

INTRODUCTION

This paper was written by Annabel Jackson and David Irwin in November 2013.

Research is an important part of advocacy projects because:

- The process can give PSOs opportunities to make useful contacts and gain credibility. Research evidence offers a reason to talk to policy makers, who are often short of data and willing to talk to anyone who can support them.
- The process can increase members' interest in, and ownership of, the advocacy project.
- The activity can help PSOs to refine their understanding of the roots of the issue, the possible solutions, the impact on business, and the costs and benefits.
- The results should give PSOs the ammunition to make their proposals evidence-based and authoritative.
- The results, and resulting presentations such as policy position papers, should give PSOs resources to explain the advocacy project clearly to different stakeholders.
- Research signals to policy makers that the PSO is serious about the issue and is prepared to do its homework.

When PSOs talk about the specific benefits of BEST-AC, the most common phrase they use is that BEST-AC encouraged them to make their advocacy evidence-based.

COST OF ADVOCACY RESEARCH

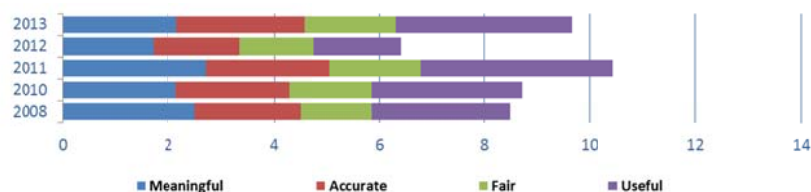
Research is generally the most expensive part of the advocacy process. In phase II, BEST-AC supported 62 research assignments at an average cost of \$22,000 (and a total of \$1.4m). ENABLE in Nigeria, in its first 3.25 years, supported 15 research assignments at an average cost of \$29,000. BAF in Kenya, in the first couple of years of its phase II, funded 29 research assignments at an average cost of \$15,000.

QUALITY OF ADVOCACY RESEARCH

We have carried out a systematic rating of all BEST-AC research reports since 2008. This uses a 17-question assessment matrix which maps on to the American Evaluation Association's four key dimensions of meaningfulness, accuracy, fairness and usefulness. Each question can be answered yes or no, giving a maximum score of 14.

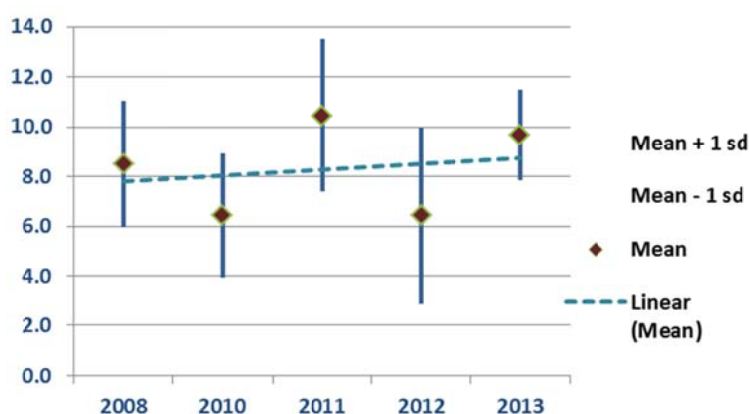
The results show improvement between 2008 and 2011, with a dip in 2012.

Figure 1: research report annual average rating



The gap between the strongest and the weakest research (as shown by the standard deviation) increased between 2008 and 2012, though narrow considerably in 2013. The standard deviation was 2.53 in 2009, 2.5 in 2010, 3.06 in 2011, 3.54 in 2012 and 1.83 in 2013.

Figure 2: research report annual average rating



The strengths of research reports tend to be:

- Reports collect and present detailed research data.
- Reports give detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of existing legislation or of proposed changes.
- Particularly recently, research collects and presents comparable data from other African countries, which is compelling to stakeholders.

The weaknesses of research reports tend to be:

- Reports are often poorly structured so the reader has to work hard to separate key facts from background. Too much of the background is given in the main text rather than in appendices. Key points are often hidden in long tables rather than shown vividly in charts or graphs.
- Reports often fail to identify the critical area, so they produce excellent data to answer the 'wrong' question or else fail to demonstrate that they are researching the 'right' question.
- Reports generally fail to specify the impact of the issues on the private sector and the potential impacts of the various solutions for the government.
- Reports sometimes draw conclusions that are not supported by the evidence presented.
- Reports generally do not offer a range of solutions, with advantages and disadvantages of each, but instead jump straight to the favoured solution, which can give the impression that the evidence has been gathered to support that solution and is therefore biased
- Reports tend to assume that the answer lies with the government.

- Solutions are generally not costed and the benefits are not explained or assessed.
- Recommendations are often not supported by argument or justification and are often too vague, leaving the policy maker to guess what needs to change.
- Reports would benefit from better proof reading.
- Reports take a long time to be produced, sometimes over a year. Consultants often take months rather than days to produce revised versions following comments. Some reports never reach a final version, but stall at the draft stage.

Whilst research reports can include recommendations, there is no need for them to do so, as long as they have a range of options and are clear about the actions needed to address the issues that have been explored. This can help in ensuring that the evidence is accepted by all parties and the debate can then focus on the policy implications rather than on the evidence. It is better, from the point of view of the PSO to articulate their policy position in a separate paper.

DETERMINANTS OF RESEARCH QUALITY

These factors affect the quality of advocacy research:

- **The brief.** BEST-AC helps PSOs write the research brief. The briefs generally specify appropriate outputs, but could be more precise on matters of quality such as impact and logical argument, the need for a range of costed solutions and an assessment of the benefits of each solution.
- **Criteria for researchers.** BEST-AC's board has enforced the use of local researchers over the last couple of years, which coincides with a decline in research quality. A survey of PSOs found interest in employing more international researchers. As we suggested in the 2012 Annual Review, we believe that BEST-AC should choose the best consultants for the job, regardless of where they are based. International consultants could have a greater role in mentoring and supporting local researchers.
- **Selection of researchers.** BEST-AC's role in selecting consultants has decreased in the last two years with the aim of giving PSOs greater ownership of the process. This has had the unfortunate effect of allowing weak researchers to gain multiple contracts. The process should be refined so that it is not reliant on passive advertisement in Tanzania but also has a proactive element in seeking the best consultants, and testing the quality of their work, for example through reviewing previous reports.
- **Steering of research.** BEST-AC has relatively limited contact with researchers between the briefing stage and the presentation of a draft final report. It would be better if BEST-AC, with external support where needed, checked the proposed research tools and methodology, so that problems could be headed off at an earlier stage.
- **Management of research.** PSOs often lack skills in managing researchers. Allowing PSOs to carry out some research themselves would build their capacity and might increase the relevance of the results by having a closer tie to use.
- **Feedback on reports.** Academic researchers tend to follow their existing research conventions, and can be resistant to comments from BEST-AC officers, who do not have equal academic qualifications. Increasing the control over the methodology should leave fewer problems to be resolved at the drafting stage.
- **Availability of data.** Researchers have had difficulty gaining responses from PSOs' members, suggesting that more needs to be done to commit them to the advocacy project.
- **Involvement of public sector stakeholders.** Having some of the research jointly commissioned with government would help to smooth the research process. This is better than involving

government officials at the end of the research, in a so-called validation workshop, when the participants can, at best, only comment on conclusions or recommendations.

- **Training of researchers.** BEST-AC has offered training in the past, but take up was low.

POLICY POSITION PAPERS

Influencing policy makers requires that PSOs are able to make a compelling case. Writing a paper will encourage the PSO to think about the messages and the logic, and the interests they share with government. Disseminating a written paper will help the PSO to keep their members informed as well as providing an aide memoire after meetings with key decision-makers. In practice, policy position papers need to achieve two objectives:

- To communicate, clearly and concisely, the nature of the problem, including causal links, and recommendations for action;
- To influence policy makers, ideally to act, but at least to increase their priority to the policy issue.

A policy position paper prepared by a PSO will need therefore to:

- Describe an issue or problem faced by public policy makers and, if appropriate, the implications for business and other stakeholders.
- Explain the current policy of the government (which will require an understanding of the policy imperative).
- Describe the possible options for addressing the issue.
- Recommend a public policy which will minimise the impact on business.

Most policy position papers produced by PSOs for BEST-AC are policy position papers in name only not in content. The results, and interviews with researchers for the 2013 project completion review, suggest some uncertainty about the structure and content of policy position papers.

- Policy position papers should be brief. They should be two to four pages long, not thirty or a hundred.
- Policy position papers are not the place to fill in gaps in the research. If research reports were stronger in analysing advocacy problems and their impact, and comparing possible solutions, then researchers and PSOs would be better able to pick out key points in policy position papers.
- Policy position papers should be written from the perspective of the target audience.
- Policy position papers should be action based. They should clearly tell the target audience what they should do and why, and give a sense of urgency.
- Policy position papers should be well written. They should present the evidence. They should make an argument for change. They should be succinct. Every word should be carefully chosen to be clear and persuasive.

CONCLUSION

Research is an important, and costly, element of advocacy projects. Advocacy research is different from academic or business research because:

- Advocacy research can be part of the influencing process: it can build relationships, generate ownership and communicate authority.

- Advocacy research is action-based: its aim is to energise and incite action. The argument presented needs to be fluent and credible.
- Advocacy research has a different intended audience: a policy maker or politician. The viewpoints of the target audiences need to be understood in conceptualising the problem and in identifying possible solutions.
- The reader of advocacy research judges the report by its academic quality/ validity but also by the clarity, practicality and timeliness of its conclusions. The work needs carried to be out to a high standard but some of the reassurance about quality can be provided in an appendix rather than in a main text.