

In summary, we have highlighted some sets of issues and approaches to properly assess contexts. Since the information needed will vary, we refrain from providing what could be interpreted as blueprints for action. Rather we provide the means to identify: issues emerging from the literature and preliminary work; and approaches for collecting political context data. Each CSO needs to decide which tools are appropriate, and adapt them accordingly. Drawing on preliminary insights here, it should be possible for CSOs to assess their policy contexts more clearly and identify the types of approaches that might maximise their chances of policy impact.

Sources for Further Information

- *Assessing Political Contexts* (Court, 2006) provides an outline of issues and approaches
- *Mapping Political Contexts: A toolkit for CSOs* (Nash, Hudson and Luttrell, 2006)
- *Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers* (Start and Hovland, 2004)

All available from: www.odi.org.uk/rapid/publications

Better Strategy: Targeting the Policy Process

Many CSOs prefer to act alone or actually in opposition to policy processes. When they do engage with an existing policy process, CSOs are often not very strategic. Here, the earlier example of Kenyan CSOs concentrating on changing laws in parliament, despite its inefficiency and limited impact on what actually happens on the ground, is instructive. What can CSOs do better?

Improvements can be made by being strategic about: whether to engage; which part of the policy process actually matters for the lives of poor people; which component of the process a CSO is trying to engage with; and what mechanism and evidence tends to matter at that stage? In Table 2, we give a generic indication of the different policy components, CSO opportunities and different evidence needs.

Table 2: Targeting Components of the Policy Process and Evidence Needs

Policy stage and key objectives for actors aiming for influence	CSOs can help ...	Evidence must be ...
Agenda setting: Convince policymakers that the issue does indeed require attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marshal evidence to enhance the credibility of the argument • Extend an advocacy campaign • Foster links among researchers, CSOs and policymakers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crystallised as a policy narrative around a problem • Credible • Suitable for the political environment • Communicated effectively
Formulation: Inform policymakers of the options and build a consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Act as a 'resource bank' • Channel resources and expertise into the policy process • Bypass formal obstacles to consensus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality and credible • Contain cost-benefit assessments • Adapted to maintain credibility with communities and policymakers • Both tacit and explicit in origin
Implementation: Complement government capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance the sustainability and reach of the policy • Act as dynamic 'platforms for action' • Innovate in service delivery • Reach marginal groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant and generalisable across different contexts • Operational – how to do it • Directly communicated with policymakers
Evaluation: Review experience and channel it into the policy process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link policymakers to policy end-users • Provide good quality, representative feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent over time – through monitoring mechanisms • Objective, thorough and relevant • Communicated in a clear, conclusive and accessible way
Underlying: Capacity building for CSOs aiming to influence policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a dynamic environment for communication and collaborative action • Provide support and encouragement • Provide a means of political representation 	(Evidence needs will vary according to the capacity building initiatives)

Source: Adapted from Perkin and Court (2005) and Pollard and Court (2005)

This framework can be used to help CSOs identify where their interventions would have most impact. To do this, CSOs must stay engaged in the implementation stage and ensure that their efforts actually result in changes to the lives of poor people.

Box 14: Political Contexts and Space for CSO Engagement in Budget Processes

The budget plays a central role in the process of a government fulfilling its functions. A certain policy which is given great importance in national policy strategies will need to be backed by the necessary budget resources in order to have an impact. Therefore understanding how budgets are constructed and implemented is crucial for CSOs seeking to influence policies and their implementation.

Looking at case studies of CSO influence in budget processes in different countries involving the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) and the Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis (IBASE), reinforced the basic point that the roles that civil society can play to influence policy are heavily shaped by the political and institutional context. In the case of budgets, that includes issues related to the credibility, robustness and transparency of budget systems and processes, and the roles and interests of different actors (government, Parliament, audit institutions, the media, etc.). South Africa's historical moment after 1994 provided opportunities and openings for IDASA that were not available elsewhere. In the post-apartheid years, rules were being redefined to shape a more inclusive, accountable government that would underpin South Africa's new political regime. This provided access to policy processes (especially within Parliament) and allowed IDASA reasonable success in budget advocacy. By contrast, there were few real openings of democratic space at the national level in Brazil to allow for genuine dialogue around budget priorities. As a result, IBASE has had more limited policy impact.

Source: de Renzio (2005)

Sources for Further Information

- International Budget Project builds civil society budget capacity (www.internationalbudget.org)
- For more on RAPID work, especially case studies see: www.odi.org.uk/rapid
 - *Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers* (Start and Hovland, 2004)
 - *Civil Society, Policy Influence and Evidence Use: What Do We know?* (Court, Mendizabal and Osborne, 2006)
 - *How Civil Society Organisations Use Evidence to Influence Policy Processes: A literature review* (Pollard and Court, 2005)
 - *Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations* (Hovland, 2005)

Using Better Evidence

While many CSOs have the potential to generate and use evidence much more effectively than they do, they are not doing so. Many policymakers are frustrated with the nature of the evidence they receive to inform policy processes. Using different types of evidence more effectively would help CSOs influence policy and practice in a pro-poor manner.

What would make evidence more useful for policymakers?²⁸ Some key characteristics include:

- **Availability.** Does a body of (good) evidence exist on a particular issue?
- **Accuracy.** Does the evidence correctly describe what it purports to do?
- **Objectivity.** How objective is the source?
- **Credibility.** What approach was taken to generate evidence and how reliable is the evidence? Is the evidence contested? Can we depend on it for monitoring, evaluation or impact assessments?