International Development Research Centre

Strategic Choices

How Canadian civil society organizations are using research to influence policy and practice in the global South

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Knowledge leads to empowerment, which in turn provides the basis for developing equitable and prosperous societies. Research and corresponding knowledge-sharing activities are essential in both acquiring and disseminating this knowledge. Often associated with academia, research is no longer the realm of universities or research centres alone, nor is it equated with scientific data or left to theorists. Research has come to include broad categories of methodologies, disciplines and actors. Not only have the types of research changed with time, but the researchers themselves have also changed. Individuals without research as their main objective and organizations without research as part of their stated mandate can and do carry out a variety of research activities as part of a strategy to further other objectives. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are credited with having a role to play with regards to making research relevant and using it to contribute to changes in policy and practice in the developing world. For all actors in the field of international development, there is a need to understand the strategies and the contributions of these institutions in order to strengthen, expand, and facilitate this type of work.

The study

Based on a general survey and fieldwork in South America, this paper presents key findings related to a 2011 study, which sought to understand how Canadian CSOs (CCSOs) view, produce and use research in their work to influence policy and practice in the global South. The role research plays for these organizations is examined through analysis of how CCSOs access research, how they incorporate research into their strategies for influence and the way in which research helps them meet multiple objectives. Findings are presented through introducing the work of four CCSOs: Socodevi, Women in Cities International (WICI), Rights & Democracy (R&D), and Save the Children Canada (SCC).

In order to find out whether research is part of CCSO strategies to influence policy and/or practice in the global South, electronic surveys were sent to 129 CCSOs[1]. Questions were designed to help understand how this research is being accessed/carried out (by whom) and what role the research serves (the purpose of using research in their strategies for influence). Responses from this survey allowed for the selection of four organizations and corresponding projects to be analysed as case studies. Collecting data on these respective case studies involved fieldwork in Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Colombia. Meetings were held with CCSO staff, local CSOs, community members and local government. Further interviews were held with CCSO staff in Montreal and Toronto. The purpose of this qualitative phase was to understand how particular CCSO strategies differ with regards to using research to influence policy and/or practice and to analyze these cases in terms of what they reveal about the strategic choices surrounding these research-centred strategies for influence.

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[1] With a 53% response rate to the survey, findings are based on responses from 62 CCSOs.

The Case Studies

Women in Cities International (WICI) is a non-profit network organization that focuses on gender equality, prevention of violence against women, and local governance. This case study explores how WICI is collaborating with a regional CSO network to facilitate research aimed at identifying public policies that will enable greater gender inclusion and equality in cities.

The case of **Rights & Democracy (R&D),** a non-partisan NGO with an international mandate to promote human rights and democratic institutions and practices, illustrates how they are coordinating research efforts of CSOs as they collect information on gender and ethnic discrimination in the Americas to create jurisprudence and better inform policy.

SOCODEVI is a Quebec-based network of co-operatives and mutuals with a non-profit international development corporation that works to promote sustainable development through cooperatives. The project case study shows how Socodevi staff and interns have used research to identify a sustainable alternative for small-scale producers in rural Bolivia, thereby multiplying the number of families benefitting from new farming practices.

Save the Children Canada (SCC) is a member of an international federation of organizations working to promote the rights, well-being and development of children and in so doing have allied with academia to compile current and relevant data on child workers in Latin America, while also supporting the training of knowledgeable professionals.

CCSOs retain control over the research

The survey results showed a high number of CCSOs who either carry out the research which they use themselves (83.6%) or have interns do so (59%). I suggest that by maintaining a certain degree of control over producing the research, CCSOs can ensure it complies with their mandates, philosophies and resources. In addition, it allows CCSOs to be flexible and adapt research questions and methods as they need along the way. By playing an active role in the research process, CCSOs can also design it in ways that serve to build capacity (of their partners, as well as their own organizational capacity). The case of Socodevi and their oregano-growing project in Bolivia helps illustrate these benefits.

Socodevi began working with agricultural producers in the department of Chuquisaca, Bolivia in 1998. The first few years were spent carrying out research in an attempt to identify ways to diversify local income-generating activities. Relying on their network of expertise and lots of trial and error, the focus soon became the growing, processing and commercializing of herbs and spices, specifically oregano. Research was then initiated in order to identify how best to scale up the production, what types of greenhouses were needed to house the seedlings, how to most efficiently harvest, dry and process the oregano and other aspects of the production chain. With cooperation as the basis of all Socodevi work, the project was developed in collaboration with Agrocentral, an organization of cooperatives in the department of Chuquisaca. They coordinate the growing component of the project ensuring technical advisors visit the farmers on a regular basis to help resolve issues that arise and maximize each producer's harvest.

Socodevi worked with what they had, which was a reliable network of Canadian cooperatives with expertise, good relationships with Canadian research centres and expressed interest from Canadian interns. These first two strengths helped Socodevi cast a wide net for solutions, access advanced technologies and save on material costs. The latter means that at least once per year, for a period of 5-6 months, young Canadians use their theoretical knowledge and gain hands-on experience assisting Socodevi in areas such as soil analysis, oil extraction and production of essential-oil products. These investigations are time-consuming and labour-intensive, but with a dependable pool of interns, there is no need to cut corners. This also allows Socodevi to be flexible and decide where to focus their interns' research efforts as the needs arise.

In 2005, a private company was set up to handle the commercial aspect of the project. UNEC (Unidad de negocios de especias y condimentos - Spice and Condiment Business Unit) carries out market research, controls the brand and packaging of the final product, sets the price paid to farmers per kilo and deals with customers. Initially Socodevi controlled the research process, but has turned things over to UNEC. Currently, UNEC alone is in charge of other research such as experimental tests with the crossbreeding of different varieties of oregano, the production of crops like lavender, dill, and thyme and small-scale extraction of essential oils for cosmetic and medicinal products. Placing the company in the hands of the local communities provides an opportunity for them to build their capacity and take ownership, leaving Socodevi with the possibility to pull out, and works as an incentive for farmers to commit to selling their oregano to the same place.

UNEC is now "the main exporter of agri-food products in all of Chuquisaca, with exports to Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil.[2]" The facility in Tomina (the centre of production) is now producing at full capacity and until more greenhouses arrive, there are simply not enough plants to meet all the demand. In 2011, Socodevi had just signed a second eight-year funding agreement with CIDA for the amount of $12 million, which will help scale up this model.

Research is integrated into CCSOs' work

A second interesting finding to come out of this study is that research is an integrated component of CCSO work to influence policy and practice; it is combined with other related activities such as capacity building, awareness raising and technical support and is often difficult to separate out. In many instances, the research process, and not simply the research findings, is very much a part of a CCSO's strategy for influence. Designing research projects in such a way as to allow for local ownership works to build organizational capacity and in turn increase the degree of influence that these organizations themselves can exert. CCSOs take a holistic approach using research to influence policy and/or practice, be it through how they carry out the research or through how research is accessed.

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[2] Villeneuve, Y. (2008), para. 12.

This blending of research with and within various other activities and roles is important for funders to understand. Not only can it be very difficult to frame a CCSO's work in terms of a traditional research proposal, but it is also very difficult to attribute impacts of a CCSOs' work to specific donor dollars.

The case of WICI provides a good example of how this blending takes place. WICI designed the Gender Inclusive Cities Programme (GICP) in order to increase women's inclusion in cities by focusing research and action on women's safety and women's experiences of gender-based violence. This three-year project aimed to identify: the geography of public gender exclusion and its interactions with other marginalised identities such as race, religion, and economic status; the activities, tools and public policies that act as enablers of or as barriers to greater gender inclusion and equality and good practices related to gender inclusion, piloted within the GICP.

This is a multi-country program of research and action coordinated by WICI and implemented by partner organizations in Russia (Petrozavodsk), Tanzania (Dar es Salaam), India (Delhi) and Argentina (Rosario) whose projects' activities fall into three stages: data collection; data analysis for intervention planning; and intervention implementation. The program involved: a review of policy, legislation and initiatives; focus group discussions; street surveys and women's safety audits[3]. Local women and local CSOs were involved in all activities.

One implementing partner, Women and Habitat Network (WHN) in Argentina, explained how it is often difficult to separate the research from the intervention since new knowledge is applied throughout the process. There is no clear data collection phase, followed by an analysis phase leading to the development and implementation of interventions that affect change. All of this takes place but the lines between each phase are blurred. For WHN, simply raising a question within the community is an intervention in itself. As data on one particular theme is gathered, the network may choose to distribute information from past studies, thus raising awareness and sensitizing the population alongside gaining new insights and information. WICI incorporated the methodological tool of women's safety audits into their project and WHN invited local government officials to take part, bringing them into the research process itself.

CCSOs find ways to maximize their resources and influence

This blending of research and other related activities is common not only to the other CSOs involved in the GICP, but to WICI and other CCSOs as well since it allows resources to be maximized and fulfils a wider range of roles and objectives. Based on an analysis of all four case studies, I suggest that CCSOs choose strategies for influence that maximize their resources and opportunities for influence by: forming strategic alliances and partnerships- since being strategic about partners/alliances can strengthen research capacity and widen the sphere of influence; identifying and using their organizational strengths- by recognizing what they do well and what defines their organizations, CCSOs can better access and disseminate research in ways that

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[3] Safety audits are planned walks where a group of women take note, record and reflect on factors contributing to a particular neighbourhood's insecurity such as lack of lights, signage, police or people.

contribute to influencing policy and practice; and by paying attention to methodological design- because how CCSOs design their research can be part of how they aim to influence the policy process or particular practices.

Although each case serves to support this analysis, SCC's work in Latin America surrounding child workers provides a clear example. SCC has formed an alliance with the Latin American Network of Masters in Children's Rights and Social Policies (or RMI[4]) and uses this alliance in innovative ways to both fill the knowledge gaps on child workers in Latin America, helping to understand the actual conditions of working children, and to support capacity building of professionals and future decision makers.

The RMI is an inter-institutional alliance initially formed in 2002 with support from Save the Children Sweden. The idea behind linking up similar Master's programs across universities in the region was to strengthen each program's capacity to train qualified professionals who could produce relevant and socially useful knowledge to promote and defend the rights of children and adolescents. SCC joined the project three years after its start and began providing financial support allowing the program to expand to other countries. The RMI now includes nine universities in eight Latin American countries[5]. Enrolled students are both mid-level career professionals, who apply new theoretical frameworks to their work and contribute relevant practical knowledge and views from the field, and younger professionals who now require graduate degrees to pursue their interest in the field. Both groups of professionals are now occupying important positions in non-profit organizations and government agencies.

In 2007, SCC took over leadership of the project and was eventually left as the sole funder. They were, however, unable to provide the same amount of direct funding and have therefore contributed more indirectly by supporting and initiating several different interactions with the RMI allowing them to capitalize on this alliance. Each initiative has been designed to contribute to influencing the policies affecting, and subsequently the lives of, working children. There is: an annual essay writing contest, open to enrolled students and graduates; working groups in participating universities researching country-specific conditions of child workers; a blog; and think tank.

As a result of this network and its activities, knowledge on issues related to children and their rights is being produced and applied. Produced, as network members research, discuss and share, and applied as students and graduates alike find or continue their work in schools, NGOs, governments and communities. SCC has direct access to this relevant school of thought which is being created and can use what is arguably a

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[4] Stands for Red Maestrías en Infancia

[5] Members of this network include: Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (Peru), Universidad Externado de Colombia (Colombia), Universidad Mayor de San Simón de Cochabamba (Bolivia), Universidad Centroamericana UCA de Managua (Nicaragua), Universidad de Chile (Chile), Universidad Columbia del Paraguay (Paraguay), Universidad Landívar de Guatemala (Guatemala), Universidad Nacional del Centro de Perú (Peru) and Universidad Politécnica Salesiana de Quito (Ecuador)

very strategic alliance to ensure their programming and future work contribute to changes in public policies affecting children.

The potential of this network to create change for children in the region by existing as both a collaborative space for knowledge production, debate and analyses and as a resource for training a well-informed mass of professionals to lead these changes is there. SCC has maximized few available resources by investing in key research-centred activities that, if continued, will serve several different purposes. With continued and increased funding, SCC and the RMI are well placed to contribute to better lives for the children of Latin America.

Research helps CCSOs fulfil several of their roles

A final key finding of this study, suggested by survey results and supported by case study analysis, is that CCSOs are using research to help fulfil their many (yet complimentary) roles. This is being done both 1) because research is needed in order to work towards fulfilling roles (SCC collects data to understand the local context and issue, and then uses this knowledge to plan their advocacy work thereby fulfilling an organizational role of advocacy) and 2) because very often the research process itself allows certain roles to be fulfilled (WICI engages local women as survey takers so they gain certain skills and establish key relationships with government officials, thereby working towards fulfilling WICI's organizational role of capacity building).

An example to help illustrate this dual use of research is found in the R&D case study. According to R&D, knowledge and understanding of the realities indigenous women across the Americas face was lacking which prompted them to facilitate a collaboration that would help fill these information gaps, but would also work towards building local organizational capacity. In 2005, building on its relationships with certain indigenous organizations in the Americas, R&D began to coordinate and bring together individual country-level research aimed at conducting a preliminary analysis of indigenous women's issues and a preliminary evaluation of the "normative and institutional framework available for indigenous women to remedy the situation."[6] These initial preparatory phases were carried out using a participatory approach with teams of indigenous leaders in Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Quebec.

Having learnt what specific situations indigenous women in the Americas face and understanding where and how the legal remedies fail them, R&D and their partners, Consejo de Organizaciones Aborígenes de Jujuy (COAJ) of Argentina, Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC) and Abogados y Abogadas por la Justicia y los Derechos Humanos of Mexico proposed the *Ethnic and Gender Discrimination in the Americas* project. It aimed at arriving at a more qualitative understanding of how indigenous women experience multiple forms of discrimination. The overall objective is to contribute to social and legal changes that will reduce these multiple forms of discrimination. The expectation is that "by increasing the production of jurisprudence regarding indigenous women's double discrimination, Inter-American institutions will gain a

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[6] Rights & Democracy. (2008) ,p.12

better understanding of indigenous women's specific situations which may lead to the creation of new legal protections for them or to new interpretations of current norms."[7]

The actual data, or information gathered will be used to bring cases of double discrimination to court in hopes of creating this jurisprudence, but by engaging local teams of indigenous women from indigenous organizations in this process (as the main researchers), the project aims to meet a set of separate yet complimentary objectives. By involving indigenous women directly in all aspects of the research from defining the issue, to interviewing and recording stories, to analyzing and adapting findings and methods to disseminating knowledge and exchanging lessons learnt, this project aims at not only strengthening partnering organizations' research capacity, but also their capacity to use international legal remedies and tools for future claims.

Conclusion

CCSOs working in international development are doing more than delivering services and assistance to the South; they are supporting and working through local, often participatory, actions to influence policy and practice and they recognize the need for their actions to be evidence-based. This need is addressed by incorporating research into their work. In this way, research activities cannot always be separated from awareness raising, capacity building or implementation activities. CCSOs use both the research findings and the research process itself to try to influence policy and practice. There are therefore several different strategic choices made by CCSOs that correspond to the ways they are using research to influence policy and/or practice in the global South.

This research points to a series of important lessons for civil society, government, and donor actors. These lessons relate to questions such as how to design and implement research-centred influencing strategies; how to access policy relevant knowledge from the field; and how to envision and evaluate CSO research outcomes. Some initial recommendations follow.

For donors:

- When looking for CCSO research "results", keep in mind that they are not only found at the end of a project, but that the research process itself can be designed in a way that achieves results regardless of what data is collected or what is found through analysis of that data.

- Support adaptive and open methodologies with potential for other roles to be fulfilled as this helps CCSOs meet their many organizational objectives.

- Help CCSOs develop their research designs so that they incorporate their various roles and strengths, as well as strategic ways to engage key stakeholders in the research.

- Think of ways to encourage collaborations among CCSOs without diminishing the role of the Southern CSO in producing and collaborating on research.

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[7] Ibid., p.12.

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- Consider rethinking what credible and sound research means when related to CCSO research: Perhaps CSO research should be seen as sound and credible if it involves local people in the process, if it allows research to mix with complimentary activities and if the methodology addresses power relations.

For CCSOs:

- Carry out a self-assessment by looking at the work you are doing and how knowledge production fits in to that work. Ask, how do we know what we know? Is it purely, experience-based? If so, how can we systematize that experience? How can more accurate data be collected and incorporated into what we are already doing?

- Take the time to sort out what role research plays in your work and think about how to present what you are doing in a way that might open the doors to more funding opportunities and further strategic collaborations.

The full research report can be found at:

http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Programs/Canadian_Partnerships/Pages/ResultsList.aspx

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