K4D

Knowledge, evidence and learning for development

Executive summary

Effectiveness of aid interventions to strengthen collective action that facilitate women's political empowerment

Collective action can play an important role in facilitating women's political engagement, and in advancing women's empowerment in formal and informal politics, in low-, middle-, and high-income countries, as shown by significant rigorous evidence[1].

Rapid review

This executive summary summarises a rapid review which synthesises key findings on how aid interventions can strengthen collective action to facilitate women's political empowerment (WPE)[2]. It is based on evidence selected through a rapid, non-systematic literature review[3]. Findings and recommendations included in this summary should therefore be understood in the context of these limitations. Despite the importance of collective action for WPE, there is only **limited and patchy rigorous evidence about aid interventions** in this area in low- and middle-income countries.

Interventions to support collective action that facilitate women's political empowerment

Overall, there have been five **major strands of interventions**: combining multiple types of interventions; providing funding; enabling relationships (e.g. among members of a coalition, or between them and state actors); supporting policy dialogue, advocacy, and campaigning; and leveraging institutions that rely on collective action (e.g. self-help groups). Within all strands, aid actors and their partners have employed many **common types of interventions**, including:

> **Building relationships.** Examples include: convening actors working on similar issues that were not in touch with each other; brokering dialogue between state and civil society actors; and supporting networking among feminist activists campaigning on the same issues in different countries.

> **Developing the capacities** of individuals and groups in organisations, coalitions, or movements for gender equality.

> **Providing financial or technical resources** (directly or through intermediaries) to organisations, coalitions, or movements for gender equality.

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[1] At its most basic, collective action refers to several individuals or groups coming together and collaborating towards a shared goal. Here, it typically refers to joint action undertaken by small or large groups of persons, associations, or social movements working to advance gender equality.

[2] In addition, some successful strengthening of collective action that facilitates WPE involved no foreign aid, and resulted instead from domestic dynamics.

[3] This is a summary of *Effectiveness of aid interventions to strengthen collective action that facilitate women's political empowerment* (Combaz, 2018a). Also see the associated annotated bibliography (Combaz, 2018b).

CASE STUDY

Building bridges to enable success

In Jordan, the Coalition for the Protection of the Family against Violence successfully introduced new legislation on the sensitive issue of protecting women against domestic violence. The British Council was a critical, highly effective contributor to the coalition's work. Working outside project cycles, it created space for the coalition to form, and to choose its issue, members, agenda, and ways of working. The British Council provided funding, coordination, and facilitation at first, and later just facilitated exchanges. Its crucial contribution was building bridges within governmental agencies, and across the divide between governmental and non-governmental actors, including within the coalition. This enabled coalition members to deliberate and find common ground (Tadros, 2011, pp. 21–23).

> **Holding policy dialogue**, for example with government or civil society partners, to create or defend space for collective action and WPE.

The focus of interventions on collective action for WPE has been on women, and to a lesser extent on girls, with some limited attention on involving men or boys.

What makes interventions effective?

The effectiveness of each common strand and each type of intervention is uneven and mixed. Effects have ranged from negative to neutral to positive, although they seem positive in the overall balance. Sustaining positive outcomes, results, and impact is often a challenge. At a general level, combining several types of interventions is more effective than carrying out single interventions. Beyond this, evidence offers hardly any comparative rankings on which types of interventions

have been more effective. Within types of interventions, few specific interventions emerge consistently as more effective than others. One exception is the finding that classic short-term trainings are less effective than sustained peer-based or experiential learning. In addition, there are variations by region and country in the interventions frequently used, and in which interventions were effective. Consequently, **reliable differences in effectiveness do not seem to be between interventions or intervention types, but across them**.

The effects of interventions seem to be highly dependent on two aspects: internally, on the quality of programming; externally, on the political savvy of the supported partners involved in collective action, and on the wider political, economic, social, and cultural conditions. Indeed, all the major types of intervention that aid actors frequently use can be effective if designed, implemented, and combined well, and if enabled by favourable external variables.

Within interventions, positive factors and conditions include aid actors:

> **Deeply knowing the political, economic, social, and cultural context**, and adapting any lessons from other settings to it. Aid actors need to base their work on local dynamics of empowerment, work with locally anchored, representative actors, and account for their own position in the country's political economy.

> **Letting their local partners own and set agendas, collective strategies, and ways of working** on women's empowerment.

> **Working with diverse partners over the long term, through collaborative relationships**. Effective interventions support both feminist groups and a variety of women's groups, especially marginalised women's groups. Simultaneously, they encourage mainstream groups to advance women's rights and gender equality.

> **Ensuring that interventions also engage with men and boys, with families and communities, and with elites**, as a complement to engaging respectively with women and girls, individuals, and grassroots contacts.

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> **Better understanding the links between collective action and the responsiveness of the state**. For example, in politically closed or socially conservative contexts, state policy responds less to public activities by grassroots citizens in formal politics (such as petitions) than to informal efforts that also involve some connections to elites.

> **Identifying and planning for security and political risks**, such as local or foreign actors facing backlash in restrictive or closed political environments.

> **Support multi-dimensional interventions** which aim to simultaneously advance women's empowerment in the personal, social, and political spheres, and to do so at different levels (e.g. local and national). The strategies chosen must address specific barriers to WPE in sequences of successive priorities.

> **Strengthen their partners' collective capacities, over the long term.** They use tailored, collaborative techniques, such as peer-based, experiential, or reflective learning.

In addition, **supporting collective action requires a longer-term, more adaptive approach focused on the process**. Effective aid actors therefore adjust their typical project frameworks (e.g. logical frameworks, theories of change), and depart from them where needed. In particular, they work over longer periods than 3-5 years, which includes providing core, multi-year funding to key partners. They design programmes to focus on problem-solving and local strengths, and to benefit from multiplier effects between different types of empowerment (e.g. economic and political). With the partners they support, they go beyond a focus on outputs or goals. Rather, their design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation pay much attention to partner's *internal* organisation. For example, with coalitions, it is essential to ensure inclusive, collaborative, and democratic functioning, as well as financial transparency among coalition members.

Effective donors recognise and use their own capacity to enact change. For example, they:

> **Improve donors' own practices in gender and accountability**.

> **Are willing to take risks and be creative, while remaining realistic**. In particular, effective donors are willing to support unconventional collective agency, and to nurture collective leadership. For example, they provide space and time for entities that are not used to working together to meet, deliberate, and find common ground.

> **Invest in building relationships among different local actors**.

> **Stay committed** over the long term, beyond the duration of 5-year programmes.

In 'fragile or conflict-affected states', aid actors can effectively **support women's collective participation in peace processes, political negotiations, and institution-building**. In particular, they can provide logistic support to the participation – formal or informal – of women's organisation and networks. They can also engage men and boys for gender equality effectively.

Outside interventions, a number of external factors and conditions affect the effectiveness of interventions, but evidence is scarce on general lessons. What is clear is that the main barrier lies with entrenched gender norms detrimental to women and girls. Other barriers include a lack of democratic political space, and dominant social conservatism and backlash. Conversely, there are a number of positive factors and conditions. Of all these variables, **women activists' ability to work in politically savvy ways is deemed crucial to success**. Having domestic actors that are effective at collective action for gender equality, in both formal and informal spaces, significantly contributes to intervention success. Organisation and collective action by women – especially by marginalised women – are essential in this regard, as is women's ability to make strategic alliances among themselves and with powerful mainstream groups. Other favourable variables include: the mutually reinforcing dynamics within empowerment (economic, political, social, and personal); having political openings; and having support within the state.

Supporting collective action requires a longer-term, more adaptive approach focused on the process of collective action for women's political empowerment.

For more on the information in this summary

Combaz, É. (2018a). *Effectiveness of aid interventions to strengthen collective action that facilitate women's political empowerment – annotated bibliography* (K4D Helpdesk Report 427a). Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/14103

Combaz, É. (2018b). *Effectiveness of aid interventions to strengthen collective action that facilitate women's political empowerment – narrative review* (K4D Helpdesk Report 427). Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/14104

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O'Neil, T., & Domingo, P. (2016). *Women and power. Overcoming barriers to leadership and influence* (Report). Retrieved from Overseas Development Institute (ODI) website: https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/10443.pdf

Tadros, M. (2011). *Working politically behind red lines: Structure and agency in a comparative study of women's coalitions in Egypt and Jordan* (Research Paper 12). Retrieved from University of Birmingham, Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) website: http://publications.dlprog.org/Working%20Politically%20Behind%20Red%20Lines.pdf

KEY WEBSITES

> Association for Women's Rights in Development – Changing their World: https://www.awid.org/publications/changing-their-world-concepts-and-practices-womens-movements

> BRIDGE – Gender and Social Movements: http://socialmovements.bridge.ids.ac.uk/

> Developmental Leadership Programme – Gender and Politics in Practice – Publications: http://www.dlprog.org/gender-and-politics-in-practice/publications.php

> Pathways of Women's Empowerment: http://archive.ids.ac.uk/pathwaysofempowerment/www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/index.html

> UN Women – Women's Leadership and Political Participation: http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation

> UNDP – Research and Publications – Gender Equality: http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/library.html?start=0&sort=date&view=cards&tag=topics:gender-equality