

Review of Partnerships for Pro-Poor Policy Change in Africa: Lessons from the Southern Africa Trust initiative “Creating Linkages between Research, Advocacy and the Media for Pro-Poor Policy Change in Africa”

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25 May 2015

Introduction

I first came across the Linkages Initiative in the spring of 2014, when I was browsing the internet for programmes that focused on developing multi-stakeholder methodologies for policy making. At the time, I was managing an EU-funded programme with a similar approach and objective as the Linkages Initiative called INSPIRED (Integrated Support Programme for Inclusive Reform and Democratic Dialogue). Like Linkages, INSPIRED was trying to capture the conditions under which different types of stakeholders would choose to cooperate in advancing policy reform. Both programmes shared a number of assumptions about the conditions under which more inclusive forms of policy dialogue and joined-up advocacy could be developed; both put those assumptions to the test in pilot projects that were managed by lead organisations in different countries: Linkages took place in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda, while INSPIRED was implemented in Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco and Tunisia. The organisations behind the two programmes—the Southern Africa Trust for Linkages and the European Partnership for Democracy for INSPIRED – relied heavily on their local partners in drawing lessons that were then published in a Learning Report (Linkages) and a Handbook (INSPIRED). The main difference is that Linkages explored whether more effective civil society collaboration (particularly between research, advocacy and media organisations) could further advance pro-poor policy in Africa, whereas INSPIRED promoted policy dialogue among civil society organisations, political parties and the government.

In this short review of the Linkages Initiative Learning Report I will focus on those findings that conform or complement the findings of INSPIRED. After highlighting some issues that I find particularly relevant, I will briefly discuss the implications for donors and practitioners working in the field of development and democracy support.

Review of key findings

It seems that the projects in the six target countries of the Linkages Initiative had relatively few things in common, the main commonality being the collaboration between research, media and advocacy organisations in pushing for policy reform. Despite this rather broad framework, the Linkages Initiative managed to produce findings that are specific enough to guide practitioners in enhancing the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder advocacy initiatives.

As such, Linkages highlights the need for a strong-lead organisation that can ensure that the policy advocacy intervention “stays on track and retains its momentum”. The lead organisation should be able to fulfil a wide array of tasks, such as identifying organisations best suited to take part in the advocacy effort, explaining the policy issue(s) at stake and the policy environment to those organisations, and helping them to find a common narrative and a common purpose with regard to the policy issue in question. Based on the experience of INSPIRED, I would like to add here that good

access to policy makers is also of vital importance, as it increases the chances of aligning the government's agenda with the said advocacy initiative.

Indeed, one of the most important lessons identified by the Linkages Initiative is that government should be involved in policy advocacy from the start and in a more systematic way than has been the case in most of the six pilot countries. The Learning Report acknowledges this shortcoming in the original approach and advocates moving from the traditional "adversarial" model for civil society advocacy towards a model that allows for more constructive engagement with government and other relevant stakeholders, including stakeholders from the private sector.

Another finding of the Linkages Initiative also supported by the experience of INSPIRED is that there are clear advantages in setting up mutual accountability mechanisms among the stakeholders. Having a clear definition of the roles and "rules of the game" from the outside helps build trust among participants in joined advocacy initiatives and is likely to improve their effectiveness. Added to this, the Learning Report stresses that it is important for the lead organisation and the participating stakeholders to understand the nature of the organisations involved. For instance, the aim of a media organisation is to sell their publishing material, which is why research findings and other relevant information that can support a given advocacy campaign must be re-packaged to make it newsworthy. The Linkages Initiative has demonstrated that civil society organisations are more likely to combine forces and divide tasks in a more effective way if they understand the particularities of research institutes, media organisations and advocacy CSOs.

I would like to add that a better understanding is also needed with regards to the nature and specific interests of two types of stakeholders that have not been considered as "formal" partners in the Linkages Initiative; i.e. government and the private sector. For instance, INSPIRED has shown that government should not be understood as a monolithic block. Rather than trying to get official government commitment for a certain policy advocacy initiative, it might therefore be more fruitful to involve individual representatives from key ministries, agencies, etc. The key is to find the right allies inside government to push for reforms. A good example of this is INSPIRED's collaboration with the Institute for Economic Affairs, the lead partner in Ghana. The Institute built heavily on its good relationship with the Ministry for Gender, Children and Social Protection to insert recommendations on how to increase the number of women in political decision making into the Ministry's draft Affirmative Action Bill. Likewise, the Linkages Initiative showed that joined-up advocacy efforts were more likely to bear fruit where the lead partners involved government representatives as partners, allowing them to shape and co-own the policy options and recommendations produced.

In addition, the Linkages Learning Report clearly highlights the gains in terms of "policy access and leverage" that multi-stakeholder advocacy initiatives can attain if they follow a collaborative, deliberative, planned, informed and strategically-targeted approach. Not only do joined-up advocacy initiatives seem to improve the efficacy of advocacy efforts but more importantly, it seems that such multi-stakeholder approaches tend to produce better and politically acceptable proposals for policy change. Again, I would like to stress that involving government as a "partner" in policy reform initiatives can further enhance the chances of producing policy recommendations that are realistic, in the sense that government is more likely to take them on board in the policy making process. Moreover, opening the joined-up work on policy reform to political parties (including from the opposition) may have additional benefits in terms of sustainability: today's opposition is tomorrow's

government, and political parties that have signed up for a specific reform today will find it much harder to change direction once in government.

The findings of the Linkages Initiative that concerns the involvement of research organisations are particularly interesting, as research tends to be seen as neutral and value free. The Learning Report challenges this assumption, pointing out that research is often driven by political and economic agendas. Linked to this, government and civil society organisations tend to take up and use research findings that confirm their own interpretation of a given public problem and/or whom they trust. The latter has important implications for multi-stakeholder advocacy initiatives involving research organisations, the most important being that building trust in the sources of information and research is an essential step towards ensuring that a particular finding will guide policy making.

The Linkages Initiative suggests that the best way to build such trust is to actively involve decision-makers in the research process. The experiences of INSPIRED confirm this finding: since government was represented in the policy dialogue process from the beginning (mostly represented by mid-level officials directly in charge of elaborating policies), it co-decided on the evidence that would be used or produced specifically to enable the different stakeholders to come to a shared understanding of the policy issue. Both the Linkages Initiative and INSPIRED further stress the importance of using “informal” knowledge (e.g. perceptions of the target groups of a policy) to complement “academic” knowledge in an effort to produce a widely shared and accepted analysis of a given public problem.

Finally, the Linkages Learning Report includes some very interesting findings regarding the challenges of working with the media. As such, the Report stresses the diversity of media organisations, which may be private or government owned, mainstream or specialised, etc. While the experience of the Linkages Initiative suggests that in principle media organisations should be involved from the outset of multi-stakeholder advocacy initiatives to allow for effective messaging and communications, it also cautions that media involvement can be counter-productive when policy makers are partners in the advocacy effort. The same trade-off had to be made in INSPIRED, where building trust among the different stakeholders from civil and political society and the government was the highest priority. Only where the key stakeholders agreed on the general direction of the policy dialogue process were media organisations invited to take part in that process and/or report on its outcomes. This was the case in the INSPIRED project in Ghana for example, where all the main political parties had publicly committed to enhance women’s role in the political process before the start of the dialogue process. This basic consensus meant that involving the media as a strategic partner in the policy advocacy process was not contested by any of the stakeholders.

What next? - Implications for donors and practitioners

One of the main challenges to achieving more and better cooperation between local stakeholders in influencing policy-making will be to perpetuate and institutionalise the positive experiences made by individuals and organisations that have participated in joint multi-stakeholder advocacy efforts such as the Linkages Initiative and INSPIRED. In order to change the way policy-makers work with civil society and other relevant stakeholders in addressing public problems, “best practices” must become “common practice”. This requires a change of mindset, both by decision makers and the “recipients” of public policies, which must then be followed by changes in the institutional framework for policy making.

Working in the field of democracy support, I have come to realise the importance of “agency” – of CSOs, citizens, political parties, decision makers, etc. – for democratisation. But agency is only one side of the coin; democratic change – but also development – is not sustainable without strong institutions that allow for inclusive forms of policy making and participation in political life on a more general level. The difficulty consists in understanding how actors build and shape institutions and how they are influenced by them. Given the complexity of this “chicken and egg” situation, practitioners often feel tempted to focus on one or the other – agency or institutions – in their efforts to support development.

For instance, donors have for a long time supported “change agents” in partner countries, through targeted capacity-building measures and advocacy initiatives. However, this kind of support has remained small, especially compared to much more substantial programmes dedicated to “institution-building”. Both approaches have their merits, but instead of supporting short-term projects targeting either only the actors in the political system (CSOs, political parties, media) or its public institutions (government agencies, parliament, law courts), donors should consider supporting change *processes* and helping local actors institutionalise home-grown approaches to more inclusive policy-making. The Linkages Initiative has shed some light onto how different types of civil society actors that donors have been supporting over the years can find a modus operandi of working together in advocating policy change.

Donors and practitioners should build on the lessons learned through this initiative and, rather than considering and supporting media, research and advocacy organisations as separate elements in the policy-making process, they should invest more resources into understanding what those organisations actually do in a given context as well as what they could potentially achieve when combining forces in joint advocacy endeavours. This new approach requires a deeper understanding of the interests and incentives for change of all the actors involved in policy advocacy and policy making, including governments, political parties and the private sector. The Linkages Initiative has made an important contribution in this regard.