

Advocacy as a Strategy for Social Change: A Qualitative Analysis of the Perceptions of UN and Non-UN Development Workers

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ABSTRACT Advocacy is an important strategy in achieving change in international development programming. Different aid agencies design and implement advocacy programmes to influence the political climate, policy and programme decisions, public agenda, resource allocation and social norms and practices. Despite the extensive recognition of the importance of advocacy in development discourse, its effectiveness is sometimes questioned. This study sought to explore the understanding of advocacy by development workers and identify new approaches to make it more effective. In-depth interviews were conducted with some 65 development professionals from at least 30 UN and non-UN development agencies. The findings reveal that advocacy is still broadly perceived as indispensable in achieving social outcomes but many development workers are ill-equipped for this function. The study identifies major causes of advocacy ineffectiveness such as lack of strategic approach, deficient issue framing and positioning and weak application of the science and art of social influence. It concludes that without a critical consideration of the complex interplay of local, national and international forces which frame political and social environments, advocacy will not be able effect change at the population level. The study recommends more research on how leadership enhances advocacy effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

There is significant consensus in development discourse that advocacy is a critical strategy for achieving policy and social change. For example, Mefalopulos (2008) considers advocacy as a form of communication intended to influence change at policy and public level and promote issues related to social development. According to McKee et al. (2004), advocacy is the organization of information into argument to be communicated through various interpersonal and media channels to gain political and social leadership for a particular development programme. Specifically for public health interventions, several studies (Baleta et al. 2012; Johnson 2009; Chapman 2004; Hudson 2002; Christofell 2000) have underscored the role of advocacy in achieving health outcomes. Broadly, it is recognized as a foremost constituent of strategic communication aimed at influencing different social and political players at the policy, programmatic, strategic, systemic and social levels.

The utilitarian value of advocacy in effecting change in various health and social development issues is also well documented. In relation to framing the global reproductive health agenda, Mbizo et al. (2013) examined the important advocacy role of International Federation

of Gynecology and Obstetrics in shaping future agenda through evidence. They argued that with effective coalition building and public education, it was possible to influence the implementation of strategies that improve reproductive health. Baleta et al. (2012) studied the role of advocacy, social mobilization and communication in introducing new vaccines in South Africa. While noting that the science of vaccines had become more complex, they found that without advocacy (among other health communication interventions) it would have been difficult to influence the policy environment to introduce three main vaccines for child health in the country.

In addressing the issue of unsafe abortion in Nigeria, Okonufua et al. (2009) posited that concerted public health education and advocacy were essential to reducing abortion-related maternal deaths and influence policy and media agenda. Their conclusion is identical to Adeyemi (2007) who analysed the role of advocacy in scaling up HIV treatment and asserted that "intense advocacy" and effective use of information by CSOs and NGOs were critical in creating access to Anti-retroviral Treatment (ART) within HIV response. Kingman and Sweetman (2005) investigated the place of advocacy in gender and development programming and concluded that

advocacy is a professional field with skills and techniques which need to be learnt. They recommended more training for feminist advocates coupled with the mobilisation of different allies and institutions (including opponents to feminist issues) in achieving social justice and change. Other studies (Gazzola 2013; Ruddle and Davis 2013) have also identified the invaluable role of advocacy in achieving either thematic policy influence or broader social change.

However, some studies have raised concerns about the ineffectiveness of advocacy in achieving its primary role of social justice and change. In relation to changing agricultural policies in Nigeria, Onyekuru (2010) found that while a few agencies were able to influence policy areas because of their clout and influence a large number of advocacy groups did not achieve any level of influence. Piccinini (2010) studied advocacy within the context of humanitarian response and concluded that advocacy is 'a good word gone bad' because it has progressively lost its positive connotation and has simultaneously assumed negative significance. In a similar vein, Rugendyke (2007) investigated international advocacy function in relation to global development of policies and practices for poverty reduction. The study observed that many development agencies, especially NGOs, have become politicised, their advocacy programmes ineffective and not measured, while in some cases they have come up with misguided development strategies. The professional recognition accorded advocacy has also been identified as a major area of concern. Chapman (2004:1) lamented on the general lack of recognition of advocacy in public health as follows:

"... for all its importance, advocacy remains a Cinderella branch of public health practice. Advocacy is often incandescent during its limited hours on the stage, only to resume pumpkin status after midnight. Routinely acknowledged to the project of public health, it is seldom taken seriously by the public health community, compared with the attention given to other disciplines. The status of advocacy as a legitimized discipline is neophyte..."

From the foregoing, it is evident that advocacy has great potential in achieving social development outcomes, but it also fraught with several weaknesses and deficiencies. This has resulted in the call by several writers for advocacy to 'reclaim' itself in order to achieve more

results (Klugman 2011; Samuel 2010; Chapman 2001; Edward 1993). This study is in consonance with this proposition. The author believes that as an important force in achieving social justice and social change, advocacy requires continuous investigation for more empirical insight to inform its practice. This is particularly important in view of shifts in development programming which integrate leveraging for structural change with optimal delivery of service for various populations. In addition, the development context is dynamic, thus various aspects of its programming (including advocacy) require continuous investigation. Against this backdrop, this study explores the perception of advocacy among aid agencies in Africa to generate new perspectives on its role in social development. It is intended to contribute to increasing evidence base for more effective advocacy interventions. Findings from the study are expected to contribute to ongoing discussions on development effectiveness in general and, specifically, greater effectiveness of advocacy function and practice.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research technique involving in-depth interviews with a total of 65 development workers based on convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria were work experience in development project management and willingness to participate in the study. Although advocacy is considered as a technical area, most aid agencies operate on the notion that advocacy is everyone's business. But as part of the inclusion criteria, only development workers involved in project/programme management were considered. Administration and operations personnel were excluded. Participants for the UN group were selected from the United Nations office in Nairobi, which has over 20 UN agencies including UNESCO, UNDP, UNAIDS, UNICEF, ILO, UNFPA, WHO, and many others. It also serves as the headquarters of the UNEP and UN Habitat.

The choice of non-UN participants was opportunistic, based on participants from two regional conferences organised by UN agencies in Nairobi from 2009-2010. Interviewees for this group included representatives from development organizations such as Gates Foundation, Engender Health, the Global Alliance for Youth,

Norwegian Peoples Aid, Care International, Uganda Youth Council, World Vision, Concern Universal, Population Services International, Soul City, LoveLife, Johns Hopkins University project, Media Institute of Southern Africa and many others. The researcher conducted all the interviews, recorded and the information and transcribed for analysis.

Based on the existing literature on the subject (for example, Baleta et al. 2012; Klugman 2011; Johnson 2009; Chapman 2004, 2001), seven issues which the researcher found to offer a critical understanding of advocacy were identified. These were: (i) perceptions on advocacy and its function in development; (ii) causes of ineffectiveness or failure of advocacy interventions; (iii) techniques for achieving advocacy effectiveness; (iv) importance of strategic engagement in advocacy; (v) skills sets needed for effective advocacy practice; (vi) processes for influencing institutional decision-making; and (vii) the place of leadership in advocacy effectiveness.

The identification of the themes and data analysis were guided by principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Kelle 2005). The themes respond to existing concepts in the field of advocacy but also integrate emerging issues in its practice. The study did not begin with any preconceived hypothesis, but generated themes from the literature which were explored through in-depth interviews. However, during the interviews, subthemes related to the main areas were also explored. This allowed for a critical examination of multiple issues and concepts relevant to the focus of the study and which invariably guided the discussions and conclusion of the study.

While the target was to conduct at least 100 interviews to enhance the reliability of findings, a saturation point was reached quite early, which resulted in repetition of responses from a number of interviewees. The researcher did not see any need to continue with additional interviews after the saturation point. From a methodological perspective, two main factors contributed to the early saturation point of interviewees: homogeneity of the interviews in terms of function and identical expertise of participants. Development work, whether within the UN or with other agencies, has its principles, norms and standard programmatic procedures which shape the perception of its staff. Despite the variety of issues

that development workers are engaged with, advocacy seems to have a uniform practice. Therefore, in line with suggestions from qualitative researchers (Jette et al. 2003; Glaser and Strauss 1967) on saturation point, the number of interviews was not increased. However, the use of convenience sampling method and limited number of interviews may be considered as limitations which other studies may address in future.

RESULTS

Perception of Advocacy in Relation to its Conceptual Understanding

The vast majority of interviewees reported that advocacy is essential and relevant in development programmes. Participants identified five main functions of advocacy: influence, information/sensitisation, strategic partnerships, marketing of ideas and speaking up on social issues. When asked to identify the foremost function, over two-thirds voted influence. According to them, the main thrust of advocacy is influence, at various levels and across sectors and social structures. Examples of areas of influence within the public sector necessitating advocacy interventions are public programmes, strategic plans, projects, policies and laws. Within the social context, they referred to norms, practices, conventions, customs, and even behaviours of different institutions or individuals that may need to be changed for the common good. Most of the participants considered advocacy as necessary to changing the social, cultural and traditional context rather than reinforcing it. Both groups agreed that effective advocacy ensures that social issues are not just raised but addressed through necessary public actions.

At least half of the interviewees across the board underscored the connection between influence function and information function. While acknowledging that the essence of advocacy is not necessarily to inform, they suggested that all forms of information, sensitization, promotion, awareness raising and public enlightenment are mechanics of advocacy intended to effect change. Hence, information is a tool of advocacy, not its essence. As one of the participants put it:

“Information and influence exist on a continuum on the advocacy spectrum. Information

around issues is the beginning point. Influence on the issues is the end point. Influence cannot take place in an information vacuum.” (Interviewee from Engender Health)

NGO participants were particularly interested in influencing the implementation of government decisions. They revealed that many government policies, programmes or even international commitments are either only partially implemented or not implemented at all. Therefore, a major focus of NGO advocacy is on pushing for the implementation of such instruments, policies or programmes. An interviewee from a youth NGO said:

“Our advocacy role involves a kind of watchdog function on government institutions for the implementation of international instruments relating to young people – such as the African Youth Charter, World Youth Charter, International Youth Declaration and national youth policy frameworks.” (Interviewee from Global Alliance for Youth)

However, more than two-thirds of the participants agreed that there is a major disconnect between the conceptual notion of advocacy and its practical application in development work. They argued that the understanding of most development workers of the meaning and role of advocacy is far from its organisational or official position. To illustrate their point, many of them suggested that advocacy is a ‘loose’ term, a ‘buzzword’, an ‘abused expression’ in development programming, different from its conceptual notion of a systematic process of influencing decisions and social outcomes. One of the interviewees portrayed advocacy as “an overused catchphrase freely thrown around in development circles with no serious consideration of the meaning, essence or import associated with its etymology.” Another interviewee said “the current practice of advocacy is suffering from lack of proper conceptualisation of its function which is seriously affecting its practical effectiveness.” More than half of the participants associated advocacy with one-off events and ad-hoc campaigning rather than strategic process for change. Many of them equated advocacy with capacity building, community outreaches, noise making, spinning, protest marches, publicity, brainwashing, institutional promotion, social branding, or sponsored media reports.

Causes of Failure of Advocacy Campaigns

From non-prompted questions, participants were asked to identify the main causes of weaknesses or the outright failure of advocacy programmes. Their responses are summarized in the following ten causes:

- i. *No Strategic Approach:* Most of the participants described their advocacy practice as “one-off events” or at best “a string of outreach activities”. Related issues with lack of strategic approach included inadequate coherence across various organizational mandates and poor planning. In many agencies, advocacy is considered as an “after-thought” in development programming resulting in “too few or too many ad-hoc activities”.
- ii. *Difficulty of Development Contexts:* It was generally noted that social, political, cultural and economic issues being addressed are complicated and sometimes impervious to change. Social problems are ‘wicked’ and political context is sometimes “antithetical to change”. Participants highlighted that structural determinants are ingrained and need more time for results. There was an agreement that many social issues that advocates focus on “are rooted in culture, traditions and social practices and are difficult to change”.
- iii. *Weak Evidence-base for Advocacy Programmes:* Lack of robust evidence based for advocacy work was identified as a foremost weakness in advocacy activities. Some participants reported that many campaigns are based on perceptions, preferences and presuppositions of what they think should happen. Another component of weak evidence for advocacy is a weak understanding of the connection between data and decisions in public sector management. This was noted as a missing link. Inadequate measurement of advocacy was identified as “a serious gap and a contribution to weaknesses of advocacy interventions”. Many advocacy efforts take place within informal settings, making attribution difficult to achieve. Interviewees also reported that many advocacy events are not amenable to rigorous evaluation.
- iv. *Ineffective Communication/Positioning of Issues:* While most of the participants

accepted that effective communication is fundamental to achieving influence in advocacy, they suggested that many advocacy activities are riddled with “poor communication strategies, tactics, inadequate articulation of core messages and weak engagement with the media on social issues”. Several participants identified weak media attention span on issues as contributing to their inability to sustain social issues on the media and public agenda. This is linked to poor news reporting or sensationalisation of social issues in the mass media.

- v. *Lack of Focus, Clarity and Clear Direction on What to Achieve*: Challenges raised in this context were that “advocacy efforts are too diverse and too diluted, while issues are not sharply defined”. Related to focus of issues across development agencies, some participants emphasised the problem of poor linkages and weak “connectedness of issues” which result in “poor focus and diluted messaging”.
- vi. *Inadequate Strategic Engagement*: Many interviewees identified “weak synergy with other advocates, poor networking and inadequate stakeholder engagement” as major weaknesses of advocacy in social development. They noted that civic engagement is not strategically integrated into advocacy activities while grassroots mobilization is haphazard. Poor engagement also manifest in many advocates not empowering affected populations to take responsibility for change.
- vii. *Poor Resourcing of Advocacy Function*: One of the major complaints of some participants is limited financial and technical resources to carry out effective advocacy. NGO participants were quick to identify inadequate organizational resources and capabilities by NGO advocates, but interviewees from the UN also listed poor institutional and financial resources as contributing to the failure of their advocacy activities.
- viii. *Weak Leadership at Individual and Institutional Levels*: Across the board, many of the participants noted poor leadership as a weakness of advocacy interventions. Some reported that the ‘bulk of advocacy work is left for junior officers’ and the com-

munication or publications department. Part of the leadership challenge also reflects in limited “energy for change by advocates” beyond the rhetoric on social change.

- ix. *Poor Advocacy Skills*: Over two-thirds of the interviewees observed that a good number of advocates lacked fundamental skills to achieve the essence of advocacy which is influence. Critical skills identified as missing are “issue analysis and issue framing, consensus building and results-based networking”. Other areas of skills deficiency are weak understanding of the role of data in decision making, poor application of the science of social influence and sub-optimal problem solving skills. An important area of skill deficiency is how to respond to “opposition, competing or adversarial advocacy”. Participants noted that many of the social issues and public health interventions they advocate for are ‘heavily contested’ and subject to ‘grand opposition’ and without a good understanding of how to manage opposition, it is difficult to achieve advocacy results.
- x. *Uninspiring Advocacy*: Some participants noted that advocacy techniques are too ‘old school’ using traditional techniques such as meetings, workshops and pushing information to decision makers. According to them, many interventions “lack teeth, energy, or momentum for change”. They reported that UN agencies are ‘over-cautious in their advocacy approaches’ while some NGO efforts are too ‘noise-making’. They also noted that in a digital age, we cannot do the ‘dull and dry’ advocacy any longer.

Techniques for Achieving Effectiveness in Advocacy

When asked to identify techniques which are crucial to achieving advocacy effectiveness, most of the participants emphasised the need to harness the art and science of influence and persuasion in their advocacy programmes. In realising this, they highlighted four fundamental principles.

First is the use of evidence. Particularly noteworthy is the number of interviewees who mentioned evidence as the foundation for advocacy. More than two-thirds of the participants spon-

taneously indicated that evidence is the first essential element of effective advocacy communication. Evidence, they agreed, must be generated from ‘accurate, unvarnished, and verifiable research’. They also noted that such evidence must not be ‘massaged or manipulated’ for specific ends. According to most of them, advocacy without solid and credible evidence is just ‘shouting or noise making’. They identified forms of evidence like social and economic data, scenario modelling, trends analysis, outcome mapping, investment models, and real-time impact assessment and performance ratings. Several participants also acknowledged the value of other forms of evidence like local knowledge, case studies and reports, incidence or prevalence data, and local stories of the people, which can be collated, verified and creatively used to influence perceptions or actions of decision-makers. Most of the interviewees linked evidence to producing convincing argument and developing narratives that are able to influence. One of the participants said:

“Our advocacy should move from ideologies, anecdotes and untested assumptions into better evidence in order to be more effective in influencing public decision-making processes. In governance today, data should drive public decisions.” (Interviewee from UNFPA)

Second is the use of credible expertise, think tanks, and policy networks in influencing different levels of decision-makers. A good proportion of participants noted that the use of technical experts is a critical tool of persuasion and convincing people. They highlighted the fact that technical expertise confers authority on the use of information and evidence in “building the case” for change. But some interviewees raised the challenge of contradictory expert opinions on issues. They argued that such contraction ‘hurts more than helps’ advocacy because it makes decision-makers suspicious of the information and evidence presented. Although some interviewees suggested the need for balanced information, others argued against it because it ‘compromises’ their position. An NGO interviewee said: “Balanced evidence sometimes does not help; therefore we present only the evidence that supports our position.” A number of interviewees highlighted that in an information age, decision makers now have access to lots of evidence from various internet search engines; therefore the job of presenting evi-

dence to influence decision through expert opinion needs to be more sophisticated.

Third is the need for creative and innovative presentation of information. Participants explained that communication effectiveness is dependent largely on message effectiveness; the kind of message that affects both the intellectual and emotional domains of the recipient. This necessitates the need for an appropriate message tone. An interviewee said: “Stories are powerful ways of communication in humanitarian situations. An advocate has to balance the right content with the right tone.” Other interviewees noted that consistently reinforcing messaging on issues through various creative formats also contribute to advocacy effectiveness. Most interviewees highlighted the need to ‘master the art and science of sticky communication.’ Examining the importance of communication in changing social norms, one participant said:

“Social norms take time to be institutionalised; therefore consistent messaging over time based on coordinated change resulting from re-categorisation of practices would be crucial for systemic change to take place.” (Interviewee from Media Institute of Southern Africa)

The last point raised by interviewees for communication effectiveness is honesty, trust and credibility in the communication process between the ‘influencer’ and the ‘influenced’. This was considered to be critical in advocacy practice. Most of the interviewees agreed that without ‘transparent communication’ among participants on the same level, it was difficult to achieve sustainable social change and public influence. In light of this, some of them rejected the concept of ‘levels in information flows’. They believed that advocacy should operate on the platform of multidimensional transparent information flow, since all parties are expected to be working for the same good of the people and the society. They called for ‘elevated social dialogue’ and ‘more authentic conversation’ around issues. But some of them noted that this becomes very difficult because most advocates are not or do not practice ‘serious dialogue’ but are interested in one-way communication to influence decisions. Typically, advocacy is designed to exercise influence from one party on the other, therefore mutually reinforcing two-way communication and authentic conversation around issues does not always take place. This is why

according to some participants, transactional relationships stifle genuine dialogue and sometimes result in tenuous policy or social change.

The Place of Strategic Engagement

The study investigated the role of strategic engagement and the power of coalition-building in advocacy effectiveness. All the participants agreed that it is impossible to achieve social or policy change in advocacy without strategic networking, relationship building, stakeholder involvement, coalition formation, alliance development, and engagement of different players. More than two-thirds of the interviewees cited the need to establish grand-coalition and strategic networks as indispensable for achieving enduring results in advocacy. However, according to them, in many cases, this is not happening as much as it should. Participants cited several advantages of developing robust alliances through strategic relationships in achieving social outcomes. A participant from an NGO, LoveLife said: "Engaging strategic actors in advocacy is a critical element of effective mobilisation for change." This issue was further interrogated and several interviewees listed a range of strategic engagement points and the nature of their role in achieving advocacy outcomes. A few of them are described below.

First, engagement with 'the people' and community structures as the centre of advocacy and change is fundamental to achieving social outcomes. Participants emphasized the need for development workers to 'put first things first', and that civic engagement should be at the epicentre of their advocacy programmes. According to them, advocacy is about the rights of people and therefore the people (especially the affected population) must be fully engaged. To most of them, the current practice of advocacy is characterized by a one-way effort which is not effectively maximizing multidimensional interdependent networks. One interviewee puts the critical importance of the affected population as follows:

"The people are critical in advocacy, but sometimes they are often forgotten or not fully involved in advocacy efforts. Sometimes our engagement with the people is largely tokenistic." (Interviewee from UNICEF)

Linked with civic engagement is the need for advocacy within community structures. Partici-

pants acknowledge that there are several opportunities within the social community (for example, social, political, religious and cultural) for engagement with community influencers around different issues. Examples of community decision makers that need to be engaged are local elders, cultural gate-keepers, moral authorities, religious leaders, opinion leaders, and other community influentials. Most of the interviewees see them as the guardians of customs, values and the conscience of the community; and also as powerful agents of change. When they are not effectively engaged, there are serious consequences. A participant cited the 2008 polio immunisation crisis in Nigeria as a 'failure of social advocacy':

"We thought with evidence things will work out naturally. We thought if we got the Minister of Health involved everything would be smooth sailing. We thought once the international development partners roll out their implementation machinery, parents would bring out their kids in their millions. But this did not happen. Just one influential Imam reversed everything. So knowing who is influential at the community level on any specific issues and effectively engaging with them is more than what foreign exchange can buy." (Interviewee from WHO)

Examples cited by respondents of the mechanisms of reaching this group include informal networks, continuous discussions, and engagement of 'significant others' in the communities. In this respect, they advised advocates "to understand the community context, recognize the power centre, respect authority structures, and listen to the people".

Secondly, multi-level mobilization of government institutions and governance structures is fundamental to effecting change at the broader level. Many participants noted that high-level advocacy with government officials is indispensable in development work and many UN agencies are doing a good job of this. However, most NGO institutions also emphasized the need to engage with middle and low-level officials because that is where 'real decisions' are taking place. An important group that needs to be effectively engaged is the political class: politicians, MPs and party leaders. While some interviewees stressed the significance of this group as an important lever of government decisions, others felt investing in them does not justify the returns in view of their transient position in the

political process. Some of the interviewees reiterated the importance of undertaking ‘influence mapping’ or ‘network analysis’ in order to determine their role and level of significance in the influence process.

Third, oppositions serve as opportunities and challenges for advocacy. A number of interviewees noted that despite the good intentions and noble objectives of health and development organisations, many of the issues they stand for are controversial and sometimes attract resistance, opposition and adversarial advocacy. They argued that in contemporary society, every issue has its supporters, resisters and fence-sitters. Therefore advocates must learn to manage oppositional campaigns to issues being promoted. A participant from UNAIDS said:

“Despite the convincing evidence through the gold standard method of public health inquiry (randomized control trials) on the protective effect of medical male circumcision for HIV prevention, we have seen a lot of opposition, resistance and lack of interest from various groups and networks, even from medical professionals who should know better.”

Participants suggested that more sensitivity is required in understanding the rationale, nature of opposition and their positions.

Process for Influencing Organisational Policies

Organizations and institutions are major locations where changes that affect various populations groups take place. This is because many decisions that affect various populations are taken in institutional settings. However, only half of the interviewees identified, without prompting, the need to influence decisions and actions of organisations or institutions as a critical element of achieving social outcomes. Several NGO participants underscored the importance of internal advocacy in changing institutional policies and programmes. They cited examples of institutions with policy and programmatic leverage for broader social development agenda as regional economic commissions (RECs) and political organisations such as the African Union (AU), South African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), East Africa Community (EAC) and many others. In terms of the mechanics of influencing decision-making structures of

RECs, participants identified the following methods: respect for institutional governance structures; alignment of proposed policy and programme changes with fundamental objectives of the organisation; leveraging the power of partnerships with other development partners; informed use of evidence and creative management of resistance. Of particular importance was the emphasis on diplomatic and negotiation skills, in influencing organisational decisions for public good. An interviewee from the ILO said:

“Connectedness across institutional spectrum is what works in a densely political environment like the AU. Understanding the governance structures and having the diplomatic finesse to manage around the labyrinth of issues, actors, players and levels of authority is indispensable. Without strategic connectedness and simple effective communication, it is difficult to achieve any influence.”

Skill Set for Effective Advocates

Data from the interviews identified a plethora of skills that are essential in carrying out effective advocacy interventions. More than half of the participants noted that all development staff should be advocates. Only one third argued for advocacy to be a separate function of specialists. According to one interviewee: “Advocacy is everybody’s business in development, but the dilemma is in getting it right.” Several interviewees observed that communication is integral to advocacy, but they also reiterated that advocacy is communication with a difference. The suggested skills are clustered in Table 1.

Leadership in Advocacy

In response to the issue of leadership in advocacy effectiveness, several participants cited the vital role of leadership as a crucial variable in effective advocacy. They acknowledged the role of leadership in ‘connecting all the dots to make change happen’. One UN interviewee said: “A critical missing link in our advocacy efforts is strategic leadership insight.” Another NGO participant puts it this way: “The day we get the leadership dimension into our development advocacy across the board that would be the defining moment of advocacy for social transformation.” Essential leadership ingredients iden-

Table 1: Skill set for effective advocates

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Skill set</i>	<i>Specific content</i>
1	<i>Technical Competence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue analysis, evidence, research and documentation • Policy research and analytical perspective • Data analysis, economic perspective • Creative utilisation of evidence for decision making • Technical knowledge of development issues • Programme and project design and monitoring • Ability to undertake situation assessment and analysis and use information for change
2	<i>Art and Science of Communication and Mobilization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social influence – process and techniques of persuasion • Presentation skills, eloquence, speaking skills • Interpersonal communication, negotiation skills • Capacity for effective communication with different personalities • Diplomacy and ability to get along with people, strong listening and relationship building
3	<i>Strategic Thinking and Problem Solving</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media engagement/relations • Strategic analysis, strategic actions and strategic implementation • Demonstrating the bigger picture and contributing to other people's agenda • Planning and implementation • Decision-making principles • Systems thinking
4	<i>Personal Attributes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal leadership, self management, vision, direction, courage, drive, and determination for public good • Endurance, persistence, hope and positive attitude • Belief and faith in mission • Team work, facilitation skills, co-ordination and building trust
5	<i>Strategic Networking</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal relationship and networking • Strong capacity for collaboration and coordination • Diplomacy in handling issues and people • Capacity for alliance formation

tified by participants for effective advocacy include passion that drives programmes, mobilization of energy for change and a sense of urgency. Many interviewees explained that advocacy is connected with a crusading or missionary spirit which cannot be achieved without ingrained leadership principles in advocates, whether at the individual or institutional level. A few interviewees connected advocacy with leadership in terms of the generic notion of influence and highlighted the combination of 'results-based leadership and results-based advocacy'

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study have demonstrated that while there is a general acceptance of the importance and relevance of advocacy in social development, there is still significant confusion regarding its practice which stems from inappropriate understanding of its essence (Johnson

2009; Hudson 2002). This contributes, as some experts believe, to mixed or even disappointing results. To be effective in influencing social outcomes, more strategic insight into its essence and approaches is necessary. This study established that communication effectiveness is critical to advocacy effectiveness. Four principles identified for communication effectiveness have substantial empirical support. For example, the use of evidence as an ingredient of advocacy is well established in the theory of persuasion (Cialdini 2009; Clayton 2011). However, merely bombarding decision makers 'with raw or cold statistics' will not achieve any purpose. In addition, evidence alone does not change decisions, especially in an intensely political context. Participants stated that in some cases, no matter what the evidence says, politics, personality characteristics and intuition take precedence. Therefore, evidence should be seen as a critical element of the public decision-making mix, which

still needs to be communicated effectively to have the desired effect.

The study supports the findings that emphasise the importance of technical expertise in the process of social influence. Expertise is similar to the notion of authority which has been recognised as one of the bases of social power (French and Raven 1959) or as a tactic of social influence in contemporary times (Ayres 2007; Cialdini 2009). A recent finding from Edelman Trust Barometer (2011) validates the use of academics and experts because of the level of trust placed in them by the public. The study showed that up to 70 per cent of those sampled across the world trust technical expertise. Interviewees from this study placed a lot of premium on the use of expertise, but this author argues that in view of the diversities and conflicting perspectives of expertise based on different factors such as ideology, personal interests, commercial motivations, and political affiliation, the use of expertise still poses some challenges in advocacy and needs further investigation.

In line with findings from studies that focus on messaging tactics in achieving social influence (Cialdini 2009; Clayton 2011; Hogan 2011), the study found that appropriate tone in message projection and overall creative packaging of information is an indispensable aspect of advocacy communication. Advocates need to ensure that messages are creative and evoke the desired response in order to be effective. Two major causes of failure of advocacy interventions identified by participants in this study (ineffective communication and uninspiring advocacy) speak to the need to emphasise message tactics in realising social outcomes. The last principle raised in relation to communication effectiveness is interaction between the source and receiver in the communication process. The point needs to be made that because of the nature of advocacy which is basically designed to influence (Klugman 2011; Chapman 2004), it does not allow for open communication and appropriate listening between critical actors in the communication process. Participants suggest that communication between 'advocates' and 'advocates' is generally one-way and linear.

The study investigated the role of strategic engagement in achieving social change. Premised on the notion of using collective effort to promoting change, strategic engagement is vital to all levels of governance. Within the public

sector management arena, the power of strategic partnerships, characterised by supportive coalitions, alliances or networks has been well noted in the literature (Hudson and Lowe 2004; Sabatier and Weible 20007). Specifically, within the domain of policy change it has been argued that policy networks are connected to policy outcomes and the type of change that creates the outcome (Adam and Kriesi 2007).

This study found that the level of strategic engagement is variable and leaves much to be desired. This is in line with some previous studies (for example, Edward 1993) that showed limited or lack of effective engagement of relevant allies in advocacy by development NGOs. It is clear that in a globalised age, effective public engagement takes place with the integration of all levels of influence and a mix of communication media for social change, including the mobilization of traditional and modern media, mainstream and new media, digital and non-digital, individual and institutional support behind any issue. This suggests the need for more systematic mobilization of strategic partners for achieving both social and policy change. An important mechanism for ensuring effective networking and coalition building is constructing 'stakeholder analysis' and 'influence mapping' which helps to determine interest, relevance and influence level of allies in relation to specific issues (Start and Hovland 2004). The principle of 'core' and 'periphery' networks within the domain of network theory (Hudson and Lowe 2004) can also help determine the relative power of different networks, whether as core or periphery in relation to different issues.

Findings on strategic engagement underscored the need to deal with competing and opposing networks and coalitions. This is in agreement with Kingma and Sweetman (2005) who suggest that as part of strategic engagement for promoting feminist issues, it is necessary to deal with resisters and opposition. In another vein, Princen (2007) proposes that advocates look more at shifts between competing advocacy coalition on any given issue especially within the domain of internationalisation of public health policies. In an age of globalization and democratisation, many networks oppose, battle for, contend with or compete on certain social issues. For instance, despite polio immunization being advantageous for child health, the power of opposition derailed it in Nigeria on two occasions

(2003 and 2008) which resulted in serious consequences (Kaufmann and Feldbaum 2009; Agbeye 2007; Obadare 2005). Therefore, it is important for advocates to factor into their strategic engagement programme, how to manage counter advocacy efforts and build trust, which is an essential element of community advocacy.

One of the findings of this study is the need to enhance the competency of advocates in advocacy. This is in tandem with some of the findings of Kingma and Sweetman (2005) and Onyekuru (2010) who emphasised the need to develop the skills of institutions and individuals involved in advocacy. While most of the participants in this study argued for making advocacy everybody's business (since according to them all development workers are 'selling' something), it is equally necessary to look into the required competences for achieving advocacy results. As a result of the complex and dynamic nature of international development, it is important to equip advocates with vital skills to boost their effectiveness. The changing communications landscape has resulted in a digital world characterised by democratisation of information. Therefore, solid technical competence, effective communication skills based on application of the art and science of influence, and strategic engagement skills are crucial for effective advocacy.

In their studies, Steckler et al. (2002) and Hudson (2002) advocated for change in institutional programmes, policies and practices as a way of achieving health improvement and addressing social inequities. Findings from this study showed that regional economic institutions are essential in Africa's development and need intense advocacy to influence their programmes for social and policy change at the national level. However, it is important to understand the decision-making context of different organisations, particularly how the dynamics of 'internal politics' can affect advocacy efforts. Also, knowledge of institutional change management is essential for advocates in their attempts at influencing organisational programmes.

Finally, the study found that leadership is a crucial factor, yet 'missing' in the current configuration of advocacy practice. This is premised on the notion that advocacy and leadership are concerned with influence and change. Advocacy strives for policy, social and systemic change necessary for public good while

leadership is generally concerned with a similar kind of influence. But effecting change at the population level cannot be done outside of the complex context of national and international policy, politics and power dynamics. This ultimately requires engaging and transforming leadership which facilitates people-orientated development, not forced development (Mintzberg 2010; Burns 2003). Overall, findings from the study reinforced the need to investigate the 'leadership factor' in social development advocacy.

CONCLUSION

The utilitarian value of advocacy in development programming is not in doubt, but there are challenges with its practice. Findings from the study have shown that while advocacy is perceived as central to achieving development outcomes, its practical application is far from its etymological essence. Both UN and non-UN development agencies are convinced on the need to rethink the notion of advocacy in social development in order to reclaim its role in achieving specific thematic outcomes and broader social and systemic change. Critical recommendations to make advocacy more effective include systematic application of the art and science of social influence, creative engagement with formal and informal networks to leverage change and better appreciation of the political and social context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To contribute to more effective social development advocacy, the following three critical recommendations are made.

1. Advocacy organizations should address the multiple causes of advocacy failure and ineffectiveness. This would go a long way in maximizing the power and potential of advocacy for development.
2. All advocates need to be equipped with insights from the science and art of influence. Contemporary advocacy needs to apply essential principles grounded in the theory of change for evidence based advocacy programmes.
3. Effective advocacy requires the integration of results-based leadership in the design and execution of advocacy cam-

paigns. However, continuous research is needed on how the leadership factor and other major elements of the advocacy mix including power, politics and science affect advocacy results.

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