

Voice for Change

We have all been affected by or involved in advocacy at some point in our lives. When a school provides healthier lunch options for their students, or government bans the use of dangerous chemicals and pesticides on agricultural crops, this may have been the result of a successful advocacy campaign. Advocacy is an effective way to collaboratively work to encourage someone, usually a decision maker, to take action. Everybody can engage in advocacy as a way to create, implement or change policies, laws, regulations or standards for the good of a larger group of people.

Then what is evidence-based advocacy? As the name suggests, evidence-based advocacy uses verified, concrete information as proof to trigger change. Data is gathered, organised and analysed to produce clear and accessible information which can influence leaders and decision makers.

To get a better understanding of the power of evidence-based advocacy, we talked to two of our advocacy experts, Jessie Bokhoven and Rianne Teule. They have worked on successful advocacy projects around the world. Together with their colleagues they are currently working on our new 5-year programme, [Voice for Change \(V4C\) Partnership](#), funded by the Dutch government and implemented together with IFPRI – the International Food Policy Research Institute.

How do you define evidence-based advocacy?

JB: SNV defines advocacy as “the deliberate process, based on demonstrated evidence, to directly and indirectly influence decision

makers, stakeholders and relevant audiences to support and implement actions that contribute to issues of common interest.” Sometimes advocacy is centred on beliefs and what someone feels is good for society. We, however, use facts, research, and lessons learnt from past experience. I’m not saying that one form of advocacy is better than another, but what we do in our practice is based on people’s needs, and for that it is very good to use evidence. In addition, we take a collaborative approach. If we involve all stakeholders, such as governments, businesses and civil society, change is more likely to be widely supported and lasting. Evidence and collaboration are the key words when we talk about advocacy.

Evidence-based advocacy requires the collection and interpretation of data. What forms do the data and information take?

JB: First and foremost, it is important to use examples and lessons learnt from previous projects and experiences. We can use examples that worked well in country A and can be adjusted, adapted and implemented in country B. That is one form of evidence. Another form is

to bring in research done by scientific or policy-oriented institutions. The combination of the two is often the most effective. It is good to have a lot of data, such as figures, but it is also very important to show successful examples or stories.

How can we be sure that the data and information we use is accurate?

JB: It is very important to use data from validated research and trustworthy institutions. If we use data and evidence from projects, we need to be sure the outcome is genuine and replicable, not just an accidental or one-off result.

RT: When we collect data ourselves, we need to use solid research methodologies and ideally work with reputable research institutes. When using data of others, it is always important to validate the information by checking with independent experts or by going back to the original source. Often people quote what other people quoted, which turns into the game of ‘telephone’, where the information becomes distorted.

Does all good advocacy use evidence?

RT: It depends how you define 'good advocacy'. We believe that good advocacy should be based on solid evidence; not on beliefs, not on ideology but on facts and figures that underpin approaches that support people living in poverty. And no matter what kind of evidence is used, it is important to present the full picture. You may put emphasis on specific facts to favour the outcome you are trying to achieve, however, to be considered transparent and reliable, you should show both sides of the coin. A lot of people, companies, and organisations who are involved in advocacy only present evidence that they want you to see. At SNV, we try to be as politically neutral, transparent and comprehensive as possible, so that the people we are trying to influence can make an informed decision.

JB: Evidence goes a long way towards convincing people. For example, we have done a lot of work in Tanzania on functionality of water points, and the fact that we could show with hard figures that so many water systems were not operational was undebatable. It may be difficult to accept but can't be disputed. You can debate the reasons why, discuss who should be responsible and how it can be improved, but you can't deny the fact that something needs to be done. This also empowers government officials who have to act. Bringing evidence and working collaboratively gives a very strong foundation for change.

Advocacy alone doesn't guarantee results. How can we go beyond advocacy and ensure action is taken?

JB: In our advocacy work we look at the enabling environment as a whole – not only at the decisions taken and the policies approved but also at how they are implemented in practice, what laws and by-laws need to be created, what other regulations, standards and norms need to be applied and what capacities need to be strengthened to implement them. In energy, for example, solar products need to adhere to certain standards, such as safety and quality, in order to be successfully adopted. So by combining our advocacy work with projects on the ground, we really try to ensure that the system changes. When we have good policies, laws and regulations combined with the proper implementation, larger groups can benefit.

Can you mention an example of a successful evidence-based advocacy initiative SNV has undertaken in recent years?

RT: Advocacy is an inherent part of the work in many SNV projects. In an oilseed project in Uganda, we organised multi-stakeholder platforms which connected smallholder farmers and their working cooperatives with groups from the private and public sectors, such as processors, financial institutions and governments. They sat down to analyse the challenges which affected the oilseed sector. This engagement led to government passing the Seeds Certification Act to ensure that seed companies sell good quality seed to farmers and cooperatives. The legislation now benefits every oilseed farmer across Uganda. This is a



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really good example of our work because it involved stakeholders from all walks of life, strong evidence, and it also empowered people to speak out. In fact, that is why we call our project Voice for Change. We stimulate people to raise their voice and further their interests.

The V4C Partnership focuses on four crucial themes: Food and Nutrition Security, Resilience, WASH and Renewable Energy. Can you tell us a little more about what progress has been made so far?

RT: Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are the voice of citizens at local, national and international level. This programme strengthens their ability to make their voices heard by decision-makers. Guaranteeing that CSOs have a greater voice ensures that the interests of the communities they represent are better served. We will support the CSOs in fostering collaboration with government and the private sector, influencing agenda-setting and holding stakeholders accountable for their promises and actions. Ultimately, the increased influence of CSOs will contribute to sustainable and inclusive development around our four themes.

We work with 52 CSOs in our six focus countries: Burkina Faso, Ghana, Honduras, Indonesia, Kenya and Rwanda. These CSOs are now formulating their advocacy plans and setting their objectives. They all have the passion and drive needed for this work, and we are guiding them to focus on key issues to increase their impact – impact that will last well into the future. ●

