

Breaking down Barriers

photo: Beyond Borders

PROJECT SHEET

2

Advocating inclusive education in Cameroon

Which organizational resources matter?

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Executive summary

In many countries, children with disabilities are excluded from equal opportunities in society. Through lobby and advocacy civil society organizations can play an important role in convincing governments to make their policies and practices more inclusive. As of yet, the success-factors of lobby and advocacy remain poorly understood. Based on evidence from Cameroon, this study identifies three types of organizational resources that are decisive for achieving advocacy outcomes. First, to be taken seriously by power holders, credibility is key. Credibility is about being recognized for one's track record, performance and integrity. Second, strong social ties are crucial for gaining access to specialised expertise and power holders. Third, successful engagement with power holders requires charismatic representation. Much depends on the rhetorical skills of the person doing the actual face-to-face contact with power holders and his/her (perceived) commitment and sincerity. Overall, the findings demonstrate that a strong presence where power holders reside is an important precondition for being seen as a relevant player and building up and maintaining relations with power holders.

Introduction

According to estimates from the World Health Organization, roughly 15% of the world's population lives with a disability, of which 150-200 million are children under the age of 18³. These Children With Disabilities (CWDs) are particularly vulnerable given their dependence on their family and caretakers. Often CWDs 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.

Creating equal opportunities for CWDs and enabling them to participate in society to the fullest of their potential is crucial. Civil society organizations can play an important role in promoting inclusive policies and practices through lobby and advocacy. Effective advocacy requires a clear understanding of the factors that determine its success. Despite the growing interest in lobby and

¹'Breaking down Barriers' was initiated by the Liliane Foundation and the African Studies Centre (Leiden University) to identify the success factors of advocacy for children with disabilities. Together with local partners in Sierra Leone (One Family People) and in Cameroon (CBCHS), the programme aims to build capacity for effective disability advocacy.



advocacy to improve the position of marginalized groups, these success factors remain poorly understood.

Drawing on evidence in Cameroon, this paper seeks to improve our understanding of the success-factors of advocacy. In particular, it seeks to clarify which organizational resources are most crucial for local civil society organizations in achieving advocacy successes for CWDs.

The study

This paper is based on research which examined the SEEPD-programme in Cameroon. SEEPD stands for Socio Economic Empowerment of People with Disabilities and is implemented by the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBCHS), a local civil society organization based in Bamenda. At the same time CBCHS is partner of the Liliane Foundation in Cameroon. The SEEPD-programme is funded by CBM, an international NGO seeking to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities in the poorest communities of the world. SEEPD started in 2009 following the observation that there were almost no children with impairments in mainstream schools in Cameroon. Moreover, those few CWDs that managed to go to mainstream schools faced the additional problem that the existing examination policy did not take their special needs into account.

SEEPD was developed in response to these constraints among others. The program aims to empower CWDs in the North West region by increasing their participation in government schools and convincing the government to make inclusive education standard-practice in Cameroon. Education is inclusive when children with and without impairments learn together and participate in the same classes. Advocacy has been an important element of SEEPD and the program has targeted a range of governmental power holders at different levels. These include the Ministry of Education,

Regional delegates (responsible for education policy at the regional level), the General Certificate of Education Board (or GCE Board, responsible for examination policy) and municipal councils (responsible for budget allocation for community development) and parent-teacher associations.

To convince power holders regarding the importance of inclusive education, CBCHS used a variety of advocacy tactics. These include mass sensitization through the media (television, radio and newspapers), formal and informal meetings with power holders, workshops, piloting inclusive education in government schools and providing specialized advisory support to strengthen the government's capacity in the field of inclusive education.

Advocacy achievements⁴

Since SEEPD started in 2009, it has realized a number of important advocacy successes. At the time of research, the most prominent outcomes include:

- 1 *Sensitisation of the general public on matters of disability rights and inclusive education.* The program reached the general public through its Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) teams, radio and television programmes and the mobilization of religious and traditional authorities. SEEPD encouraged parents and caretakers to send children with impairments to school, thereby creating a 'demand' for inclusive education.
- 2 *Sensitisation of key power holders regarding the need for inclusive education.* Formerly, disability rights and inclusive education used to be 'hidden' topics in North-West Cameroon. SEEPD had done much to make these issues visible and put them on the political agenda.
- 3 *Implementation of inclusive education in 17 pilot schools.* SEEPD succeeded in convincing the government to pilot inclusive education in 17 government schools. Besides providing education opportunities to individual CWDs, the pilot schools served to demonstrate feasibility of inclusive education to the government.
- 4 *Improved Examination Conditions for CWDs.* SEEPD managed to convince the government to adopt a new examination policy for the Anglophone part of Cameroon that takes the special needs of CWDs into account. Amongst other things, SEEPD provided an embosser to the GCE Board for improved braille translation of exams.
- 5 *Signing of action plans for disability mainstreaming by 18 Municipal Councils.* SEEPD entered into partnerships with a number of Councils to make their policies disability inclusive. In each Council, a focal person was installed acting as an intermediary between the Councils and SEEPD.



Inclusive women's group active on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).



Joining forces. The SEEPD-programme creates a Regional Network for evidence on Inclusive Education.

The study identified a wide range of resources that played a role in achieving these outcomes. Three resources, however, clearly stood out. This brings us to the next section.

Credibility

The first organizational resource that stood out as playing a key role in contributing to power holders' receptiveness to CBCHS's advocacy message is credibility. To be perceived as credible people have to know you in the first place. CBCHS clearly benefited from having a strong brand recognition, particularly in the Anglophone region of Cameroon. This can be traced to the organization's long history. Building on the prior work of German missionaries and American Baptists, the CBCHS was founded in 1953. Since its early years the organization has offered health services and amongst other things paid attention to disability (leprosy). Over the years, the organization became an established healthcare provider in the North-West region. Many people in the region, including individuals working for the government, know CBCHS from personal experiences with its health services.

So what made CBCHS credible in the eyes of power holders? Three elements stood out. The first one is the organization's track record. Given the fact that CBCHS's track record dates back to the 1950s, there is no doubt amongst power holders about the organization's knowledge and expertise on health and disability issues. Power holders made it clear that CBCHS can talk with real authority

about these issues. The organization's credibility is further boosted by its reputation of being a strong performer. Most people, including power holders, know from personal experiences that the health services offered by CBCHS are amongst the best in the North-West Region. Finally, power holders emphasized the importance of the organization's integrity. In particular, they pointed out that the Christian (Baptist) identity of the organization contributed to CBCHS being seen as honest whilst being genuinely concerned for the well-being of Cameroonian people.

Strong social ties

The second organizational resource that played a major enabling role in the achievement of advocacy outcomes concerns CBCHS's strong social ties. First of all, these ties proved to be crucial in gaining access to the required expertise in the field of inclusive education. While CBCHS has an extensive track record on disability issues, this has been mainly in the medical field. SEEPD, however, required expertise in the field of (inclusive) education. To gain access to such expertise, CBCHS from the start made good use of its existing connections with special schools in Kumbo and Mbingo. The expertise present in these schools in teaching children with impairments proved to be pivotal in the training of 'regular' teachers for the 17 pilot schools.

SEEPD also benefited immensely from its existing connections with power holders, in particular

regional delegates. Here the network of its education advisor, who acts as the program's main 'ambassador' or lobbyist towards power holders, proved to be crucial. Of importance here is that the husband of the education advisor is a traditional leader, which makes the advisor a Queen and therefore a respected figure in Cameroonian society, especially in the North-West Region. Moreover the fact that her husband used to be a regional delegate for education proved to be helpful in gaining access to (current) regional delegates and convincing them to participate in the sensitization workshops. Once these delegates as the highest education authorities in the region were 'on board', the schools and the teachers could not decline the invitation to participate in the workshops organized by SEEPD.

Charismatic representation

While credibility is crucial for being taken seriously by power holders and social ties are key for gaining access to them, power holders themselves cited the charisma of the education advisor as an important reason as to why they had been receptive to SEEPD's advocacy message. Within the program the education advisor has been responsible for most face-to-face contact with key power holders. Power holders made it very clear that they were impressed by her sincerity, motivation and commitment. Moreover, the interviewees highlighted that she also has the

retorical skills needed for persuasion. Both the personality and skills of the education advisor proved to be pivotal to convince power holders.

Local presence

The above findings also shed light as to why SEEPD has been quite successful in the North-West of Cameroon while it (as of yet) has not yet achieved the same level of success at the Ministry of Education in Yaoundé. The study shows that CBCHS's circle of influence is concentrated in the Anglophone part of Cameroon. While CBCHS is clearly established as a 'brand' in the North-West and South-West part of Cameroon, power holders at the Ministry of Education were not familiar with the organization as a relevant player in the disability and education fields. Similarly, while CBCHS has strong ties with power holders in the Anglophone part of Cameroon, it mostly lacks such ties at the Ministry of Education in Yaoundé. It is illustrative that one of the main persons at the Ministry-level who did make an effort to 'champion' SEEPD (the Secretary General of the Ministry of Secondary Education) is somebody who originates from the North-West Region and is a personal contact of the education advisor. Overall, the findings show the limitations of lobbying power holders from a distance and, therefore, the importance of having a strong presence where power holders reside.



We Ring the Bell campaign referring to the SDGs motto Leave No One Behind. We Ring the Bell is an worldwide initiative of the Liliane Foundation aiming at raising awareness for the right to education of children with disabilities.

Further reading

Potthof S. (2016). *How Capacity Matters - Understanding Lobby and Advocacy for Inclusive Education in Cameroon*. MA-thesis. Nijmegen: Radboud University. See www.barriersfree.org

Notes

- ¹ We would like to acknowledge the support of CBM in conducting this study and sharing the lessons learned from the SEEPD-programme.
- ² Willem Elbers is academic project-leader of 'Breaking down Barriers' at the African Studies Centre Leiden.
- ³ World Health Organization (2011). *World Report on Disability 2011*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- ⁴ This is similar to projectsheet #1.