Searching for Impact

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How do you create real-world impact with academic research on policy influencing and advocacy? I will try to shed light on this question from my experience as the principal investigator of the ‘Breaking Down Barriers’ project. This project (2015-2019) was a research partnership between the Dutch non-profit organization Liliane Foundation and the African Studies Centre (Leiden University).

According to estimates from the World Health Organization, globally roughly 150-200 million children under the age of 18 have a disability. These children are particularly vulnerable given their dependence on their family and caretakers. They often face severe forms of discrimination and stereotyping, typically based on prejudices, a lack of knowledge and prevailing cultural beliefs. Difficulties in accessing services in the areas of education, employment, healthcare and social and legal support further contribute to their marginalization.

The Netherlands-based Liliane Foundation works towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in the global South. To achieve its goals, it works with a range of disability groups in Asia, Africa and Latin America. While Liliane Foundation and its partners work hard to promote inclusive policies through advocacy, evidence initially did not play a role in their advocacy work.

The Breaking down Barriers project was developed in response to this. It aimed to generate knowledge of the conditions under which advocacy for children with disabilities can be most effective and enable Liliane Foundation and its partners to use evidence as basis for decision-making.

In the period 2015-2019, the project examined a wide range of advocacy interventions in Zambia, Sierra Leone and Cameroon. In these countries, the project worked with local academics and Liliane Foundation’s partner organisations. In 2019 the project won the ‘Impact Challenge Award’ as a successful example of an initiative using evidence to enhance non-profit effectiveness. The success of the project led to the decision to continue with a second phase which is expected to start coming October.

In the project I learned a lot about the cooperation between academia and civil society and the role of academia in producing real-world impact. I have picked three lessons which I hope might be of interest to my ISTR colleagues:

Lesson 1: Ensure practitioner ownership of the research. An original, and in hindsight probably somewhat naïve, project assumption was that if you make relevant information on advocacy available to practitioners, they will use this knowledge to improve their practices. In ‘Breaking Down Barriers’, however, research uptake in many cases either occurred in an ad hoc manner, in ways not originally envisioned or not at all. Over time, I came to realize that practitioner ownership was insufficiently captured in the project-design. As principal investigator, I was basically the driving force behind all aspects of the research such as the formulation of research questions or selection of cases. Consequently, the intended ‘users’ of the knowledge were insufficiently part of the process of producing knowledge and as such felt little ownership for research findings. This was a clearly a missed opportunity and in the second phase I will ensure that practitioners will be involved from the very start of the research.

Lessons 2: Research is only part of the story. In the course of the project it became increasingly clear that producing new knowledge is just one of the ways in which academics can be impactful. Looking back, I think (hope) I have been impactful in several ways, including playing the role of a ‘critical friend’: a safe person who listens, asks critical (and sometimes uncomfortable) questions and prompts reflection. Another role is that of making existing academic knowledge available and accessible for practitioners. This role is particularly important for practitioners who often have no time to read, don’t have access to literature or don’t know where to look. Finally, academics can play a role in offering academic education to bridge the gap between science and practice. In the second phase of the project, we will develop a ‘professional’ course on inclusive development on the basis of the research. This course, which targets professionals, will be offered at universities in Zambia and Sierra Leone.

Lesson 3: Embrace the unexpected. In teasing out the conditions under which advocacy for children with disabilities can be effective, I first focused on questions with (at least for me) a familiar focus such as the role of organizational resources, alliances or the political environment. These were also the type of questions the original project-proposal mentioned. Over time, however, the findings pointed to directions which I had not foreseen. A key example is the importance of intersectionality, which is a concept from
gender studies I was previously unfamiliar with. Advocacy strategies are rooted in an understanding of what drives exclusion. Persons with disabilities have multiple, overlapping and interrelated identities. They are not only marginalized because they have a disability, but also because of other identities like their gender, age, sexual orientation or ethnicity. For example, girls with disabilities may not only be marginalized because of their disability, but also because of their gender and age. Addressing the root causes of these girls’ marginalization therefore requires accounting for their overlapping multiple marginalized identities. The importance of intersectionality was by far the biggest eye opener for Liliane Foundation and even became the central theme of the project’s final conference. We would have never found this if I would not have had the flexibility from Liliane Foundation to pursue ‘leads’ outside the original project-scope.

More information on Breaking down Barriers: www.barriersfree.org

I recently wrote a blog with Duncan Green (Oxfam GB) on ‘the helpful academic’: https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/in-search-of-the-helpful-academic-10-ways-they-can-support-practitioners/.

Tackling Governance of Risk Management: Civil Society Impact in Mexico City
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On September 19, 2017, a 7.1-magnitude earthquake struck Mexico City, killing over 200 people and causing the collapse of buildings and widespread structural damage. Despite having experienced a disastrous earthquake 32 years earlier, the city was not well prepared to prevent damage, respond in the immediate aftermath, or undertake reconstruction.

Many citizens and nonprofits helped with emergency relief in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Several organizations—Ruta Cívica, CartoCrítica and others—along with grassroots groups, risk experts and citizens, were working toward a longer-term goal: improved governance of the risk management system in the city. Overall, they pushed for an approach that moved away from the traditional focus on disasters as relating only to natural hazards and emergency response, toward a more comprehensive view of risk (and resilience) as a combination of natural, social, and human conditions. In line with their understanding of risk and resilience, as well as with their missions as civil society organizations (CSOs), they advocated for more citizen involvement and more accountability of government to citizens.

The CSOs identified inaccessibility of critical information on risk and vulnerability as a central problem underlying inadequate coordination, inclusiveness, and accountability. They collectively led three major advocacy efforts: 1) a push to make the Mexico City Risk Atlas—with data on natural hazards, social vulnerabilities, and resources—public and usable by citizens; 2) an Open Data campaign focusing on relevant government information, especially on damage to and structural integrity of individual buildings; and 3) pressure for simplification, better coordination, and more transparency of Mexico City government’s reconstruction processes.

The main partners
Ruta Cívica is a small backbone organization that carries out campaigns on various issues of importance for Mexico City, including anti-corruption and citizen participation in urban sustainable planning. It advocates for improved governance by talking with people in government, conducting communication campaigns, and bringing public pressure on government. CartoCrítica uses Mexico’s transparency and Access to Information legal framework to produce openly available maps of energy, natural resources, government permits and urban planning. Its stated purpose is to support integrated management of Mexican territory, protection of cultural and biological diversity, and protection of human rights. CIUDADanía19s, formed within weeks of the 2017 earthquake, became the coalition under which Ruta Cívica, CartoCrítica, and other actors campaigned in favor of risk management and reconstruction that included civil society participation, access to justice and respect for human rights, anti-corruption, and environmental justice.

The approach
The coalition carried out a wide variety of activities across the three efforts. Communication campaigns in social and traditional media mobilized citizen support through #At-lasdeRiesgosYA (#RiskAtlasNOW), interviews and press conferences, and posters and signs in neighborhoods. They lobbied government directly, holding meetings and discussions with elected representatives and government officials. They called upon the international commitments