affected, or those people themselves. Currently, standard methodological approaches involve semi-structured interviews, group-based discussions, surveys, and questionnaires, together with media records, internal reports of meetings, events and activities, mailing lists, and external reports.

Whom to involve in M&E/IA should reflect the type of advocacy work and the power structure being influenced. The intended beneficiaries of advocacy work should be involved wherever possible, though this may be impractical in campaigns involving large numbers of beneficiaries (e.g. the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign). A more practical approach would be to involve civil society representatives at the national and, where possible, local levels. This also is difficult in campaigns where a change is being prevented. For example, it is impossible to involve beneficiaries in a campaign to stop a new round of WTO negotiations – but the involvement of a range of NGOs, social movements, trade unions, and other civil society groups in a joint campaign evaluation would be possible.

In other cases, however, the direct involvement of the people most affected is vital. This is most likely to be meaningful when they have been closely involved in the campaign, when the policy change is local (rather than international), and where there is a high degree of trust among those involved.

The different forms of power structure being influenced also have a bearing on the most appropriate M&E/IA, as shown in Table 1. In a relatively open and pluralist system it may be possible to involve opinion formers or even decision makers in evaluating the success of different advocacy approaches. In a closed system with power controlled by élites, it will often be difficult to get access to information on how decisions are made, and evaluation is reliant on assessing the degree to which advocacy work is making progress according to the conceptual model of how advocacy can achieve change. There are even

fewer opportunities to access decision makers in a system dominated by ideology. Change is often slow, discontinuous, and may take place over decades.

Table 1 outlines some of the implications of different forms of power structure for the type of advocacy work undertaken and possible approaches to M&E/IA.

Table 1: How power analysis affects M&E/IA approaches			
System of power	**Key characteristics of power structure**	**Possible advocacy approaches**	**Possible M&E/IA approaches**
Pluralist system	• Relatively open, access defined by level of resources (e.g. many democracies) • Competition between interest groups on the basis of political and economic leverage • Powerlessness of poor and minorities	• Professional research and lobbying • Public-interest lobbying on defined issues • Influence over democratic processes/voting • Public campaigning to demonstrate public support	• Use available information, including public records of decision making • Involve wide range of stakeholders, possibly including opinion formers and/or decision makers • Possible joint evaluation between coalition partners • Include intermediate measures of political change, capacity building, and degree of participation
Elitist system	• Closed access, limited to the powerful élite (e.g. Burma) • Exclusion of issues and groups • Systematic forms of repression and exploitation	• Mobilisation of excluded groups in coalitions • Underground and secretive opposition movements • Strategies to de-legitimise the power of the élite • Important role of symbols of repression • Expand space for civil society to organise and influence	• In the absence of information on decision-making processes, M&E should assess progress on key influence pathways and test assumptions about how to achieve change • Involve coalition allies in participatory M&E where possible • Include evaluation of capacity building, scope of civil society involvement, and degree of participation
Ideological system	• Hidden forms of oppression arising from ideological non-conformity (e.g. institutional racism) • Hegemony of ideas perpetrated through formal structures of society • Dissenting voices stifled and ridiculed	• Popular education and building critical thought • Development of public understanding, through literature, arts, culture, etc. • Promote analysis and understanding of alternatives • Build a coalition among the powerless (e.g. the poor excluded from market ideology)	• Recognise even longer timeframes in achieving identifiable change • Assess the extent and nature of public understanding • Include evaluation of capacity building, scope of civil society involvement, exposure of different public audiences, changes in public perceptions

Assess the whole, not just the parts

A third principle that should guide the choice of M&E for advocacy is to be holistic. As shown in this paper, advocacy work is complex, multi-layered, and evolving rapidly. The traditional tools used in planning, monitoring, and evaluation, with their emphasis on limited timeframes, logical frameworks, annual objectives, periodic reviews, and lengthy reports, are often inappropriate. A recent review of M&E/IA approaches to advocacy illustrates that NGOs often look at part of this complex 'elephant', and not at the whole (Davies 2001). New approaches are required, recognising the huge diversity in advocacy work.

M&E must be an integral part of the advocacy process itself. This means that M&E is not a separate exercise carried out after a campaign is finished, an audit or a source of good news stories for funders. The timeframes for the campaign and the rapidity with which it evolves dictate how frequently activities and plans need to be reviewed. Flexibility is often important. A successful campaign is one that takes advantage of new opportunities or responds to new threats as they arise. Therefore, a successful M&E approach must be flexible enough not only to adapt to external events, but to be a tool in reshaping the campaign.

There are few answers available 'off the shelf'. The authors are involved in several initiatives that are developing aspects of M&E work. The World Development Movement (WDM), a UK-based membership network, is part of an international network of civil society groups campaigning on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The overall campaign is multi-layered in tackling national governments, national and international corporate lobby groups, and international institutions (primarily the WTO); allies range from small community-based protest groups in the South fighting for local control over natural resources to international trade unions opposing privatisation of public services; the methods of campaigning are diverse and external events are moving quickly; and the systems of power are a mix of relatively pluralist, élitist, and ideological. M&E is difficult.

The approach used by WDM has been to develop a conceptual map of the advocacy process, identifying the decision makers to be influenced, the campaign outcomes that would benefit the poor and disadvantaged communities, and the pathways to do so. These campaigns typically use a combination of research and analysis to win the arguments and influence opinion makers; public education, mobilisation, and media coverage to create political pressure; and

work with others to support their actions. The pathways therefore comprise a number of tracks which contribute to the overall goal.

At periodic intervals, the map is reviewed, progress discussed, and changes made to future plans. The conceptual map thereby provides a framework not only for planning, but for monitoring progress on each of the pathways for change and towards the overall influence target. Where there are often long time lags between the activity and the result, it is essential to be able to assess progress on each step of the advocacy path. Some indications of change can be ascertained from official positions, documents (especially those that are leaked!) and discussions, shared among allies. This framework has yet to be fully developed as an M&E/IA approach, but shows promise as a flexible and practical means to ensure that the assessment of the parts to a campaign contribute to the effective assessment of the whole.

Make impact assessment an organisational priority

A final principle, which could guide the development of M&E/IA of advocacy, is to make this process an organisational priority. At its best, M&E work should be about supporting institutional learning, encouraging reflection and adaptive work practices, and ensuring a voice and accountability to those people whose lives are most affected by NGO advocacy. For this to happen, M&E and IA have to transcend their specialist boxes and become a live and kicking part of the way an organisation works and relates to its stakeholders. Some NGOs are waking up to this challenge (Roche 1999; Chapman and Wameyo 2001). For example, the development of the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) within ActionAid has created the potential for this to happen (see also the article by Patta Scott-Villiers in this volume). In essence, this new system simply details processes for appraisals, strategy formation, and programme review across the organisation. Yet it does more than this. It places emphasis on accountability to poor people at all levels of the organisation. It promotes ongoing reflection and learning as a key element of everyone's work. And, importantly, it explicitly recognises the influence that M&E/IA procedures have on the success or failure of ongoing work.

How does this affect the M&E/IA of advocacy? While it is too soon to judge the new ALPS system (indeed, there is currently a gap between intention and practice), it has provided the impetus for the organisation to seek greater clarity about what it is trying to achieve in its advocacy and how it measures this. There is a long way to go. A long-

term action-research project (led by Jenny Chapman) is currently being developed, which explores how best to involve local women, men, and project partners at local, national, and international levels in the assessment of influencing, advocacy, and social change.[1] The work will be carried out with partners and activists in Uganda, Ghana, Nepal, and Brazil (ActionAid 2000b). While this work is in its infancy, it has two interesting elements. The first is the intention to involve central actors in identifying how they want to monitor and evaluate their own work in ways that are culturally appropriate and empowering, and which they find useful. The second is the intention to open up to the chaotic nature and full range of advocacy rather than close it down. The essential principle is that to be most useful M&E/IA has to be led by those engaged in advocacy themselves.

Conclusion

The most fundamental problem in undertaking M&E/IA of advocacy work is failing fully to understand the nature of the advocacy process – its multiple aims, multi-layered structures, shifting timeframes, and the nature of the power structures it aims to influence. While many NGOs are increasingly recognising the issue of power, there is little evidence of M&E/IA systems for advocacy that are explicitly designed to analyse change in the particular context. Consequently, NGOs sometimes collect a lot of information about particular aspects of an advocacy process, but rarely look at the whole. M&E/IA is often seen as a requirement imposed by donors, rather than as a dynamic system for learning that helps inform and guide the advocacy process itself. New approaches are required.

An important factor to consider in designing the most appropriate M&E/IA approach for a particular advocacy process is to start by ensuring that the most important aims are included. This means that less visible and long-term aims should not be forgotten or undervalued – such as capacity building, opening up democratic space for civil society, and including the participation of those most affected. Second, the methodologies used for M&E/IA need to be tailored to the nature of the advocacy itself, the power structure, and particularly the type of relationship that advocates have with influence targets. Third, advocacy planning and management should use frameworks that allow M&E/IA to assess the way that the various parts of the advocacy work fit together in order to achieve its aims. And, finally, M&E/IA must be an integral element of the advocacy process and the wider organisation. There are

no 'off-the-shelf' answers; no easy solutions. Those of us who want to use M&E/IA tools to contribute to effective and accountable advocacy need to work together to develop new approaches.

Note

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