Community-led policy monitoring for DRR

Implementing the Hyogo Framework for Action at a local level

Ten practice notes for community-led policy monitoring for disaster risk reduction

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Note 2
Community-led policy monitoring for disaster risk reduction

Good governance and a functioning democratic system can only be achieved when local governments work in partnership with representatives from civil society. However, despite a legal mandate in most countries for civil-society participation in local government processes, this engagement is often ineffective, inconsistent or lacking all together.

This can create a vicious circle – as local governments fail to engage or participate with their citizens, their political accountability and legitimacy decreases; corruption, poor decisions and elitism go unchallenged; and citizens are further alienated from the political process. Christian Aid believes that poor communities should not be passive recipients of policy but should have opportunities for input, and involvement in the way that national and local policies are shaped and implemented. How we best support and facilitate partners to achieve this is of central importance to our work.

What is community-led policy monitoring?
Community-led policy monitoring occurs when civil society groups, community representatives or anyone independent from government or formal political parties are involved in evaluating, examining or critiquing their government's policies, programmes or actions.

Policy monitoring has been very influential in bringing about change on many issues and is a powerful way to raise awareness on a particular issue, and to hold governments to account.[1]

Policy monitoring involves gathering evidence and information on a particular policy. It can occur at any point during the policy cycle – from initial discussion and development through to its implementation and evaluation. This evidence is then used to evaluate the policy and to potentially influence future courses of action. Three main components for monitoring are:

- gathering evidence
- analysing evidence
- influencing policy decisions.

Policy development is a complex and chaotic process involving many actors and arenas. Different actors have different opportunities for influencing and shaping policy, depending on their power, legitimacy and position in society. It is important to bear in mind that civil society representatives are not necessarily neutral but come into the debate with their own agendas. As policy is shaped as much by issues of power and politics as by technical factors, we must recognise that an organisation's position within civil society can dictate how influential its input will be.[2]

Using formal political systems to bring about change works best in countries that have strong, open and transparent democracies – where local government is prepared to share power with other partners. A democracy requires both a strong and active government and a strong and active civil society.[3] Policy monitoring can be a useful tool in persuading governments to listen and to respond constructively to citizens' needs and aspirations. In many cases policy monitoring and related advocacy has enabled local governments to accept a new relationship which sees power flow from departments to citizens and back again, reinforcing the strategic or leadership role of government.[4] It can also strengthen local government in its legitimacy vis-à-vis national government. The challenge of creating an open, trusting environment should not be underestimated – it takes time and hard work. [5]

Decentralisation

Many countries have gone through, or are going through processes of decentralisation of their political institutions, devolving power to the local level and giving local government relatively greater autonomy. Many Christian Aid partners believe that it is at the local level that participation by poor communities is most likely to occur, and where it has the greatest potential for ensuring policies actually reduce poverty – shifting power away from centralised states, giving interest groups the space to organise, compete and assert themselves, building democracy at the local level and holding governments to account.[6]

Local community institutions, such as *Union Parisads* in Bangladesh, *Panchayat Raj*[7] institutions in India, and *Pradeshiya Sabha* in Sri Lanka all provide vital entry points to respond to the needs of the communities they claim to represent, and to initiate and strengthen community-based policy monitoring. However, while decentralisation should create arenas for citizens to challenge, engage and participate more fully in the decisions that affect them, this has not always been the case. As the World Bank notes: 'Decentralisation can make state interventions more responsive to poor people, but only if it allows poor people to hold public servants accountable and ensure their participation in the development process.' [8]

Key principles

- Policy monitoring and related advocacy should be **systematic**. Local organisations and communities should be **strategic** in their engagement, if they are to influence local government in the long term, rather than reacting ad hoc to issues as they arise.
- Policy monitoring takes both **time and ongoing organisational commitment**. Most organisations operating at a local level will therefore require additional resources, either financial or human, to undertake effective policy monitoring.
- A detailed knowledge of policy processes is critical. A lack of this can result in activities being badly timed and politically ineffective. For example, some organisations' campaign work on World Trade Organization (WTO) policies at a local level is focussed on WTO ministerial meetings; however, national trade priorities and positions have usually been formulated months before these events and cannot be influenced any further.
- Policy monitoring needs to be **objective and unbiased** – coming into the policy debate with an overly confrontational approach or known political agenda can alienate potential allies within local government, and dilute the importance of the message. In many cases, particularly in Asia and Latin America, communities find it difficult to make the transition from **oppositional activism to one of critical engagement** and partnership with local government institutions. Local organisations can play a key role in providing access to institutions, facilitating dialogue and providing examples where constructive relationships have benefited in securing access to policy change.
- Before communities can participate in existing political processes they need to **understand how political structures work**; how policies, laws and decisions are made, where they can input and when it is appropriate to target political representatives and officials. They also need to understand the roles and responsibilities of different tiers of government and their rights.
- There is a **growing trend** for civil society participation. New arenas are emerging for consultation and participation, often pushed by international institutions and donors. However, some of these may be tokenistic in practice; for example, Christian Aid partner Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) in Sri Lanka states that its involvement in the poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) process was tokenistic, that participants were carefully selected by the government and the World Bank, and that this process diverted NGOs time and energy from arenas where more critical political decisions were being taken. The Asian Development Bank NGO Forum in the Philippines has also noted that consultation with international institutions can be very time consuming for smaller NGOs, with little direct benefit to their work, especially with so many voices and organisations at the table. **Organisations and communities need to be strategic and discerning about the forums in which they participate.**

ENDNOTES

1 These practice notes are concerned with government policy, also called public policy. In this context policy is understood as a course of action, authorised by government to achieve certain goals. Such a course of action can take many forms – a law, strategy or government programme for example. Policies can also be seen as processes – they change as they are implemented and have both intended and unintended outcomes.

2 See Rosemary McGee and Karen Brock, *From Poverty Assessment to Policy Change: Processes, Actors and Data*, IDS, July 2001.

3 Campaigning Toolkit for Civil Society Organisations engaged in the Millennium Development Goals – http://www.civicus.org/mdg/title.htm

4 *Citizens, innovation, local governance – a 21st Century Approach*, DEMOS Project 2004.

5 Ibid.

6 Karen Brock, Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, *Power, Knowledge and Political Spaces in the Framing of Poverty Policy*, IDS Working Paper 143, October 2001.

7 For a case study on reforming the *panchayati raj* institutions in the context of DRR see *Facing up to the Storm. How local communities can cope with disaster: lessons from Orissa and Gujarat,* Christian Aid, 2003 – introduction, p14.

8 World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty. World Bank, 2000.