



Researchers as Policy Activists: An Experience-Based Framework for Responsive Policy Engagement

By Jyotsna Jha
(Centre for Budget and Policy Studies India)



ISID
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY
OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

GrOW Working Paper Series
GWP-2018-14 – Research Report

Abstract

This paper is both an analytical and reflective piece on the process of public policy advocacy in global South contexts. It documents the author's experience advocating with state governments in India to continue funding for the *Mahila Samakhya* women's empowerment program. While reflecting on the dilemmas, processes and outcomes of this engagement, the author also discusses the utility and limitations of existing policy advocacy frameworks commonly used and promoted by organisations, looking specifically at the widely popular RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA). To better support researchers and organisations engaged in policy advocacy, the author proposes a new framework that improves upon the ROMA by emphasizing responsiveness and evidence- and context-based decision-making to address the experiences and realities of organisations in the global South.

Keywords

Policy, policy advocacy, Mahila Samakhya, India, global South

Introduction

The term ‘evidence-based policy-making’ is one that most individuals and institutions active in the policy space are familiar with. It describes the process of determining whether public investment will achieve its intended outcomes based on evaluations of social and financial costs and benefits. While policy makers around the world are being trained and re-trained in using evidence for policy-making, social scientists face increasing pressure to provide evidence of policy advocacy or policy influence alongside research results. This is especially true for externally funded research - i.e., research funded by bilateral, multilateral and other international organisations. With an almost universal decline in domestic government funding for social science research in both developed and developing countries, dependence on external funding sources has grown exponentially since the 1980s. Alongside this shift, there has been an increase in the demand for evidence of policy influence and impacts, as forms of accountability to funders, such as taxpayers of donor countries or trustees of philanthropic foundations.

Development literature is full of ‘logframes’ and ‘theories of change’ that include clear evidence for policy advocacy and influence as desirable outputs. Under this results based approach, policy advocacy efforts must take place within the time frame of a predetermined research cycle. This calls for an approach that compresses the process of policy advocacy, rather than one that follows traditional forms with which social science researchers are more familiar - i.e. seminars, conferences and publications. There is, therefore, a need for an expanded knowledge base that helps researchers to more effectively design and map their policy advocacy strategies.

Funders often require recipient organisations to work within existing advocacy frameworks, such as the RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA) developed by the Overseas Development Institute, in order to help them foster sustainable policy change, as well as to monitor and evaluate their work. These frameworks are useful guides for organisations to better understand, engage with and influence policy, but are based on several implicit and explicit assumptions that can make the adoption experience tenuous for organisations. In this paper, I make explicit the assumptions embedded within the ROMA framework in particular, and examine how the real world experiences of policy advocacy organisations sheds light on the limitations of this approach. I do this by documenting a successful case study for policy advocacy that was spearheaded partly by my organisation – an Indian think tank called the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS). Drawing directly from our experience in India, I propose a new framework for planning and implementing policy advocacy that is more strongly rooted in the realities of research think tanks and policy institutes located in the global South.

The CBPS is a research think tank based out of the city of Bangalore in Karnataka, India. In 2014, the CBPS team started evaluating the effectiveness of a program called the *Mahila Samakhya* (MS) program in Karnataka and Bihar states in India. Since 1986, MS has operated as a centrally (or federally) sponsored program, focused on providing financing, training and

education for women across the country. The primary goal of the MS program is to facilitate women's empowerment by collectively organising individuals and training them to be aware of their rights and to have the ability and confidence to fight for them. However, within a year of CBPS beginning its evaluation of the MS program, a newly elected federal government decided to axe its funding. A number of civil society organisations that were also impacted by the government's cuts to social spending came together to raise their voice in support for continued funding of the MS program. Given the CBPS's credibility with state governments in Karnataka and Bihar, and with many civil society groups, and given its commitment to policy advocacy, CBPS decided to advocate for the MS program in addition to conducting our research and evaluation work.

By the end of 2016, CBPS, in collaboration with other civil society organisations, had achieved two successful outcomes from its efforts. First, it had secured both the future and the funding of the MS program and its staff in Karnataka. Second, it had compiled evidence of the program's effectiveness and shared it with stakeholders, including the federal government. The government of India issued a recommendation that all states continue supporting the MS programs with funding from their own state budgets. In addition, a number of advocacy outputs and processes created by CBPS were used by MS members to advocate for the continued funding of the program within their respective states. More broadly, both CBPS and MS became integrated into a broader network of partners, which included academics, policy officials, activists and other CSO groups working on women's empowerment, and thereby increased their institutional and social capital.

Throughout this process, our team at CBPS realised the limitations of existing policy advocacy frameworks, particularly the ROMA, for guiding the work of global South organisations. Drawing on our experience, CBPS developed a new policy advocacy framework that we believe adds to existing approaches by emphasizing responsiveness, and evidence- and context-based decision-making. This framework has the potential to help research and civil society organisations plan their policy advocacy strategies more effectively. It has two dimensions. The first is preparatory and includes questions about the organisation's internal preparedness in terms of commitment, resources and evidence while also highlighting the need to be aware of risks. The second dimension comprises planning and implementation, primarily referencing an organisation's ability to identify enablers and address barriers to successful policy advocacy.

This paper is organised as follows. The next sections describes common dilemmas facing global South organisations engaging in policy advocacy work. The third sections documents the context, process and outcomes of CBPSs' advocacy on behalf of the MS program, and the fourth outlines lessons learned from our experience in relation to existing policy advocacy frameworks, like ROMA, and their limitations. Finally, I present the CBPS's new framework for policy advocacy and discuss how it improves upon existing approaches to provide better support for global South organisations engaged policy advocacy that is either sudden or well planned.

Common dilemmas facing global South policy advocacy organisations

Before introducing the MS program, I want to address three kinds of dilemmas relevant to the process of policy advocacy conducted by global South organisations: the social choice dilemma, balancing research neutrality with passionate engagement, and managing competing resource demands. Our experience advocating on behalf of the MS program suggests that these are common dilemmas facing global South organisations. Our experience also points towards strategies for resolving these issues, which I detail in a later section of this paper.

The social choice dilemma of public policy-making

The earliest motivations for social choice theory came from the need for “avoidance of both instability and arbitrariness in arrangements for social choice” (Sen 1999, 351), which continues to hold true even today. Social choice theory is:

[T]he study of collective decision processes and procedures. It is not a single theory, but a cluster of models and results concerning the aggregation of individual inputs (e.g., preferences, judgement, welfare) into collective outputs (e.g., collective decisions, preferences, judgments, welfare). Central questions are: How can a group of individuals choose a winning outcome (e.g., policy) from a given set of options? How can a collective (e.g., a legislature, expert panel, or committee) arrive at coherent collective preferences or judgments on some issues, on the basis of its members’ individual preferences or judgments? (List 2013, 1)

Modern social choice theory, evolving from Arrow’s impossibility theorem (Arrow 1951) and moving toward issues of inequalities, deprivations, entitlements and freedoms, has posed several dilemmas and highlighted the need for more informed and humane policy choices; but no useful blueprint has emerged. The challenges of policy choices are compounded in areas where actors and domains are heterogeneous: public investment decisions and choices need to be complemented by private decisions and investments (e.g., girls’ education), or the macro logic of investment has to be complemented by aggregated micro logic or collective choice (e.g., increasing girls’ age of marriage) to be successful in leading to the desired change (Majumdar 1983).

The challenge of policy choice gets further complicated by the fact that democratic policy is often characterised by such dilemmas even within policy-making communities (e.g., absence of a shared goal or common commitment among politicians, bureaucrats and consulting experts). Therefore, the tasks of policy advocacy and policy influence become equally challenging, and questions such as “who in this collective of decision-makers with diverse interests and orientations should be approached?” and “what should be the process of approaching them?” pose dilemmas that are difficult to resolve.

Balancing research neutrality with passionate engagement

A common dilemma that organisations like CBPS face in the process of policy advocacy is the issue of balancing neutrality and rigour in research on the one hand, and passion or commitment to a cause or program for which advocacy is needed on the other. The question then becomes: is there always a tension between the two, or is it more important for research to be objective and distant? Sudarshan argues for using action-based research as a tool for “bridging the gap between research and reality” (2009, 9), while Drèze (2002) views real-world engagement as a way of enhancing the value of scientific research:

The value of scientific research can in many circumstances be enhanced even further if it is combined with real-world involvement and action. The flourishing of action-based research could also pave the way for a healthy democratization of scientific research (Drèze 2002, 192, as cited in Sudarshan 2009, 8).

Balancing research neutrality with passionate engagement is a delicate task that organisations must approach with diplomacy and care.

Managing competing resource demands

Policy engagement may demand substantial time, money and tact from organisations. Yet, given the constraints of tight timelines, resources and capacities within which most organisations carry out their work, such choices are often not possible. This is especially true in global South contexts where organisations face resource deficits and other political and social challenges. External interference, troubled political contexts, and paucity of qualified researchers are often identified as major challenges for bridging the gap between research and policy-making in developing countries (Young 2005). Even in a country like India, with healthy democratic institutions and an abundance of researchers, the presence of laws such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) makes it difficult for organisations to function independently. Registration with FCRA is mandatory for organisations who want to access foreign resources, and is subject to administrative clearance, which is often denied in order to silence political dissent and critique (Sampath 2016).

Although there is no easy solution to these dilemmas facing global South organisations, there are ways they can be addressed and mitigated, and in this paper I share how CBPS resolved them in case of the MS program.

Description of the Mahila Samakhya program and its funding

The MS program originated as a Government of India (GoI) response to a 1986 Education Policy that recognised education as a means of empowerment and also acknowledged women’s

empowerment as key to wider social development and transformation. This Policy and the 1992 Programme of Action were the first Indian legislation to espouse a clear commitment “to gear the entire education system to plan a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women” (GoI 1992, 101).¹ MS was first introduced in ten districts across three states - Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka - and then expanded to more than 42,000 villages in 11 states (Jha and Menon 2016, 21). Though located in the Department of Education (DoE), MS took a broader view of education that included women’s self-image, critical thinking skills, decision-making capabilities, knowledge of legal issues, economic empowerment and governance. Today, the MS program remains focused on mobilising women into collectives, known as *sanghas* or *samoohs*, to discuss, reflect, organise, and analyse their needs, and address them jointly (Jha and Menon 2016, 21)

MS was initially funded by the Dutch government, and later the British government’s Department for International Development (DFID), and implemented as a centrally sponsored GoI program in all states, except in Bihar where it was a subset of the Bihar Education Project, funded by UNICEF (Jha and Menon 2016, 21). The conceptualisation, initial planning and funding of MS borrowed substantially from the Women’s Development Programme in Rajasthan. The idea was to design a state-supported, flexible program adopting a feminist approach to promote women’s empowerment and to develop partnerships with the national women’s movement and with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Ramachandran 2012). The GoI worked actively with representatives from NGOs and the women’s movement to design the program with the Dutch embassy, which had promised funding (Ramachandran 2012).

The MS officially launched in 1989 and continued, fully-funded until 2016, as a centrally sponsored scheme (CSS).² Originally, the program was intended to be funded in each state through the creation of a separate MS society under the Societies Act, with money transferred directly from the GoI to the state MS society. This meant that the money would not be routed through states’ government treasuries and would not be included in state budgets. This acted as a shield preventing state governments from diverting the funds for other purposes. All states except Bihar followed this system. In Bihar, the MS functioned as part of the Bihar Education Project, which acted through an independent society for many years and then formed an independent MS society.

¹ http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/document-reports/NPE-1968.pdf

² CSS’ in India are schemes funded entirely by the GoI. This assumes significance due to the federal nature of the country, where the Constitution has determined financial responsibilities and rights of union, as well as state governments and revenue-raising capacities vary widely among the states. The union government has control over significant taxes and revenue resources, which are then shared with state governments through various modes including CSS’. A CSS is a mode where state governments do not need to share any financial burden and, therefore, it is usually easier to gain their support for the program. Even when CSS’ are sourced through external funding, either through grants or in the form of development loans from bilateral or multilateral agencies, the burden, if any, is not shared by state governments. The GoI alone is responsible for paybacks. In this case, the Dutch government’s support was entirely in the form of a grant and therefore had no component of payback or interest involved.

The Dutch ended their support for the MS program after India conducted nuclear tests in Pokharan in 2005. DFID then stepped forward to fund MS from 2007-2012 (Dighe 2013). Towards the end of this period of DFID support, the GoI instituted an external evaluation by the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIMA) and ultimately committed GoI funding for the program for three more years. But in 2014, a new union government took power in the general elections and withdrew this commitment to provide GoI support for the MS program. The withdrawal of this financial support was not properly communicated, leaving states uncertain about the future of the MS program beyond 2013. Government funding of the MS program was officially rescinded in April 2016. All of this was despite the fact that the IIMA report was very complimentary in its assessment and concluded that MS has made a positive impact in the areas of violence against women, legal awareness, health, political participation, and education of women and youth. The MS program was relatively low-cost, as the sangha women worked voluntarily, and even MS employees worked for low salaries because the program was valued as a social movement. The IIMA report estimated that on an average, each member contributes Rs. 3,532 per annum to the sangha. If this is estimated over the entire program, it amounts to about Rs. 170 crore. This is at par with the allocation of about Rs. 210 crore by the Government of India in the period 2007-2012 (Jha and Menon 2016).

The initial proposal for CBPS's evaluation of MS was developed after consultation with the MS offices in Bihar and Karnataka. By the time that the new union government took power, CBPS had already developed a good working relationship with MS program. CBPS also had inroads in various policy circles, so MS staff expected CBPS to help them better understand the GoI's position.³ One major push for our decision at CBPS to engage in advocacy efforts came from a national consultation meeting held with experts organised by the GoI on the issue of inclusive education, in the context of drafting the country's new Education Policy. A number of invited stakeholders, including CBPS representatives, raised the issue of continuing programs such as MS for promoting women's empowerment and enabling girls' access to education. The GoI representative in attendance mentioned that the responsibility of collecting and collating evidence in support of MS lay with organisations like ours. Although our own evaluation efforts had just begun, we were aware of other studies of the MS program and took it upon ourselves to collate the existing evidence and disseminate it publicly.

Process, outputs and results of CBPS's policy advocacy process

Advocacy efforts

³ CBPS has been actively engaged with advocacy at various levels in different arenas of social and economic policy and is generally viewed as a credible policy think tank. We are represented in several committees and task forces representing the research community both at Karnataka and GoI levels. This reflects recognition of both individual and institutional capacities and engagement.

Our advocacy efforts for the MS program were characterised by a multiplicity of actions involving diverse stakeholders. Figure 1 provides details of the activities undertaken, including a review of existing evidence, stakeholder engagement, the production of literature and policy briefs and media relations. These efforts are detailed here.

FIGURE 1. PROCESS, OUTPUTS AND RESULTS OF ADVOCACY FOR MS

Processes	Outputs	Results
1. Evidence-building: Review of both published and unpublished literature including research and evaluation reports for MS 2. National workshop in New Delhi with presentations from influential evaluating agencies for MS and participation of diverse stakeholders 3. Lobbying with members of parliament, members of the legislative assembly, ministers and senior civil servants in different departments 4. Letters and memoranda to state governments 5. Advocacy with media for coverage of MS achievements and issues 6. Bringing together like-minded individuals on a single platform for MS advocacy 7. Provision of continuous support and back-up information to various agencies trying to advocate for MS funding at different levels 8. Continuous dialogue with selected 'champions' in policy circles; carrying voices of MS lower ranks to higher policy circles	1. Policy Brief that was widely circulated and used by a variety of stakeholders and networks as evidence base in the process of lobbying for MS 2. A published article in <i>Economic and Political Weekly</i> , a widely circulated and respected social science weekly in India 3. Widening of the network that was working in support of MS with greater participation from academics and researchers 4. A number of newspaper articles published in English and Hindi newspapers 5. Creation of an MS resource bank with all published and unpublished research and evaluation of MS over a period of three decades (CBPS is in the process of putting this in the public domain as one GrOW output)	1. Policy Influence: - The Government of Karnataka (GoK) has committed funding to MS for five more years subject to certain conditions - MS actively used the Policy Brief as a tool for advocacy and received committed funding in a number of other Indian states - the GoI has issued a recommendation to all state governments to consider state funding of the program in view of positive evidence ¹ 2. Policy discourse: contributed in raising debates about the cost-effective policy choices in a democratic and emerging economy committed to greater gender equality* 3. Forging new relationships: The network of those who supported empowerment-based policy approaches in general and MS in particular expanded with greater participation from academia/research institutions 4. Capacity-building of MS functionaries in understanding research and using evidence for negotiations and fundraising

*For instance, the GoK has shown interest in a formal external evaluation of its cash transfer scheme aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour towards male preferences, girls' education and early marriage partly as a result of CBPS raising the issue in its letter to the Department of Finance regarding MS funding.

Evidence-building: systematic review of the literature

Given that our own evaluation of the MS program was barely underway, one of the most important actions taken on our part was collating existing evidence on the impact of the program. We undertook a systematic review of internal and external evaluations of MS, and shared it with diverse stakeholders in various channels. The literature that we reviewed included papers published in academic journals, doctoral theses, book chapters, and publicly available GoI reports. We broadened the scope of our review by also accessing literature that was unpublished and stored within MS state offices. This included smaller, formative or summative evaluations and reports commissioned by MS offices or other partner agencies. Further, we were aware of an ongoing academic study using secondary data from large sample surveys conducted in all MS program states.⁴ We requested the academic institution conducting the study to make the results of their study accessible quickly, and they did so by publishing a working paper. This was an

⁴ Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore (IIMB) was conducting this study and made us aware of that.

important data source as it was the first evaluation to cover all MS states using quantitative analysis to provide evidence of the program's impact on outcomes such as girls' age of marriage and girls' secondary school participation (Bhuwania et al. 2016).

National workshop: platform for bringing together groups to discuss evidence

Once we collected the literature and carried out the review, we shared it with various stakeholders at a national workshop organised in New Delhi. In addition to the presenting our review at the workshop, we also invited the IIMA and the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore (IIMB) to share their evaluations, these two being the most recent and comprehensive studies of the MS program (IIMA 2014; Bhuwania et al. 2016). The IIMA and IIMB also command high levels of respect and influence in policy circles. We invited members of parliament and representatives from academia, civil society, the women's movement, members of the MS National Resource Group (NRG), the media, and senior civil servants. A number of MS state project directors also attended and discussed advocacy efforts taking place in their respective states. The idea was to present the evidence of the MS program impact to diverse stakeholders and create a dialogue that could influence policy makers. The workshop also generated media attention including several newspaper reports that helped to amplify our voice and identify new partnerships.

Making evidence available for different stakeholders to use

The MS literature review, the national workshop in New Delhi, and other similar advocacy activities produced several outputs and results (Figure 1). First, we produced a policy brief based on our literature review and circulated it among stakeholders including workshop participants, policy makers, senior bureaucrats and politicians. While special attention was paid to the GoI and state governments in Bihar and Karnataka, a number of other groups reported using the policy brief to help influence their respective state governments. The Ministry of Human Resources, which had been the host ministry for MS in the GoI, used the policy brief to negotiate with the Prime Minister's office to secure funding until at least 2015-2016, giving time for various MS offices to negotiate with their own state governments to secure future funding. We also published an article in a widely respected and circulated social science weekly, popular amongst academics and activists in India (Jha and Menon 2016). This publication helped with generating awareness among a larger group of academics, professionals, and activists, who could in turn could use the evidence to support their own advocacy work on this issue.

Direct engagement with the state using wider networks and support

While the literature review process was taking place, we began reaching out to civil society organisations involved with MS, and organised a small meeting to strategize for advocating with the Government of Karnataka (GoK). This included a number of MS NRG members located in Bangalore, former and present functionaries of MS, and also a few academics including our advisory committee members. In this meeting, we decided to meet two critical decision-makers

and submit a memorandum to the Minister of Education (Chair of the Gender Council for MS, Karnataka) and to the Principal Secretary of Education (Chair of the Executive Committee for MS, Karnataka). The memorandum included the evidence of MS's impact on desired and committed policy goals, and advocated for continued financial support for the program using the argument that this was a low-cost/high-impact scheme. The memorandum was signed by all those who attended the meeting and other influential stakeholders that we contacted for support (i.e., writers, actors and other public figures whose names are readily recognisable). This memorandum was well-received by the GoK and led to a further process of discussion and negotiation.

CBPS is physically located in Karnataka and hence the nature of engagement in the state was quite intense and continuous. In Bihar, the advocacy strategy had to be slightly different. We identified key interlocutors using our own and MS's networks. Bihar had a coalition government and we identified a member of the legislative assembly from the same political party as the Minister of Education and through him gained access to the Minister. We wrote a letter to the Minister, similar to the memorandum in Karnataka, urging him to continue state funding of MS. We also met with the Minister to reinforce the same request. In addition, the MS team in Bihar and its extended network succeeded in influencing some members of the legislative assembly to raise questions during the session of the Assembly. These lobbying efforts in both states were backed by the evidence presented in the review, which formed the basis of our arguments in favour of supporting MS.

Using our strengths: building a cost-effectiveness argument

The evidence generated from our research efforts helped CBPS to strengthen the argument in favour of MS, and we used it to persuade policy makers in Karnataka through a letter written to the Principal Secretary of Finance. This letter addressed the issue of policy choice and pointed to several impact evaluations of high-cost conditional cash transfer schemes in other states showing an insignificant impact on attitudes towards girls' and women's empowerment. We contrasted this with the IIMB impact study on the relatively low-cost MS program, showing a significant impact on these same indicators across MS districts (Jha 2018). We further pointed to the fact that the GoI decision not to fund MS was based in part because the 14th Finance Commission, the mechanism that decides on the division of revenue collected by the GoI between the centre and states, had recommended devolution of a larger share (42 per cent instead of 32 per cent) of centrally collected revenue through taxes as untied funds and reduction in transfer of funds through CSS, which are in the nature of tied funds.⁵ This was an especially powerful point to

⁵ The Finance Commission is the statutory body mandated by the Indian Constitution that determines the mechanism and modalities of fund transfers, generated through taxes and designated as a divisible pool by the GoI, between the GoI and state governments. The latest commission, the 14th Finance Commission, increased the proportion of untied funds transferred to the state from 32 to 42 percent of the divisible pool. The GoI then reduced its allocations for a

raise in Karnataka, where CBPS is viewed as a credible research organisation on fiscal and budget issues.

Keeping the dialogue alive: the role of discursive translation

We kept the dialogue with senior bureaucrats alive using multiple channels and every possible opportunity. We raised the issue with those in power wherever it had even slight relevance to the issue at hand. These channels included academic conferences, workshops and events on social sector issues, and any meeting with the government related to budgets or finances. We also identified ‘friends’ and ‘champions’ in policy circles, people with known preferences for empowerment-based approaches. We tried to engage popular media, especially local newspapers, by reaching out with requests for them to cover MS and its approach and achievements. Our two-fold objectives were, first, to raise the profile of MS and its mandate, and second, to draw the attention of policy makers. However, those of us at CBPS were careful not to monopolize the media space by writing pieces ourselves, both because we sought to limit our writing to research and evaluation only, and because we wanted to allow space for a multiplicity of voices to talk about the issue.

This engagement process also positioned CBPS in a mediating role, in which we were continuously involved in discursive and interpretive translation, facilitating communication between the MS program, civil society and government. This was a challenge, given that we were not part of the MS program and had an independent identity that we needed to protect. We also faced the challenge of high expectations from relatively powerless MS employees who wanted their voices to be carried to top policy levels. Throughout this process, we were cautious not to lose our identity as independent and objective researchers.

In this case, “independent and objective researchers” did not mean distant or disengaged researchers. Rather, it meant strategizing to keep our responses and actions in sync with our overarching research and policy mandate at CBPS. We were also aware of the various interests driving the other actors involved. MS employee concerns about the continuation of the program were, for instance, understandably interspersed with fears about maintaining their own employment. Whereas a number of government officials were concerned mainly about the shortcomings and failures of the MS program, they were not looking at the bigger picture of the more desirable policy choice for women’s empowerment. In contrast, some civil society members could not see beyond the immediate need for funding.

Those of us at CBPS were committed to the MS mandate, and given the evidence we were also convinced of its impact, but our ethnographic research was uncovering certain limitations of the program that called for reflection. We adopted two strategies to address these challenges. First,

number of small schemes with the argument that the states should fund with their own resources as they now had access to greater amounts of untied funds.

using evidence to argue for MS' strength and potential but also pointing to a need for reflection and reform by sharing our concerns about the limitations of the program with the government as well as some civil society partners. Second, listening to the concerns of, and standing in solidarity with MS employees in their fight to keep their jobs. Throughout this process, we acted as a bridge between MS, civil society and the government.

Outputs and outcomes

Our combined efforts produced several outputs and ultimately to some results. Column 2 in Figure 1 details the outputs of our advocacy efforts. As mentioned earlier, our policy brief was widely used by different state governments and also the Ministry of Human Resources. The Department of Women and Child Development in Karnataka also used the policy brief, among other materials, to negotiate successfully with the Department of Finance, GoK. The MS team in Bihar translated the brief in Hindi and has since been using it for their negotiations with various donors as well as their own government.

Another tangible output of our advocacy efforts was the emergence of an expanded network of support for MS. Although the presence of NRG had meant that a network for MS already existed, our presence helped in strengthening the evidence base and our advocacy activities provided a platform to mobilise and influence greater participation of academics and researchers. It also drew media attention from those who had not previously been actively engaged with the issue of women's empowerment but were supportive.

Column 3 in Figure 1 also lists the outcomes that might be seen as the results of our advocacy efforts. Although this is an ongoing process, some clear and tangible results have emerged. The most significant outcome was the GoK's decision to support MS for a period of five years. It would be difficult to attribute these results completely to CBPS's advocacy efforts because these also built upon other parallel initiatives occurring elsewhere.⁶ Nevertheless, CBPS's role on a number of fronts has been clear: (i) playing a direct role in securing GoK funding support for MS in the state, (ii) strengthening the research and evidence-base of the advocacy efforts across states and at the national level, (iii) broadening the network lobbying in support of MS to include researchers and focus on evidence-based advocacy, and (iv) strengthening MS linkages with possible donors for funding of MS federations.⁷ Another important outcome of our advocacy work is the contributions made to the policy discourse around existing approaches to women's

⁶ For instance, separate groups of external professionals and academics associated with the NRG were active in a number of states such as Assam, Kerala, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, influencing their respective state governments. MS team members, supported by former MS employees and friends, succeeded in gaining the state government's financial commitment in some of these states. All these groups also helped us by providing materials and sharing their approaches for policy advocacy.

⁷ MS follows a policy of federating – turning women's groups into registered federations at block or district level – once a block or district reached 'maturity' and is able to function independently. This acts as a withdrawal strategy and the MS staff start withdrawing and the federation is expected to act independently.

empowerment programming, such as cash transfer programs. For instance, during the course of our engagement the GoK wanted to know if MS could be a more cost-effective social policy than cash-transfer programs that aim to change social norms around female foeticide, girls' education and early marriage. The GoK also began to conduct research to go deeper into answering this question. This, to us, is an important outcome, which we view as an externality of our own policy-advocacy exercise, as we had not set out to impact the wider policy discourse around women's empowerment programming in this way. But such outcomes are important, as in the long run they have potential to significantly influence policies.

Lesson learned: principles and pathways for engagement in policy advocacy

This section outlines the utility and limitations of existing policy advocacy frameworks, looking specifically at the ROMA developed by the Overseas Development Institute. The ROMA is a guide or approach that can be used by organisations to improve their policy engagement processes, to influence change. It comprises a suite of tools that organisations can use to improve how they diagnose problems, understand the potential impact their work on policy-making, set realistic objectives for influencing policy, develop a plan to achieve those objectives, and monitor and learn from their progress (Overseas Development Institute 2018). Yet as previously indicated, several assumptions are built into this approach that can make its implementation difficult for some organisations, and we argue, particularly for those located in the global South.

Based on our experience at CBPS in India, below are several principles and pathways for global South organisations to engage in more effective policy advocacy. In the case of the MS program, CBPS responded to a sudden need for financial support. However, many of the elements of strategic thinking and planning remain the same regardless of whether an organisation's decision to engage in policy advocacy is sudden or well-planned.

Control over events and situations is not always possible

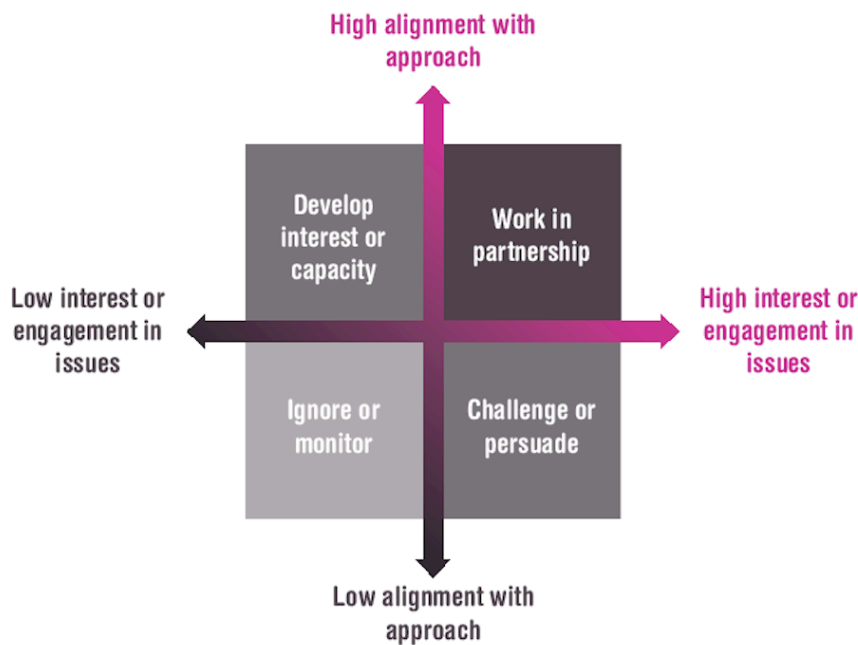
Frameworks like ROMA are strategic planning tools designed for situations where research findings are available and a clear advocacy approach is in place. In our case, the need for advocacy came suddenly, when our own research was barely underway. Although this is not a typical situation that research institutions face, it can happen, especially among think tanks based in developing countries where political regimes are less stable and policy-making is not necessarily research-driven or evidence-based. Political regimes in developing countries are also frequently suspicious of external agencies and therefore the responsibility to respond immediately is much greater when the institution is locally based and expectations from partners are high. While such situations bring opportunities, they can also pose dilemmas for research institutions, as was the case with CBPS. Although we decided to take the responsibility of playing an active role in this case, we were also operating in a political situation where we were continuously watching our steps, so to speak. It was like walking on a razor's edge. On the one

hand, we were dealing with a new GoI largely perceived as conservative and therefore not necessarily tolerant of organisations that were critical of their decisions. We also had to answer to our own Executive Board, which wanted us to be careful in our activist role so as not to overstep our mandate as researchers and policy-advisers, and risk our adherence to the Acts that guide our funding and direction. On the other hand, as a group of researchers, we were fully committed to the MS ideology and convinced of the need to intervene to the best of our ability to retain state funding for the program. Many competing factors and interests were simultaneously at play.

Advocacy does not necessarily take place within a single situation in the interest and influence matrix

The ROMA framework rests mainly on the ‘interest and influence matrix,’ which operates on the implicit assumption that all situations an organisation engaged in policy advocacy will face can be categorised in one of four quadrants: low-interest/low-alignment, low-interest/high-alignment, high-interest/low-alignment, and high-interest/high-alignment. The ROMA goes on to suggest four respective approaches for acting: ignoring, developing capacity, persuasion and partnership (Figure 2). In our experience advocating for the MS program we found it difficult to categorise or locate our position within any one of these approaches; in reality, it was a combination of all four.

FIGURE 2. INFLUENCE AND INTEREST MATRIX OF ROMA FRAMEWORK



Source: Reproduced from Young et al. (2014, 14)

In this case we were dealing with multiple governments - the GoI and at least two state governments - and each of these bodies comprised several layers of actors working within varying orientations (e.g., politicians, senior bureaucrats in different departments, etc.). The MS teams were also part of the same government system, and the NRG was an extension of that system. Therefore, each one of the quadrants in the ROMA framework above was relevant in some way to our situation, but not perfectly suited for our purposes (Figure 3). This means that there is a need for a more open policy advocacy framework that allows for a multiplicity of situations and relationships when determining the choice of strategies.

FIGURE 3. CBPS STAKEHOLDERS PLACED IN ROMA FRAMEWORK

High alignment with approach			
Low interest in the issue	Some key policy makers at the state level; Some civil society institutions	Some key policy makers at the state level; MS NRG and civil society institutions; MS teams	High interest in the Issue
	Key policy makers at the GoI level	Some key policy makers at the state level	
Low alignment with approach			

A communication strategy is key

Young and Quinn (2012) emphasise the importance of language, especially the need to convert often esoteric academic language to a more easily understandable and digestible message for policy makers. Young and Quin emphasise the need to analyse audience profiles and shape the message accordingly, focusing not just on what one wants to say but on what solutions their audience is looking for. Related to this idea, we raise three points from our experience. First, the language of the target group, especially in a multilingual society, is critical. Second, the credibility of the evidence crucial as policy makers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of rigorous research and asking more technical questions. Third, alignment with policy goals and commitments is important to communicate that what is being suggested would help policy makers achieve their own policy objectives.

In the context of language, an important challenge for researchers engaged in policy advocacy is that there is rarely a single target group. There are multiple target groups that one ends up engaging with, and this means that a message will need to be repeatedly re-drafted to suit the specific group at which it is aimed. All existing frameworks, including ROMA, highlight the need to map the stakeholders and frame the message and communication strategy accordingly. In reality, situations arise where one needs to reframe the message based on knowledge even about an individual, say, a civil servant who may be critical of the policy shift and who happens to be

much more interested in the numbers than in qualitative data. It makes sense to highlight numbers for this individual rather than feature human interest stories. In another case, s/he could be keener on human interest stories and one has to respond accordingly. The principle that helps here is that the need for redrafting the message is continuous and preparedness for this fact is important.

Equally important is the need for aligning one's advocacy efforts with policy priorities. For instance, in the case of MS, it was obvious that policy planners were not interested in the MS per se. Therefore, in order to make them interested in the cause of MS, they had to be made to see how it reinforces their own policy priorities. We were always emphasizing the government's commitment to reduce child marriage, increase girls' secondary school participation rate, increase women's participation in the labour market and political decision-making to highlight the need for continued funding of the MS. We were also continuously revising our message to tailor it to different actors – i.e. senior civil servants were interested in the technical details of evidence, whereas political leaders were keen on end results. With enhanced focus on the training of civil servants in the developing world, more and more bureaucrats are now well-versed with evaluation techniques and methods, this means researchers and policy advocates have to be prepared to face technical questions and respond with conviction.

Institutional trust and credibility each play roles in success

ROMA and other similar frameworks highlight the issues of institutional trust and credibility, albeit with varying emphasis. Based on our experience, we agree that institutional credibility and trust play major roles in gaining access to policymakers, getting attention, and ultimately, in creating trust in the evidence and in the message being put forward. Institutional credibility cannot be built overnight. Therefore, one has to either use existing social capital or look for partners who have the necessary credibility and use it to make inroads. Also, it is important to be aware of individuals who can help in gaining access and lend the credibility that is needed to influence policy change. CBPS's representation in a number of expert policy-making groups in Karnataka was helpful in gaining access to decision-makers and influencing policy planners.

Existing frameworks are devoid of location-specific experience

Location also matters. If the researcher policy advocates are located in the same geographical location as those in power, then the strategy and the process of engaging in policy advocacy can be continuous and much more responsive compared to situations when they are located miles away. For instance, in Karnataka, CBPS is a well-known think tank with representation in various consultative expert committees set up by the state government and we used that influence to make inroads for advocating on behalf of MS. Since we are not located in Bihar, we did not have the same advantage of familiarity and easy access. Hence, it helped to partner with others – both institutions and individuals – whose possess an higher profile and existing credibility among policy circles in Bihar. Some CBPS researchers are individually known in Bihar because

of their earlier research and that also helped in establishing connections and gaining trust. This has lessons both for national and international players - in a federal bureaucracy, a sub-national or local location provides some advantages for policy advocacy that other actors do not have. On the other hand, these lower level organisations are at a disadvantage when it comes to national advocacy and there, one has to look for appropriate strategies and partnerships.

Strategic and responsible partnerships

The ability to locate and connect with partners helps in the pooling of resources, evidence and efforts in the process of policy advocacy. Engaging in policy advocacy and generating influence are continuous exercises and not one-time events. It is not necessarily about planning multiple activities and executing them; it is more about maintaining a continuous dialogue where all possible channels are utilised. Partnerships help in maintaining the process of dialogue as individual institutions may not be able to sustain independent engagement for long. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the need for perseverance as the bridge between advocacy and results. Our experience tells us that good quality evidence coupled with perseverance pays off for achieving desired outcomes.

One also needs to be both strategic and responsible in the process of choosing and connecting with partners. In the case of CBPS, partnerships with civil society organisations facilitated access to greater evidence and other influential actors. However, this has its challenges and it is important to be aware and have adequate preparedness to deal with the associated demands. A multiplicity of partners can also require continuous adaptation in terms of not only language but also other aspects of messaging. For instance, representatives from the women's movement interpret certain forms of interaction and use of language very differently from development partners, and this is what we refer to as the challenge of discursive translation.

Diversity of voice but one cohesive message

One very important principle that can help researchers and organisations engaged in policy advocacy is that a diversity of voices matters. That is to say, if the same message comes from different sources, the pressure on policy makers to pay attention is much greater as compared to just one source. This has implications for partnerships and coalitions. For instance, while we were engaging other stakeholders and forging partnerships, we were also very careful in not bringing everyone in under one coalition or as position ourselves as one voice. We shared evidence with media representatives and requested them to take this up rather than writing newspaper articles ourselves. Similarly, though we facilitated the access to evidence and its use, we did not include all feminist groups as part of our memoranda and letters, as we wanted their voices to be separate from ours. This was important to establish that we are not the only ones arguing for MS and that there were multiple voices echoing the same message.

Social capital, friends and champions

All policy advocacy cases and frameworks mention the importance of finding friends and champions within policy circles. This cannot be overemphasised in terms of its ability to expedite the policy advocacy process. Champions within policy circles know what works, what does not, when is a good time or a bad time to act, what a good or a bad message is, who is interested in what kind of evidence, and so on. Access to this information is incredibly valuable for strategizing to engage in policy advocacy. This may also imply being more responsive to shape the message as needed and provide different types of information when required. It presupposes that the ability and commitment for such responsiveness exists.

Social capital in the form of an existing individual, social or institutional network helps in locating friends and champions. Social capital may involve leaning on a colleague from university who is part of the bureaucracy, an old friend from the students' movement who is a member of the ruling political party, a past institutional collaborator who is an active researcher in the area of interest, and so on. Leveraging the collective social capital of an institution can open channels to a vast number of people and organisations who can be accessed for a particular purpose. In many ways, social capital compensates for a lack of institutional power that think tanks and research organisations typically experience in policy circles and in highly bureaucratic and political contexts. Such networks have obvious downsides too, as these are highly dependent on the social networks that the individuals advocating are able to leverage. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this plays a critical role accessing influential actors in policy-making circles. Our experience with the MS programs suggests this is particularly true in Asian cultures. While the important role played by social capital in business networking in Asia has been well-researched (Liu and Hong 2001; Anderson and Jack 2002), its role in public policy advocacy is not yet fully documented.

A lack of institutional power gets accentuated in situations where advocacy is performed for a purpose that is not politically attractive or expedient. For instance, while engaging with policy makers for MS funding we realised that policy advocacy for process-based women's empowerment is different from advocacy for programs that are more direct, like creating social services or providing cash transfers. This made us include evidence on the relatively high costs of cash transfer schemes to be able to argue that empowerment-based approaches like the MS program are the more cost-effective choice for a similar policy goal. This helped to attract the attention of policymakers.

Moving forward: a CBPS framework for policy advocacy

In the light of the above discussion, using our experience and building upon the approaches developed by the Overseas Development Institute, Young and Quinn (2012) and Young et al. (2014), we suggest a simple policy advocacy framework comprised of four quadrants: (i) key

questions for understanding the situation, (ii) key principles for enabling the work, (iii) major risks that one needs to be aware of, and (iv) key challenges (Figure 4). This is a twenty point framework with each quadrant having five points each. There is some obvious overlap with existing frameworks, and though useful in varied contexts and circumstances, it is designed to be most relevant for think tanks and research institutions based in developing countries with young and evolving democracies, and in contexts where the need for policy advocacy may not be a well-planned exercise and yet demands an urgent and collaborative response.

FIGURE 4. CBPS FRAMEWORK FOR POLICY ADVOCACY

P R E P A R E D Y	(i) Key questions to understand the situation	(ii) Key principles to enable the process	P L A N N I N G & I M P L E M E N T A T I O N
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you fully committed to the main goal of advocacy? • Do you have sufficient and convincing evidence in hand or easily accessible? • Are you aware of and ready for the risks taking the political and institutional contexts into account? • Are you aware of the resource requirements: time, money and human and do you have those? Are you prepared to sustain advocacy on the face of uncertainties? • Are you aware of your limits and boundaries? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity of the message as well as credibility of the evidence matters; align the message with existing policy goals • Institutional credibility and trust in individuals play a major role; geographical location plays a role in determining the approach • Ability to locate partners and pooling of resources, evidence and efforts are critical; continuous dialogue through multiple channels of communication is critical • Diversity of voices helps in creating and enhancing pressure • Important to find friends and champions within policy circles; Social capital pays 	
	(iii) Major Risks that one needs to be aware of	(iv) Key Challenges that could pull one down	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time, money and human resource requirement could be significant • Advocacy and research getting mixed up, especially if the advocacy process is in the middle of ongoing research • Being viewed as having vested interests and therefore losing credibility of independent think tank • Being singled out in a wider 'unfavourable' political environment • Lack of success in influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited 'power' of a think tank in a highly bureaucratic and political environment • Need for discursive translation: translation of culture and modes of communication between programme, civil society, and government • Need for continuous re-framing of the message to suit the language of different stakeholders • High expectations from the 'powerless': need to amplify their voices without losing identity as researchers, and refrain from creating 'false hopes' • Need for and costs of perseverance 	

The key questions are meant to help an organisation decide whether or not it wants to engage in this particular advocacy work. If so, it needs to be conscious of the nature of the commitment, risks and resource requirements. It must also be sure of the quality of evidence available. This

line of questioning is to ensure that an organisation is not caught unprepared. This step is important not only in circumstances where the responsibility for policy advocacy comes suddenly, but also in situations where one has to plan for policy advocacy as part of research uptake activities. The answers to these questions can help organisations weigh their own preparedness and capacity for such a responsibility. Only when the answer to all these questions are in the affirmative can the organisation consider itself prepared. The issues of commitment and resources are especially critical. If the commitment is there, the issue of resources - financial, human and time - can be worked around.

Major risks, as identified in quadrant three, help in answering some questions of quadrant one. An organisation needs to weigh those and understand the implications before arriving at 'yes' to relevant questions in quadrant one. Therefore, in some ways, quadrant three helps in analysing the risks and in arriving at the decision regarding the engagement, and in that sense, the two quadrants on the left are complementary and need to be viewed in combination. The two also refer to the preparatory phase of the policy advocacy while the other two refer to multiple phases: planning, implementation, reflection and re-planning; in other words, all the post-preparatory phases. The key principles in quadrant three are mainly enablers, while the challenges in quadrant four are barriers. In a game of snakes and ladders, a good combination of enablers could work like a ladder in expediting the process, while an unmindful stepping on a challenge can pull one down, rendering one's efforts worthless. However, unlike a game of snakes and ladders, careful planning using the identified principles in quadrant three and continuous assessment of challenges as identified in quadrant four could help in avoiding such an occurrence.

In the end, it is important to reiterate, as most other frameworks and experiences do, that each policy advocacy context is unique and hence calls for a specific approach. Nevertheless, common principles have emerged in our experience and helped us to identify patterns leading to the development of elaborate frameworks. For those of us at CBPS, this paper is both a reflection of our experience of policy advocacy in the case of MS, and a consolidation of lessons learned, which, as a simple and locally grounded framework for policy engagement, we hope, will be relevant for think tanks located in developing countries. We feel strongly that there is a need for more reflective analyses of policy engagement by researchers to be able to develop and refine this area of knowledge. At the same time, we also hope this proposed framework can help to highlight that policy advocacy is a complex and time-consuming process. It is therefore difficult to show results on this up-front when it is often scheduled towards the end of the project cycle in most of the externally funded research and evaluation studies. In such cases, by the time research finding is available and starts feeding to policy advocacy, it is also usually time to end the project, and therefore clear evidence of policy influence is difficult to come by.

Conclusion

The framework, principles and pathways discussed above help to answer questions about the dilemmas faced by researchers and organisations engaged in public policy advocacy. This is especially true for programs like MS, which is a feminist-oriented women's empowerment program and therefore remains contested in terms of its desirability in a patriarchal and conservative political environment. In the end, the power of rigorous research and credible evidence in challenging status-quo social policies cannot be underestimated, but even more so when democratic governments strive to make decisions that are for the larger good of the society, even if it remains impossible to satisfy everyone, as social choice theory asserts. Lately, social choice theory has delved into issues of gender inequality, individual freedom and evidence-based policy advocacy. It could play a role in what Sen calls "formal methods and informal reasoning" (Sen 1999, 353), enabling policymakers to make public policy choices that are progressive and facilitate movement towards more equal societies. Our success in Karnataka was highly dependent on the fact that we managed to identify individuals within policy-making circles who were committed to feminist principles of women's empowerment, and that we equipped them with arguments to counter an instrumental policy perspective.

We resolved the dilemma of combining research and activism by adhering to organisational boundaries and fulfilling our responsibilities on both sides; CBPS is committed to working towards equality and justice and engagement in research-based advocacy is considered part of our organisational responsibility. As suggested by Drèze (2002), our engagement in policy advocacy deepened our research process as we widened our network of partners to access credible evidence for the MS, and also broadened our research questions to include understanding MS' experience dealing with uncertain funding.

The dilemma regarding competing choices between human and financial resources posed serious challenges, but in our case it was resolved because of other organisations' ongoing research on MS, which included activities pertaining to policy engagement, and because our funding agency agreed to allow us to advance policy-related activities to an earlier phase of the research process. However, this is an area for which there is no clear path to success. Other organisations will have to find their own solution to the dilemma of competing resources.

Acknowledgements

This work was carried out as part of the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program with financial support from the UK Government's Department for International Development, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada.

I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Niveditha Menon for reviewing the paper. The paper has benefited immensely from comments received from Dr. Lakshmi Iyer, Dr. Anaka Aiyer and an anonymous reviewer for IDRC. I also wish to thank Dr. Shobha Raghuram, Dr. Arnab Mukherji, Dr. Gita Sen and Dr. Srilata Batliwala, who constitute the advisory committee for the study, for their guidance and support at every step of our progress. Finally, I thank all our partners and friends, including the MS teams, researchers and policy planners, who played an important role in advocacy for MS and also in making the process meaningful.

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Funding acknowledgement

This work was carried out with financial support under the *Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women* (GrOW) initiative. GrOW is a multi-funder partnership with the UK Government's Department for International Development, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and Canada's International Development Research Centre. The views and opinions stated in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GrOW program or funding partners.