

IMPROVED CSO-GOVERNMENT DIALOGUE: FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

INTRODUCTION

This study explores how civil society organisation (CSO) coalitions in Nairobi and Bungoma counties in Kenya improved their engagements and dialogue with government when advocating for issues around maternal and newborn health (MNH) during planning and budgeting.

The study is informed by routine reports from CSO activities and focus group discussions conducted with the coalitions. The analysis reveals that the CSO coalitions made progress in being recognised as partners by government and increasingly were involved in the decision-making on budget processes in the counties. The main findings of the study are as follows:

- Evidence plays a critical role in influencing dialogue between civil society and government by providing a basis for engagement. The availability of reliable evidence has improved relationships between the two since it influences how the CSOs present themselves – it makes them confident and have compelling

messages. This has improved how CSOs are perceived by decision-makers.

- Various strategies for engaging in structured dialogue were employed, depending on the subject, audience and timelines in the decision-making process. These included taking part in public participation forums, use of the media, engaging with the highest decision-makers in the hierarchy, participating in health sector technical working groups and utilising consultative advocacy forums.



BACKGROUND

CSOs play a key role in advocacy, to drive social change, to strengthen governance and transparency and to hold governments accountable in the attainment of development goals (Chao, 2005; Enock, et al, 2016). In Kenya, there is a supportive legal environment within which CSOs can engage with government. The Constitution of Kenya 2010 provides a solid foundation for the existence and operation of CSOs, the comprehensive Bill of Rights recognises other fundamental rights, and the Public Finance Management Act of 2012 provides a framework for the participation of CSOs in planning and budgeting processes.

E4A Mama Ye supports CSO coalitions in Nairobi and Bungoma counties, building their capacity in advocacy and accountability relating to reproductive,

maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health (RMNCAH). CSOs used the Steps to Change model to identify key MNH priority issues for advocacy. The priority issues identified were: weak referral systems, low antenatal care attendance and high rates of teenage pregnancies. The coalitions regularly updated their steps to change using the political economy analysis (PEA) approach – taking into consideration the changing circumstances for the priority issues – to improve their advocacy and better hold government accountable. In updating their steps to change, CSOs gathered evidence from a variety of government and non-government sources to inform their adaptations to the prevailing situation. In turn, this improved dialogue between CSOs and government. This case study highlights how the CSO coalitions were able to improve their engagement with government when advocating for priority MNH issues.



FINDINGS

Role of evidence in dialogue

Evidence played a critical role in driving the coalitions' advocacy approaches on identified priority issues in engagements with government. It also helped to create a conducive environment for dialogue and assisted in dispelling the notion of coalitions as antagonists, enabling a good working relationship with government.

“ *Though they still view us as activists, we are changing the narrative. Some personalities in political circles are receptive and accommodative, and how one presents themselves really matters to establishing a good working relationship.* ”

Coalition member, Nairobi

Generally, CSOs were perceived as adding value to the government planning and budgeting processes because they spoke with authority and knowledge on the issues they advocated for. As a result, the relationship between CSOs and government improved significantly.



Understanding power and power relations

CSOs conducted power mapping around each identified priority issue, identifying the persons with a high level of influence and interest in the issue. The mapping results were used to craft targeted messages for each audience. For example, in Bungoma county, CSOs realised that the non-functionality of the health financing sector working group (SWG) was an impediment to proper budget formulation practices in the county. The mapping showed that the chief officer for health had the greatest responsibility, power and influence and so was the person best placed to make a change. The coalition held a meeting with him. Consequently, the SWG was revived and the coalition members were invited to take part in the SWG.

Claiming closed spaces

CSOs worked to claim traditionally closed spaces in their advocacy efforts. Committees of County Assemblies would traditionally only engage the public through public participation forums. These were often brief and crowded opportunities. Other committee processes remained inaccessible to the public. In September 2020, the Nairobi MNH Coalition wrote to the Health Committee of the County Assembly seeking to discuss sectoral budget issues ahead of the budget formulation stage. The acting Assembly Clerk made a formal invitation to the CSO coalition, inviting them to a meeting on health services in the Assembly chambers. This was a breakthrough for the coalition, considering the limitations to CSOs and citizens accessing the members directly, and transformed this closed space to a claimed one.



Utilisation of invited spaces

Invited spaces are provided by law in order to make government processes more transparent and inclusive. These are the spaces that are the most used by CSOs. They include public participation and membership of CSOs in critical government accountability mechanisms, such as the health financing SWG in Bungoma and the Medium Term Expenditure Framework Technical Working Group in Nairobi county. To maximise on these available spaces, CSOs prepared by extensively analysing key budget documents, such as the County Fiscal Strategy Paper, to identify gaps in the prioritisation and allocation of funds. The coalitions used this evidence when giving inputs through oral and written submissions, highlighting the shortcomings and calling for improvements. In the written memoranda, the priority issues identified in the CSOs' steps to change were articulated, linking the issues to the budget.

Working with the media

The CSOs identified the media as being a powerful advocacy tool. Not only does it highlight issues of interest to the public, but it also brings to the fore systemic challenges that governments should pay attention to. Media personnel were incorporated into the coalitions to help publicise issues of concern and to heighten accountability. Some of the issues highlighted by the media include the need for blood availability in the counties, the high rates of teenage pregnancies and the importance of antenatal care visits for pregnant women. By

collaborating with the media, CSOs boosted their profile and made sure they could not be ignored in key processes.

Enablers of good working relations

Effective engagement was made possible by establishing good working relationships between CSOs and government. One of the enablers for this was the use of members' networks of connections with decision-makers. Different coalition members had connections with different decision-makers, who aided in their advocacy efforts. After intensive capacity-building by E4A MamaYe, the CSOs' knowledge on the subject matter (RMNCAH) improved their standing when engaging with government and other partners, as their inputs to plans and processes were seen to be technically sound. Bringing their deep understanding of the contexts at the grassroots level and evidence to inform dialogue, they forged strategic partnerships with like-minded organisations, including larger national and international implementing NGOs in the counties. These relationships with critical stakeholders and government officers helped CSO coalitions to access important budget documents for review to help in their advocacy.



CHALLENGES

Despite progress, there were hindrances along the path to attaining fully improved dialogue between CSOs and government.

There remained instances where some government officials sought to limit participation in critical processes, such as public budget hearings, for fear of critical analysis of the planning and budget documents. The CSOs used their networks to gather intelligence and attended all the meetings, backed up by the constitutional provisions and by having proper information about their civic duty in participating in public processes.

“ There was a problem with my MCA¹ for he selects people to attend these public participation meetings and some of these invited participants are illiterate. The problem is commercialising the forums – people attend merely to get the allowances but make no contribution to the content. We equally have a challenge with the MCAs because we have a non-operational dispensary and yet the MCAs says it is operational. ”

CSO coalition member, Bungoma

There is still a tendency by government officials to disregard some inputs to the policy and budget documents made by the public. Coalitions mitigated this by constantly following up and tracking the views they submitted, to ensure they were included in the final documents or, if they were not, that there were plausible justifications and alternatives.

Political stakeholders have expectations that civil society partners will provide financial incentives during engagements. Grassroots coalitions have to navigate these perceptions, which often limit their access to decision-makers.

“ The politicians speculate that we are agents of goodies. When we want to have meetings in their offices, they are reluctant. But they are always willing to be taken out of Nairobi for meetings and they ask for allowances. They also do not like Zoom meetings. ”

CSO coalition member, Nairobi



¹ Member of the County Assembly

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for coalitions

CSO coalitions should claim their places in technical working groups (TWGs). TWGs offer opportunities for evidence generation and for the identification and prioritisation of issues in the right context. The coalitions will also be able to articulate their priority issues to other stakeholders effectively as they advocate. This also converts government officers to be internal advocates for the same issues.

There is need to develop joint work plans and roadmaps for the implementation of activities by coalitions and government. Joint work plans would enhance ownership of activities and foster coordination between CSO and government representatives.

Coalitions should enhance any established networks with policymakers. As well as developing synergies by working with other like-minded CSOs, there is need to establish rapport with policymakers. This will ensure that coalitions can effectively follow up on the priority issues being tracked and document progress.

Coalitions should continue to generate and analyse evidence, to ensure they have credibility and so that evidence is always available when required for engaging with the relevant stakeholders and policymakers.

Recommendations for donors and partners

Grassroots coalitions are often seen as the lowest level service providers and mobilisers, and as only being active when engaged by a donor or big NGO. They therefore require tailored capacity-building assistance, not just in the technical skills, but also in brokering relations with decision-makers, especially those most influential in the policy and budget processes.

The support given to coalitions should be informed by mutually conducted needs assessments, so that the CSOs identify the gaps in their own capabilities and have a say on how the support should be channelled.



NEXT STEPS FOR E4A

E4A-MamaYe will enhance its efforts to put the coalitions in the driver's seat of the advocacy work in the counties. It will continue to provide technical, organisational and financial support on demand, guided by the plans developed jointly with the CSOs.

E4A-MamaYe will continue to facilitate collaboration between government and coalitions by providing workable tools for improving dialogue and accountability actions.

References

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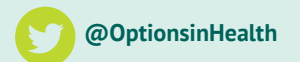
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