

Searching for relevance: INGOs and advocacy in the Global South

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The time we thought that INGOs are some kind of magic bullet in development is long behind us. Ever since the golden years of INGOs in the 1990s criticism has increased and is often directly related to their status as donors and/or to the idea that they are mainly active in the field of service delivery. Whereas the former depicts INGOs primarily as a channel for (government) funding to local CSOs in the global South (with all the caveats attached to donorship), the latter argues that their interventions do not tackle the root causes of poverty processes and as such cannot achieve sustainable change.

Such critique, however, bypasses the fact that more and more INGOs have become active in the field of advocacy, which we can define as ‘a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at different levels’. Such advocacy interventions are seen as challenging the underlying power structures that perpetuate poverty, inequality and marginalisation. Equally important, such critique overlooks the fact that INGOs can add value to advocacy process in a number of ways beyond the provision of funds.

Most of the existing literature on INGOs and advocacy focuses on the roles they play within international campaigns. This literature assumes that INGOs are the primary driver of social and political change. In contrast, this paper focuses on the enabling roles that INGOs can play in strengthening local advocacy efforts in the global South. Existing literature that examines the roles that INGOs play in advocacy is fragmented, with most studies focussing on a single role. We address this limitation by synthesising existing academic research on the topic.

Our analysis shows that INGOs in fact have a range of potential roles to play. There are thus many ways in which INGOs can have an added value in the advocacy interventions of local CSOs; ways that are not always known or recognised. However, evidence shows that some practices of INGOs (whether given in by their involvement in international aid chains or not) are detrimental to local CSOs’ advocacy. Greater awareness of possible enabling roles and constraining practices is the first step towards enhancing the added value for INGO in advocacy. Besides offering a comprehensive overview of the literature, our analysis offers concrete starting-points to INGOs for maximising their added value while minimising or eliminating possible constraining practices they are engaged in.

Table 1. INGO as enablers and constrainers of advocacy

Enabling roles	Brief description
1 Funder	INGOs provide funding to local CSOs which otherwise might not be available
2 Capacity strengthener	INGOs provide tailor made capacity support to local CSOs
3 Protector	INGOs provide a safe haven for local advocates
4 Alliance builder	INGOs bring diverse advocacy groups together for learning, coordination and collective action

5	Relationship broker	INGOs facilitate exchange between advocacy groups and power holders
6	Knowledge producer and broker	INGOs research, analyse and disseminate knowledge as a basis for advocacy
7	South North connector	INGOs connect local CSOs to audiences in the Global North and in international arenas
8	Advocate	INGOs advocate in either the Global South or North for certain laws, policies and practices
Constraining practices		
1	Top-down decision-making	INGOs undermine local ownership and constituency participation by dominating decision-making
2	Confining funding arrangements	INGOs undermine the long-term health, expertise and credibility of Southern CSOs by constraining funding practices
3	Managerial professionalisation	INGOs undermine grassroots legitimacy by promoting managerial professionalisation
4	Preference for 'professional' Southern CSOs	INGOs undermine advocacy by a preference for CSOs with weak grassroots ties and little mobilisation capacity
5	Rigid and linear approach to planning	INGOs undermine Southern CSOs' ability to adapt to on-going environmental changes by inflexible programming

Elbers, W. & Schulpen, L. (2020), [Maximising added value](#) - INGO roles and practices in advocacy programmes, Nijmegen/Den Bosch, CAOS/Liliane Fonds.

New publications

My new policy brief on the added value of International NGOs in advocacy [INGO roles and practices in advocacy programmes: Maximising added value, Elbers W. & Schulpen L. \(2020\)](#)