



NGO Advocacy and Quality Education for Disadvantaged Children

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Zhao Zhonghua, Save the Children UK

Abstract

It is perceived that, whilst development NGOs have secured worldwide small-scale successes, they have not achieved significant changes in the systems and structures that determine the distribution of power and resources within and between societies. As a result, their impact on the lives of poor people remains limited. Both for the sake of effectively helping as many people as possible and for the sake of securing their own survival and development, international development NGOs (IDNGOs) have been using 'advocacy' as an approach to influence government policy and practice in developing countries. While globally, access to quality education is still not a reality for children in developing countries, so the policy and practice of education in those countries are intensively targeted by IDNGO advocacy activities. Through a specific and previously unpublished case study from China, this presentation explains how a child rights IDNGO, namely Save the Children UK, used a practical advocacy approach, with a very modest total budget to achieve significant change in the way that minority children are taught in schools, in the way that training is delivered to teachers, and in the way that schools relate to communities. Further more, the schools are delivering better educational results, which has been a major factor in generating government enthusiasm for the project and the desire to extend its reach to other parts of China.

List of Abbreviations

BBC	The British Broadcasting Corporation
CCS	The Center for Civil Society of London School of Economics and Political science
CDB	China Development Brief
DFID	UK Department for International Development
EU	European Union
IDNGOs	International Development Non-government Organizations
LSE	London School of Economics and Political Science
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MoE	China's Central Ministry of Education
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
SC UK	Save the Children UK
YMBEP	Yunnan Minority Basic Education Project
YPED	Yunnan Provincial Education Department

NGO Advocacy and Quality Education for Disadvantaged Children

1. International Development NGOs: *key drivers of development and active practitioners of advocacy*

As a key component of civil society, non-government organizations (NGOs) lacks the coercive power which government relies on to ensure authority, the money that ensures authority in the business sector and the consanguinity and love on which families are based. Therefore, NGOs have to rely on moral power and shared values to gain status. 'Development', which can be understood as all the efforts aimed at achieving well-being for the majority of ordinary people, has become a belief shared by all nation states and international communities. By undertaking development, NGOs could gain authority and legitimacy, and largely promote their own profiles. As a result, many NGOs have actively worked on development. They are widely known as 'development NGOs'.

Though development NGOs have been successful in small-scale projects, their influence on systems and structures that distribute power and resources within and between societies is weak. Therefore, development NGOs' impact on the people they want to help is limited. However, in order to fulfil their moral obligations, development NGOs want to effectively help more people around the world. At the same time, because they lack coercive power and money, development NGOs have to rely on good reputation to survive. A big impact helps development NGOs promote their profile and raise their status. As a result, they endeavour to maximize their impact.

If a NGO can make some positive change on government systems, then through the government policy and practice, a large number of people will benefit and prospects of sustainability are increased. Many NGOs have realized this and used 'advocacy' as an approach to maximize their impact.

According to the Oxford dictionary, the word 'advocacy' has the following meanings: 'publicly supports or recommends' and 'someone pleads a case on someone else's behalf'. When the word advocacy appears in development studies, it still keeps those meanings. For example, Whaites (2001:308) noted advocacy is a tool or a set of tools that are used by NGOs

to make positive changes for others. Some people assume advocacy is an activity that combines campaigning, lobbying, and development education (Anderson, 2001:231), but others argue advocacy involves much more than campaigning, lobbying and development education (Wallock et al, 1993:27). In this paper, advocacy means all the activities (not just campaigning, lobbying and development education) that are carried out by NGOs with the purpose of influencing structures and policies.

Against the background of globalization, civil society and NGOs can no longer be understood as territorially bounded conceptions, while development, always has an international perspective. The consummate marriage between NGOs and development at an international level facilitated the growth of international development NGOs (IDNGOs). Today, IDNGOs are actively operating in most developing countries.

2. Advocacy Strategies used by IDNGOs

A brief review of the work of typical IDNGOs shows that three advocacy strategies are commonly used by IDNGOs to maximize their impact. This paper names these three strategies as ‘advocacy through preaching’, ‘advocacy through demonstrating’, and ‘advocacy through partnership with government’. Nonetheless, it does not necessarily imply that the three strategies resonate all advocacy strategies used by IDNGOs. But they represent a wide range of significant issues that concern IDNGOs’ advocacy work. This paper briefly explains these three strategies, and examines an IDNGO education project to illustrate the strategy of advocacy through partnership with government.

2.1 Advocacy through preaching

Preaching is the most straightforward advocacy strategy. In simple terms, an IDNGO which adopts this strategy believes its ideas are self-evidently correct, and superior to those prevailing in the target society. It also assumes that the attitude and practice of government and public could be changed through purely preaching activities such as audio and video presentations, publication distribution, lobbying and campaigning.

2.2 Advocacy through demonstrating

An IDNGO which adopts the strategy of ‘demonstrating’ also believes its ideas are superior, but it doesn’t believe the attitude and practice of government and public could be changed through purely preaching. So it will first establish a concrete project that reflects its values.

After it has successfully established a concrete project (i.e. set up a model), then the IDNGO will use the project as evidence to convince the government and public to accept its ideas. This approach assumes that government should then replicate the model to large scale.

2.3 Advocacy through partnership with government

An IDNGO which adopts 'partnership' advocacy strategy needs to develop a positive and creative working relationship with the institutions of government; to work with the government in a partnership to establish a concrete project that reflects the values of both the IDNGO and government. After a successfully concrete project (a model) is created, then the IDNGO will work with the government to replicate the model to large scale.

3. NGO advocacy and quality education for disadvantaged children

Education reduces poverty and inequality. It lays the foundation for good governance and effective institutions. Countries with higher levels of education have greater political stability and stronger democratic rights. Yet, despite this, many less developed countries fall short of providing a basic education for all children. Globally, children from the poorest 20% of households are three times more likely to be out of school than children from the wealthiest. It is the poorest children in poor countries that are being left behind.

- More than a third of the world's countries have very low or falling pre-primary enrolment rates.
- 104 million primary school-aged children still do not go to school, 60 per cent of whom are girls.
- Many children are unable to make a successful transition into secondary education
- The poor quality, and lack of inclusiveness of education available in many countries deters families and their children from enrolling in schools or engaging in alternative, basic education and also leads to many children repeating grades or dropping out.
- Conflict and discrimination and a lack of resources remain the biggest hurdles to achieving education for all.
- Exclusion from basic education creates further inequality and marginalisation.

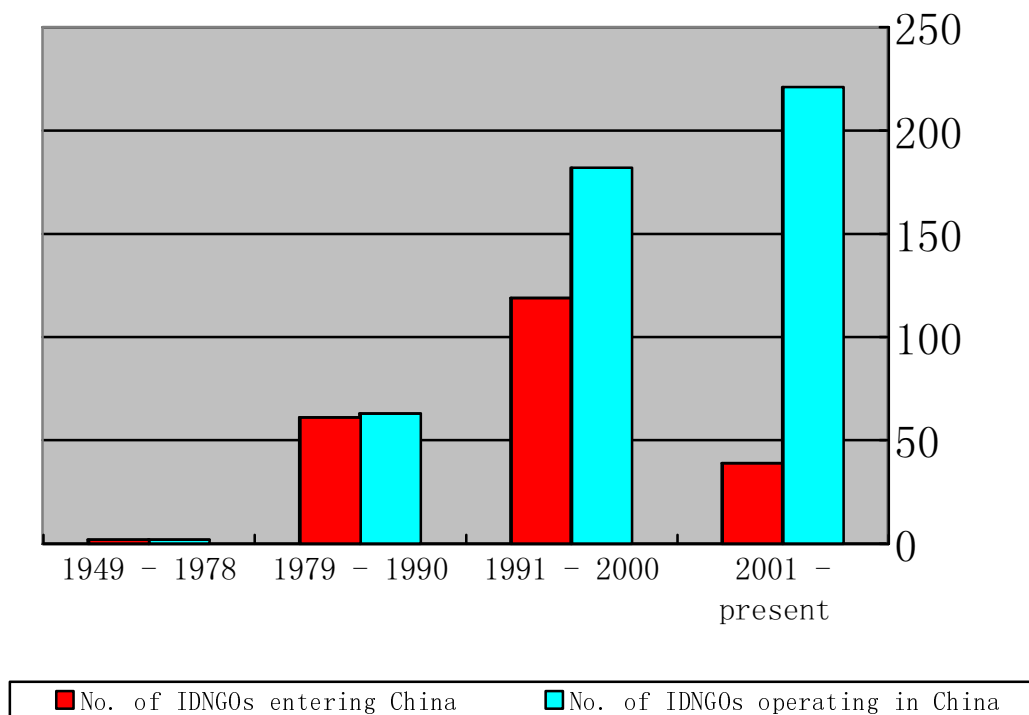
Because of the above shared concerns, IDNGOs are actively working on education in nearly all less developed countries in the world. And many IDNGOs believe influencing government policy and practice through advocacy is one of the most effective strategies to ensure quality education for disadvantaged children.

4. Quality projects with local ownership are effective means of pursuing education advocacy objectives: a case study of Save the Children UK in China

4.1 IDNGOs in China

The western faith-based, humanitarian and philanthropic NGOs have been operating in China since the 19th and early 20th centuries. The establishment of The People's Republic of China (PRC) brought dramatic upheavals in Chinese society in all aspects. IDNGOs have also experienced big changes. Figure 1¹ shows the numbers of IDNGOs that entered mainland China and that operated in mainland China in different time periods.

Figure 1. IDNGOs in Mainland China



It was not until the consolidation of Deng Xiaoping's power in 1978 that China started to open its door to IDNGOs again.

Figure 1 indicates a significant number of IDNGOs entered China from 1978 to 1990. From 1991 to 2000, the number of IDNGOs entering mainland China reached a peak and from 2000

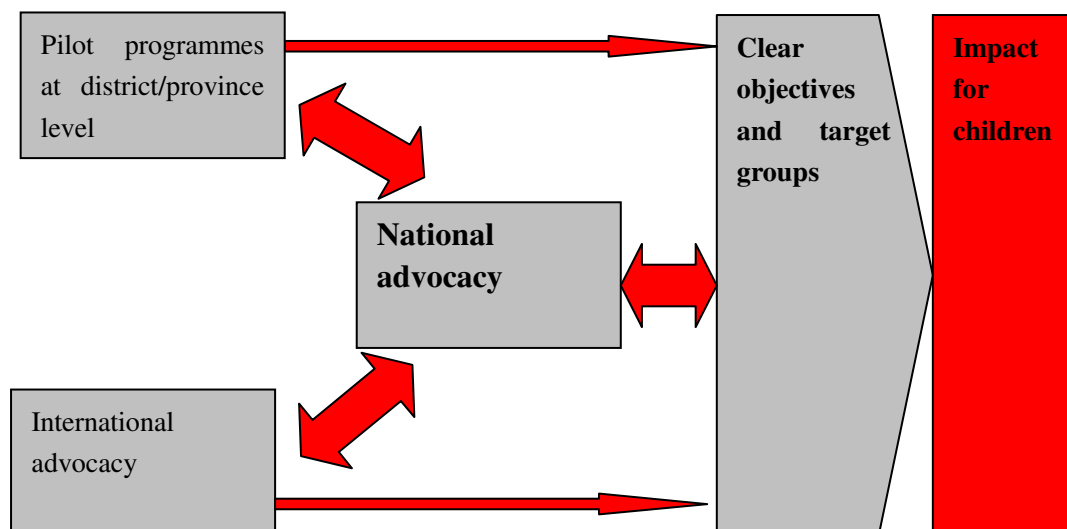
¹ Figure 1 is based on the *China Development Brief (CDB)* database: *Over 200 International NGOs in China*. The CDB data base has included most, but not all IDNGOs in China. This limitation should be taken into consideration in interpreting this figure.

to the present, many IDNGOs are continuing to enter mainland China. The total number of IDNGOs working in mainland China continues to grow. So far, IDNGOs have reached all the twenty-two provinces, five autonomous regions and four municipalities of mainland China and the IDNGOs' activities have included all the areas covered by the eight MDGs.

According to Clark (1997:19), 'maximizing impact is the paramount objective of NGOs'. Due to the huge size of the country and the fact that the Chinese government is strong and influential in all aspects of social life, once an IDNGO can get the government to accept and practice something new, a large number of people's lives will be affected. Realizing this, many IDNGOs are now vigorously involved in advocacy in China. Save the Children UK (SC UK) is one of them.

Founded in 1919, SC UK is an IDNGO striving for child rights. In the late 1980s, SC UK began to operate community development and education projects in China. So far, SC UK has child protection, education and health projects in more than 20 provinces, managed by around 140 professional staff in its Beijing head office and regional programme offices in Anhui, Yunnan, Tibet and Xinjiang.

The diagram below extracted from SC UK working document explains its advocacy approach:



4.2 Yunnan Minority Basic Education Project (YMBEP)

4.2.1 Background

The benefits of drastic economic development seen in China over the last two decades have not fully reached the poorest and most marginalized. Inequality and the wealth gap between the rich and the poor has been growing because a rapid privatisation of social welfare and health care has not accompanied by social safety net required to enable the poor to escape the trap of poverty. So poverty remains a key factor for children denial of access to quality education. Though primary education is free according to government policy, some families still cannot bear the indirect costs they incur. And for children that do attend schools, many drop out due to the poor quality and lack of relevant teaching. Many children from minority groups come to school with no knowledge of Mandarin and they just cannot compete with the children from more financially and educationally advantaged families. As the province that has the most diversity of ethnic minority groups, Yunnan experiences many typical problems that the country faces.

Located at the southwest periphery of China, Yunnan Province has a total area of 394,000 square kilometers. 46% of its population of 42.88 million belong to one of 25 registered minority nationality groups. Many families (especially those from minority nationalities groups) live in poverty in mountain villages, remote from access to basic services. According to Yunnan Provincial Education Department (YPED), despite China's rapid economic development, the provision of adequate education and health services to very remote communities remains difficult. The 5th national census states that the average education period per person in mainland China is 7.6 years, but only 6.3 years in Yunnan. For 5 ethnic minority groups in Yunnan the average education period per person is less than 3 years. Nationally the goal of '9-year-compulsory Universal Education and Elimination of Illiteracy among youth' has been achieved with 85% of the total population, while Yunnan has only achieved a percentage of 71.16%. Low teacher qualification rates, inadequate and ineffective teacher training, poor management of schools, home-school-community gap, inadequate child protection in education, and lack of child participation in education are all problems that undermine the quality of basic education in remote communities in Yunnan Province.

When attempting to realize children's right to education in the world, SC UK considered its

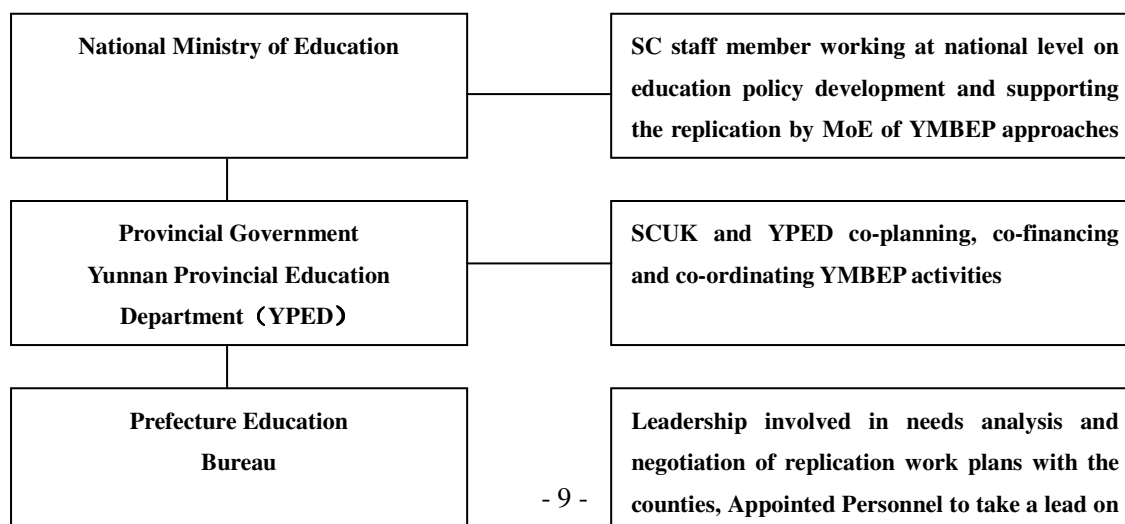
role as a catalyst for positive change. With such an attitude in mind, SC UK started to work with YPED in June 1998 in order to develop a minority basic education project aimed at improving the quality of and access to basic education for children from remote ethnic minority communities.

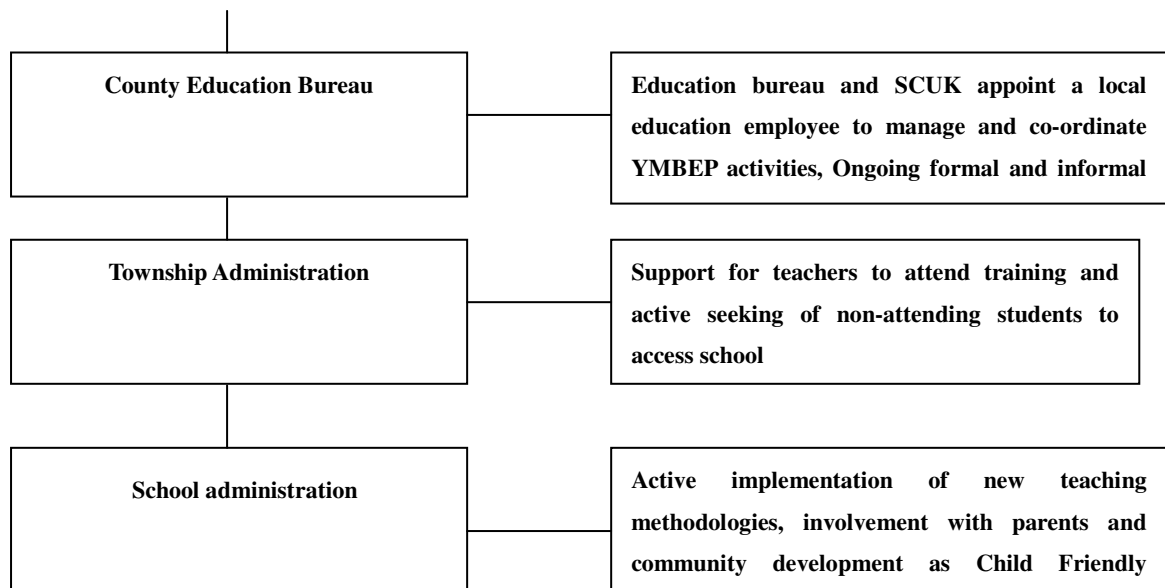
4.2.2 Partnership development

In order to develop a working partnership with the local key government education authority, i.e. YPED, SC UK staff had many meetings with officials from YPED, conducted training workshops for YPED staff and leaders, and organized study tours for YPED officials who are responsible for minority education and basic education. Those meetings, workshops and study tours offered opportunities for both SC UK and YPED to get to know and understand each other. With the facilitating of YPED, SC UK also established working contact with China's central Ministry of Education (MoE) (YPED's superior) and with prefecture and county level education bureaus (YPED's inferiors).

As time went by, a relationship of trust was established between SC UK and YPED. In June 1999, YPED and SC UK signed a *Memorandum of Understanding* and agreed on the basic concept of the YMBEP: 1) YPED and SC UK would design the YMBEP together and write the project funding proposal together. 2) YPED and SC UK would both contribute money and human resources into the YMBEP; 3) the YMBEP would first start with small scale pilot work in three counties. If the pilot work proved to be successful, then YPED would replicate the successful pilot work to the whole of Yunnan Province with continuing technical support from SC UK. The *Memorandum of Understanding* also defined the roles of government education authorities at different levels as below:

Shared responsibility and Involvement in YMBEP Activities





4.2.3 Participation in programme design and proposal writing

IDNGOs usually don't have enough money to finance their projects. So they need to apply for funding from donors, in which case IDNGOs need to submit convincing funding proposals to donors. Once a donor has agreed to fund a project, then the project needs to be implemented strictly following the funding proposal. So the funding proposal is a vital document that defines what a project should be. Many IDNGOs just write up the funding proposals by themselves with, or without consulting the local stakeholders (such as government or direct and indirect beneficiaries). So when a project gets funding and starts to be implemented, only the IDNGO and the donor know what exactly the project is about. The local stakeholders' involvement in the proposal is limited so they don't know the details, and as a result they usually lack any sense of ownership of the project. While in the case of YMBEP, SC UK believed that if the local stakeholders had a strong sense of ownership of the project, then they would more easily be influenced. So SC UK involved YPED and its subordinates in every step of the proposal development. Many activities in the funding proposal were designed by the local teachers and officials. The local education authorities fully understood the project and showed a strong ownership of it. By the time the proposal was finalized, YPED had set up a project leading committee; three pilot prefecture education bureaus had set up project liaison offices and three pilot county education bureaus set up project site offices, with the aim of supporting the effective implementation of the YMBEP.

With the consent of YPED, SC UK submitted the YMBEP funding proposal to DFID. In April 2000, DFID provided GBP 1 million funding for the YMBEP over a five year period.

4.2.4 Pilot and replication

In June 2000, two months after the funding was secured, the local education authorities (whose participation in the design enable them to fully understand the project and to be prepared for implementation) vigorously started to implement the project in the pilot counties. SC UK mainly focused on technical input and financial management support which was also vital to the success of the project. After one and a half years, satisfied and impressed by the YMBEP activities in the pilot sites, which they themselves had managed and coordinated, the county and prefecture education bureau officials started to replicate the project to the townships nearby. SC UK's intensive technical input and effective budget monitoring ensured the quality of the work during this first round of replication.

According to a formal project evaluation conducted in October 2002, the first YMBEP replication was successful. Students, teachers, parents and local education officials in the townships where the project was implemented expressed high appreciation of the YMBEP activities. In April 2004, encouraged by the success of the first round replications, YPED coordinated the three prefecture education bureaus to replicate the project activities from pilot counties to other counties under their administration.

In July 2004, on YPED's initiative, SC UK and YPED worked together to develop a three-year funding proposal to the European Union (EU), with the aim of replicating the YMBEP activities in all the poor remote counties in Yunnan. With the efforts of both parties, EU agreed funding of EUR 750,000, with SC UK providing EUR 250,000 co-financing. The project is now replicating to 70 counties in Yunnan by April 2009.

Through internal interactions within the government education system, the project's success has drawn the attention of the MoE at national level. The Director General of the Minority Nationalities Education Department of the MoE visited one of the project counties in April 2005. As a result of this visit and the regular reports from YPED, the Director General

suggested SC UK replicate the project to other western provinces in China with large minority populations. Encouraged by the Director General, SC UK developed a partnership with China National Research Institute of Education Science (a think tank under the MoE) in February 2006, with the aim of replicating the successful YMBEP activities to seven provinces (or autonomous regions) and influencing MoE's national policy and practice for minority children's education.

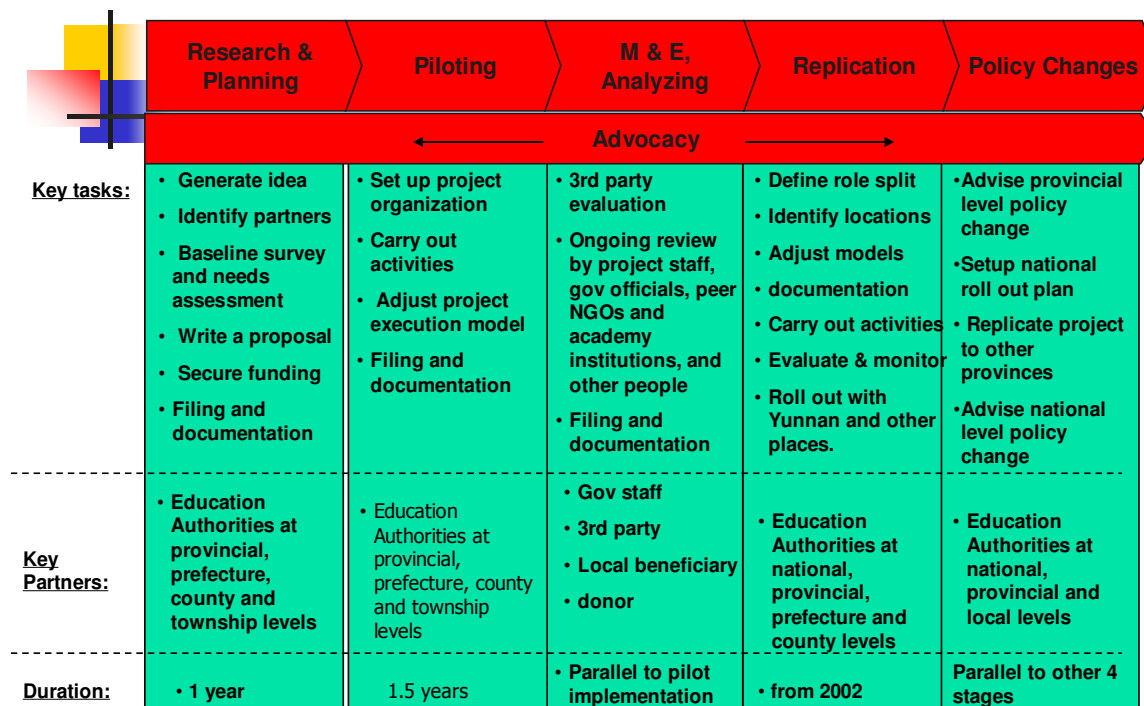
4.2.5 A practical advocacy model

The YMBEP, with a modest total budget, is achieving significant change in the way that minority children are educated in Schools, in the way that training is delivered to teachers, and in the way that Schools relate to communities.

SC UK as an organization recognized the YMBEP case study as a successful advocacy model and analyzed it as below²:

A five-stage advocacy model of YMBEP

Note: There are repetitions, overlapping and intense interacting between different stages.



This diagram indicates how SC UK and YPED closely worked together at every stage of the

² This is a slide from a SC UK internal power point presentation.

YMBEP. Each stage is recognized as part of a holistic advocacy approach which aims at achieving policy changes.

5. Analysis

Literature review shows different advocacy strategies usually end up with different outcomes. Of course there must be variance caused by factors that other than advocacy strategies, such as the qualities of the staff who operate the projects, the local culture or the way local government works etc, so it's hard to simply attribute the outcomes to the advocacy strategies. However, certain examples have shown some strengths and weaknesses of advocacy through preaching, advocacy through demonstrating and advocacy through partnership with government.

The following analysis will show a partnership strategy has certain strengths and why the YMBEP which represented a partnership strategy achieved good outcomes.

5.1 Advocacy as Communication: partnership ensures best quality

It is obvious that the process of advocacy is a process of communication. According to the Encoding/Decoding model of communication proposed by British sociologist Stuart Hall, when people hear or watch something from the public media (i.e. audio and visual means), they tend to understand it in a way which reflects their own position, experiences and interests. As a result, where people involved in communicating do not share common social positions, the understanding of those who receive the message are likely to be different from the intended meaning of those who deliver the message.

In the context of international development, the social positions of IDNGOs are always different from those of government (which is why advocacy is necessary). In a preaching advocacy strategy, the IDNGO communicates its idea to the government primarily through audio and visual means; but without a concrete local model, the IDNGO cannot guarantee that it has got its idea across correctly. The demonstrating strategy includes a concrete local model in the communication, so it ensures the government get a correct message about what the IDNGO expects the government to do. However, because local government does not participate in creating the model, they do not know how to work out such a model, therefore the IDNGO largely relies on audio and visual means to communicate 'how to do it'. So the quality of communication is still not guaranteed. In this approach, the government may know the model is good, but it does not know how to do it by itself, or if it tries to copy the

demonstrated model, it ends up with a distorted one. In a partnership strategy, the IDNGO and government work closely together through every step, so the quality of communication is arguably the best.

5.2 Advocacy as education: partnership ensures best results

Advocacy can be understood as an education process. It is commonly understood in education that learning by doing will achieve the best educational results, followed by learning by observing, while learning by listening often achieves least results. This theory echoes an ancient Chinese proverb:

I hear ... and I forget; I see ... and I remember; I do ...and I understand.

By using preaching advocacy, an IDNGO wants its 'student' (government) to learn everything by listening and reading (including watching video films), so the government tends to 'forget'. A demonstrating advocacy strategy lets the government observe, so it may 'remember' but not necessarily understand. However, a partnership advocacy enables the government to 'learn by doing', so it will end up with the best educational results.

5.3 Practice is the only standard to verify truth

In order to achieve successful advocacy, an IDNGO needs to prove its theory is true. How should an IDNGO do that? When the IDNGO's theory conflicts with government's theory (on most occasions they do), how can one verify whose theory is relevant? What should be the standard for verifying theories? To most people, the most acceptable is: through practice.

If an IDNGO puts its theory into practice and uses concrete evidence to convince the government, then it will have more credibility with government and with the public, and therefore more chance of success. An IDNGO adopting a preaching advocacy strategy does not involve local practice, so according to the theory of 'practice is the standard to verify the truth', government and the public could just ignore it if its theory sounded unreasonable to them. Also, it has no evidence to defend its theory. Both demonstrating and partnership strategies build their advocacy on local practice, so they have stronger positions. Partnership strategy, especially, takes the government through every step of practice so it has the most opportunities to convince the government.

Based on above analysis, it can be argued that an IDNGO that conducts advocacy through

partnership with government has the best chance to be successful when achieving quality education for disadvantaged children. .

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