



Best Practices:

Study of Armenian NGOs dealing with advocacy

Executive Summary

The CRRC-Armenia Foundation and Transparency International Anti-Corruption Center (TIAC) jointly, with the support of USAID implemented the “Engaged Citizenry for Responsible Governance” initial (panel) study in 2015-2016. It aims to reveal the needs of civil society organizations (CSOs) that emphasize **advocacy** activities as well as to assess the potential of these organizations to raise public awareness and influence public policies.

The Executive Summary presents the main challenges faced by advocacy NGOs as revealed by the study and recommends a range of solutions to overcome them.

Methodology

A quantitative and qualitative toolset has been used for the study. The quantitative study was conducted among the representatives of forty non-government organizations (NGOs) engaged in advocacy through face-to-face interviews. A standardized questionnaire was used. The qualitative study was conducted in order to verify the results of the quantitative study and understand it comprehensively, as well as to develop recommendations for the stakeholders. Within the scope of the qualitative study, in-depth interviews were held with the representatives of ten NGOs, six state institutions, and three media outlets. Five focus group discussions were held with the representatives of the above-mentioned ten NGOs. One round table discussion each was held with civic activists, CSO experts and representatives of the donor community. After the initial results were summarized, one discussion (in “world café” format) was held on March 23rd, 2016 with the participation of advocacy NGO representatives to formulate recommendations in light of identified challenges.

During the study, part of the results were used of the representative survey (N=1443) conducted throughout Armenia within the scope of the CELoG program. These in particular corresponded to the TIAC proposed question pool and related to the attitude of RA citizens towards the NGO sector.

Relations with State Institutions

Challenges

- Around one-third of advocacy NGOs describe their relationship with state institutions as **collision**. According to the representatives of civil society, even in the case of collaborative relations, the influence that NGOs have on the state governance sector is **weak** in reality.
- According to the representatives of state institutions, the NGOs that strive to collaborate with them often have a lack of **ideological principle** and **specialized experience**.

Recommendations

- The collaboration between advocacy NGOs as well as state and local self-government bodies will benefit if the organizations take a position of **initiative** in their relations with those institutions. In particular, NGOs can invite decision makers from state institutions to NGO board meetings and general assemblies, as well as actively participate in the discussions organized by state institutions (for example, the bill discussions at the National Assembly or the local council meetings).
- The collaboration between state institutions and advocacy NGOs will receive a new boost if the latter make an effort to **find supporters and partners** working in state bodies. In particular, NGOs can “cast a wider net” by establishing ties and partnership with not only high-ranking officials in state institutions, but also the **middle management**.
- Advocacy NGOs can form an atmosphere of mutual understanding with state institutions if they try in advance to understand the **institutional interests** of state institutions. In particular, before they try to initiate a partnership with a state institution regarding any issue, it is necessary for NGOs to examine in detail the needs and aspirations of that state institution, as well as the initiatives already implemented by the state institution relating to the given issue.
- The formation of an atmosphere of mutual understanding with state institutions can be facilitated by the **improvement of the image** of advocacy NGOs. It is necessary for NGOs to always act **in accordance with their missions**, and to be **professional** by comprehensively analyzing the nature of the issue and proposing legally competent and fact based solutions. NGOs will be most influential in their relations with state institutions if they act as **coalition** groups.
- The formation of an atmosphere of mutual understanding with state institutions also requires that the advocacy NGOs improve the effectiveness of their **communication** with state institutions. It is necessary for the NGOs to present their proposals and issues to **the relevant people** in state institutions **using the simplest possible wording**. During the collaboration, it is also important for NGOs to **maintain contact** with the state institutions and keep the latter informed of the results of the collaboration by **emphasizing its achievements**.

Relations with other CSOs and the Mass Media

Challenges

- **Only a quarter** of the NGOs collaborate **with other CSOs** as part of their advocacy activities. The NGOs that do not use the potential of other CSOs end up missing important opportunities to gain additional sources of information, contacts, material resources and experience. At the same time, when describing success stories of advocacy, the majority of NGO representatives mentioned the significant role played by **coalitions** in those achievements.
- **Regional NGOs find it difficult to attract the attention of mass media** to their advocacy initiatives. The national media are more interested in the activities of Yerevan-based NGOs, while the local media active in the regions are willing to cover the activities of regional NGOs only on a paid basis.

Recommendations

- The impact of advocacy initiatives would grow considerably if the NGOs **collaborated** with each other. An important condition for collaboration is awareness of the other organizations working in the same area. In this sense, it might be extremely useful to create **joint platforms** of NGOs and organize an **expo-exhibition** of NGOs through which the representatives of civil society can acquaint themselves with each other and exchange the necessary information and resources.
- In order for the impact of advocacy initiatives to grow, it is extremely important for NGOs to act as **coalitions** more often. Moreover, coalitions would work more productively if the participating NGOs set their **responsibilities and authority** in advance as well as create **mechanisms of accountability** within the coalition.
- Taking into consideration the fact that the advocacy initiatives carried out through coalitions have greater impact, it is necessary for **donor organizations** to provide funding more often to **coalition projects** while also encouraging collaboration between experienced and newly-created NGOs.
- The attention of the **mass media** is extremely important for advocacy NGOs. In order to make their collaboration with the media more effective, both regional and Yerevan-based NGOs must make a number of changes in their modus operandi. In particular, the mass media will pay greater attention to advocacy initiatives if those who undertake them include a **“newsworthiness”** element within them. The interest of the mass media towards advocacy initiatives would grow if NGOs also provide high quality but simple **press releases, success stories and implemented initiatives**. If necessary, the NGOs must **“educate”** the mass media on specific issues, turning the latter into their supporters. Another very effective method for collaboration is the **inclusion of mass media in coalitions**.
- In order to gain the attention of the mass media, it is necessary for **advocacy NGOs in the regions to find areas of collaboration** with other organizations in the civil sector and **jointly use** the latter’s resources for disseminating information. When **planning the budgets** for their advocacy initiatives, regional NGOs must consider putting aside resources in order to work with local NGOs on a paid basis.

Relations with beneficiaries and the public

Challenges

- Only a quarter of advocacy NGOs **use beneficiaries' ideas** when developing their strategic programs. The latter, in turn, **lack in confidence** regarding their own ability to contribute to that process.
- In the case of half of the NGOs examined, **the beneficiaries do not participate** in the **monitoring** of the organization's activities. Some of the beneficiaries were also not sure whether they could contribute to the monitoring and evaluation of the NGO's activities.
- In the case of half of the NGOs that monitor the policies of state institutions and LSGs, **the beneficiaries, volunteers and members do not participate in that monitoring**.
- Less than half of the examined NGOs **regularly publish their program reports**. Only a quarter of the NGOs **publish a regular financial report**.

Recommendations

- It is extremely important for advocacy NGOs that their beneficiaries (as well as other citizens) participate in the organization's activities in various areas. The indicators of this participation will increase considerably if the NGOs improve the productivity of their communication and become **comprehensible and attractive** in their beneficiaries' eyes. In particular, it is necessary for NGOs to show a **targeted approach** to their beneficiary groups and give each group a **simple** presentation of their activities and programs. In order to become attractive to their beneficiaries, it is no less important for NGOs to **"advertise" their best achievements** in the area of advocacy. In order to become visible to beneficiaries, NGOs must use all the means of communication possible, including **face-to-face meetings, open discussions, television programs, as well as public events (such as flash mobs)**.
- In order to increase the participation of beneficiaries in the activities of advocacy NGOs, the NGOs must **motivate** them. In particular, it is necessary for the NGOs to take steps aimed at **overcoming the lack of confidence** among beneficiaries **in their own abilities**, and to show beneficiaries how important their participation is in finding solutions to this or that issue by using various means (certificates of gratitude, for example) to highlight this importance. It is also necessary to show the beneficiaries what they stand to gain from this participation. NGOs can also **increase the beneficiaries' capacities** by organizing training sessions for them.
- Advocacy NGOs stand to gain if they **place more trust in beneficiaries** and provide for their participation in the various areas of their organization's activities. In particular, through the beneficiaries, the NGOs will **not just discover the issues but also the means to solving them**. It is necessary for NGOs to include beneficiaries in various working groups, advocacy events, as well as in the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of their own organizations.
- In order to gain public **trust**, advocacy NGOs must take steps to increase their own **accountability**. In particular, the NGOs must provide for the accountability of their own activities through ongoing discussions, reports, publications or leaflets. It is also extremely important for NGOs to **regularly produce publications on their financial flows**.

Public Attitude to the NGO Sector

Challenges

- Only **four percent** of the Armenians surveyed considered the level of **accountability** among Armenian NGOs to be high. The proportion of people who considered the level of **transparency** of NGO activities to be high constituted just **seven percent**.
- The general **trust** of the Armenian population **towards the NGO sector is low**. Just seven percent of the respondents trusted the representatives of Armenian NGOs.

Recommendations

- In order to win the confidence of the public, stakeholders must take steps to increase **awareness** of NGOs among the public. In this sense, it is the NGOs themselves who have the most work to do. In particular, they must take more active steps to spread information about their own activities, programs and biggest achievements. It is necessary for NGOs to gain the reputation of organizations that show **honesty, integrity, concern for public interest, accountability and professionalism**.
- When spreading information about their own activities, it is necessary for NGOs to use **various information platforms**. For example, they can do so through direct contact with people, public awareness campaigns, spreading their NGOs biggest success stories through word of mouth as well as through regional and national mass media. In order to broaden their audiences, NGOs should not **limit themselves to the internet**. They must take steps to appear **on television** as well.
- In order to gain **public trust**, Armenian NGOs must also take steps to increase their **accountability**. Moreover, this relates to the regular publication of both programmatic as well as financial reports and the use of various formats to do so.
- The reputations of Armenian NGOs stand to gain if they use **joint efforts to provide worthy responses** to the **negative propaganda** that is conducted against them from time to time, which are mainly focused on their “grant-seeking” nature and accusations of serving their donors’ agendas. NGOs can, for example, look for means to present the funding they receive from international donors in a positive light. They can also strengthen their lobbying in order to **gain funding from the government of Armenia**.