Finding and following the natural pathways in advocacy evaluation
No Royal Road: Finding and following the natural pathways in advocacy evaluation

Jim Coe and Rhonda Schlangen

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Summary

There’s a tension at the heart of advocacy, and advocacy evaluation, between wanting clear answers and the inherent uncertainties around how social and political change really happens.

The Greek mathematician Euclid is said to have replied to King Ptolemy’s desire for a quick route to knowledge that “There is no Royal Road to geometry.” Like the king, we might want advocacy, and advocacy MEL, to be simpler and easier to navigate.

There’s nothing linear about the experience of advocacy; it operates within a complex web of interacting factors and relationships, and change can emerge and cascade in unexpected ways. At the same time, advocates and their supporters want to understand whether what they’re doing is making a difference. Monitoring and evaluation is intended to support that understanding.

The desire to be able to expect specific results, and then to be able to demonstrate those results, creates a strong and enduring pressure. So there’s a push toward planning that is grounded in assumptions of control and predictability and in the ability to influence events. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) often tends to then follow this logic, playing to a (mainly vain) hope that it’s possible to measure “what really happened” and allocate credit for this with precision and certainty.

This all operates counter to the realities of social and political change and the role that advocates can play in highly complex, inter-connected, often volatile environments.

The inherent characteristics of advocacy make it resistant to control, predictability, and certainty. Approaches that fail to recognize this can squeeze out space for approaches that are truly appropriate to advocacy contexts and that can generate meaningful learning and drive advocacy effectiveness. MEL should reflect the realities of social and political change in ways that support more effective advocacy, optimizing the limited resources available.

We use the term advocacy to refer to all forms of influencing. This view of advocacy goes beyond efforts to influence specific policies. It includes approaches that seek longer-term, more diffuse, more transformational change through challenging dominant power relations by augmenting marginalized communities’ voices and through reframing debates and seeking shifts in social norms.

There are different implications for MEL depending upon the scope and scale of the changes being sought.
Thinking about more discrete advocacy interventions — aimed at achieving incremental change as part of a defined policy process, for example — there may be opportunity to robustly assess advocacy contribution and make sense of the result. Although, even at this scale, conclusions can rarely be definitive. As efforts at driving change become more diffuse, involve more actors, and have more transformational goals — as with broad-based movements aimed at achieving systemic changes in the overall direction of policy and of society — we need a radically different approach to thinking about and assessing what effective advocacy looks like.

Clear answers, certain judgments, and simple tools are appealing, but they ultimately aren’t going to result in good representations of reality, nor will they provide the knowledge advocates need to develop their effectiveness.

To try to help do that, this paper proposes ideas for adjusting how we think about and approach advocacy MEL.

**Six changes to how we approach advocacy MEL**

Fundamentally, advocacy MEL needs to accommodate the uncertainty, unpredictability, and complexity of how social and political change actually happens. While there is no “royal road,” the paper aims to raise practical solutions for advocates, evaluators, managers, and funders to approach advocacy MEL in a way that makes it credible, reliable, and instructive.

Collectively, we should:

1. **Better factor in uncertainty:**
   Evidence related to advocacy is often subjective and rarely definitive. We can’t reasonably expect to reach certainty in our conclusions, and we should accept and make explicit that there is an inevitable element of uncertainty in judgments reached. Thinking probabilistically and bringing rigor to interpretation as well as to information gathering are more robust evaluation practices suited to advocacy. They can better factor in uncertainty and draw more credible conclusions about the plausible connections between advocacy and change.
2 **Plan for unpredictability:**
Most advocacy takes place in contexts that make results unpredictable and in which the level of control that a single actor or group of actors can exert over the situation is highly limited. Theories of change and other planning approaches that assume a predictable course and that overestimate the influence of an individual actor can miss essential analysis of how change might happen. Grounding the strategy in the root cause of the problem and designing iterative, deliberative processes that surface and challenge notions about how change happens can support good advocacy strategizing, which can then underpin good planning and monitoring.

3 **Refocus contribution to be more in line with the realities of how social change comes about:**
Contribution is combinational and dispositional; multiple interacting causes make an effect more likely. Recognizing this, we should shift the lens from the “amount” of contribution a single actor makes to an understanding of the typologies of the different actors contributing to change. This can help us better understand how a campaign worked and how to structure more effective advocacy in the future.

4 **Parse outcomes and their significance:**
Advocacy happens in widely varying contexts, working against all sorts of different prevailing winds, so an outcome being achieved (or not) gives only a partial picture. To understand significance and relevance, we should parse outcomes for how much of a “successful result” it is given the context, how it was achieved, what trade-offs may have been involved, and how sustainable it is. It also means looking across different dimensions of change to understand the wider context, such as considering shifts in power dynamics, developments within civil society capacity, and changes in policy. Such reflections can support better judgments about progress, particularly when objectives are ambitious and transformational.

5 **Break down barriers to engaging advocates in MEL:**
Advocates are expert observers but also not always enthusiastic contributors of MEL. For evaluators, the first question should be, “How can we equip practitioners to make good decisions?” The key contribution MEL specialists can make is to find the best ways to create space for busy people to reflect critically on their work, draw out information, and apply the learning to future work in a timely way. This includes addressing cultural and management challenges to embedding advocacy MEL.
Think differently about how we evaluate more transformational advocacy:

As a rule of thumb, the more ambitious the scope of advocacy work, the less measurable the outcomes and the less clear and definable the contribution of any one actor or group of actors. When it comes to more transformational advocacy, aimed at tackling deep-rooted structural barriers to change, looking for contributions to a set of defined outcomes is looking at the wrong thing. But we do know enough about the discipline of advocacy to be able to set some parameters around what fitness for purpose would look like (i.e., the characteristics that make an organization or group likely to be effective, such as the quality of relationships held and the focus on learning). These can provide an alternative set of metrics to traditional approaches to assessment that rely on claims around contribution to outcomes.

Exploring these steps could help continue to move advocacy MEL forward toward approaches that integrate uncertainty and accept the unpredictability of advocacy and, in doing so, help orient MEL to support more useful and reliable learning, as well as contribute to better advocacy.
Introduction

As organizations develop advocacy approaches, the question “Is what we are doing making a difference?” becomes increasingly salient. This has naturally led to growing interest and investment in monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) of advocacy.

This interest has generated a plethora of resources and ideas to draw on and has helped introduce greater rigor in advocacy MEL approaches. This has been positive in many ways.

But the purpose of this paper is to move forward debates about how MEL can best support and foster effective advocacy. To do that, we hope to provoke thinking about directions that advocacy MEL has been following and the assumptions that underpin them.

In particular, we explore ways to navigate the tension between wanting clear answers about investments in advocacy and the inherent uncertainties around how social and political change really happens.

Advocates, evaluators, and funders all recognize that tension in theory. This paper aims to make the case that rather than trying to evade these tensions, as some current MEL approaches try to do, we should focus on approaches that truly embrace them.

The Greek mathematician Euclid is said to have replied to King Ptolemy’s desire for a quick route to knowledge that “There is no Royal Road to geometry.”

Like the king, we might want things to be simpler and easier to navigate. We might want clear answers, certain judgments, and simple tools. If advocacy were more straightforward, life would be easier for everyone. We would have a sense of control, we could plan with more confidence, and we could demonstrate value more easily. Advocacy would be a simpler discipline, its rationale more communicable, and it would be more marketable to key stakeholders including senior managers and potential funders.

Notions of predictability and certainty are attractive to funders and senior managers, who (naturally) want to be able to account for investments made and the results achieved and who may be uncomfortable about more speculative programs of work. But more generally, too, psychological research shows that a sense of not being in control creates dissonance, is stressful, and is something everyone is inclined to try to avoid.

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1 In this paper we use “advocacy” and “campaign” as synonymous terms referring to all forms of influencing.


“We explore ways to navigate the tension between wanting clear answers about investments in advocacy and the inherent uncertainties around how social and political change really happens”
And so there’s a push toward planning that is grounded in assumptions of control and predictability, and in the ability to influence events, that does not reflect the realistic scope of influence of one actor in a complex ecosystem. Evaluation often tends to then follow this logic and in formal external evaluations plays to a (not well-founded) hope that it’s possible to precisely measure “what really happened.”

But wanting that to be the case doesn’t make it so. We need to adjust our expectations to the realities.

The appeal of (the illusion of) control may be pushing toward thinking around advocacy MEL that fails fully to incorporate and address the messiness. By approaching advocacy MEL in ways that don’t reflect the realities of social and political change, we miss opportunities for MEL that supports more effective advocacy.

It’s good to be rigorous and systematic. But, we argue, the point of more deliberate processes shouldn’t be to eliminate doubt. Instead, rather than trying to find ways to sidestep the realities of conflictual social change, evaluators and advocates should be taking them as the starting point. We need to find ways to work with the challenges of the context, not ways to avoid facing them. Not doing so risks operating on the basis of inaccurate or misinterpreted information, confusing specificity with certainty. The opportunity is for MEL to better serve advocacy, and for limited MEL resources — including the time of advocates and evaluators — to be used in ways that are more likely to contribute to more relevant and reliable learning about advocacy.

In this paper, the authors outline the argument that advocacy MEL needs to accommodate the uncertainty, the unpredictability, and the complexity around how social and political change actually happens. While there is no “royal road,” the paper aims to raise practical solutions for advocates, evaluators, and funders to approach MEL in a way that makes it credible, reliable, and instructive. It argues that, collectively, we should:

1  **Better factor in uncertainty:**
   Evidence related to advocacy is often subjective and rarely definitive. We can’t reasonably expect to reach certainty in our conclusions, and we should accept and make explicit that there is an inevitable element of uncertainty in judgments reached. Thinking probabilistically and bringing rigor to interpretation as well as to information gathering are more robust evaluation practices suited to advocacy that can better factor in uncertainty and draw more credible conclusions about the plausible connections between advocacy and change.
2 **Plan for unpredictability:**
Most advocacy takes place in contexts that make results unpredictable and in which the level of control that a single actor or group of actors can exert over the situation is highly limited. Theories of change and other planning approaches that assume a predictable course and that overestimate the influence of an individual actor can miss essential analysis of how change might happen. Grounding the strategy in the root cause of the problem and designing iterative, deliberative processes that surface and challenge notions about how change happens can support good advocacy strategizing, which can then underpin good planning and monitoring.

3 **Refocus “contribution” to be more in line with the realities of how social change comes about:**
Contribution is combinational and dispositional; multiple interacting causes make an effect more likely. Recognizing this, we should shift the lens from the amount of contribution a single actor makes to an understanding of the typologies of the various actors contributing to change. This can help us better understand how a campaign worked and how to structure more effective advocacy in the future.

4 **Parse outcomes and their significance:**
Advocacy happens in widely varying contexts, working against all sorts of prevailing winds, so whether a certain outcome was achieved gives only a partial picture. To understand significance and relevance, we should parse outcomes for how successful the result is given the context, how it was achieved, what trade-offs may have been involved, and how sustainable it is. It also means looking across different dimensions of change to understand the wider context, such as considering shifts in power dynamics, developments within civil society capacity, and changes in policy. Such reflections can support better judgments about progress, particularly when objectives are ambitious and transformational.

5 **Break down barriers to engaging advocates in MEL:**
Advocates are expert observers but also not always enthusiastic contributors of MEL. For evaluators, the first question should be “How can we equip practitioners to make good decisions?” The key contribution MEL specialists can make is to find the best ways to create space for busy people to reflect critically on their work, draw out information, and apply the learning to future work in a timely way. This includes addressing cultural and management challenges to embedding advocacy MEL as well as designing tools to support rather than circumvent them. Essentially, advocates need to think more like evaluators and evaluators need to think more like advocates.
Think differently about how we evaluate more transformational advocacy:

As a rule of thumb, the more ambitious the scope of advocacy work is, the less measurable are the outcomes and the less clear and definable the contribution of any one actor or group of actors. When it comes to more transformational advocacy, aimed at tackling deep-rooted structural barriers to change, looking for contribution to a set of defined outcomes is looking at the wrong thing. But we do know enough about the discipline of advocacy to be able to set some parameters around what fitness for purpose would look like (i.e., the characteristics that make an organization or group likely to be effective, such as the quality of relationships held and the focus on learning). These can provide an alternative set of metrics to traditional approaches to assessment that rely on claims around contribution to outcomes.

Exploring these steps could help continue to move advocacy MEL from traditional approaches that assume certainty in the predictability and the measurability of advocacy to approaches that enable better advocacy.
What is advocacy, and why is it unpredictable and uncertain?

Advocacy, is, in essence, about getting others to think or behave differently. Advocacy happens in contested contexts where power, personal relationships, and history determine how people respond to influencing efforts. Understanding these dynamics is central to evaluation. But these dynamics aren’t stable, and they are not all knowable. This is where advocacy meets the limits of predictability and certainty. Factors that create unpredictability and uncertainty in advocacy include that:

The processes that the advocacy is aimed at influencing are typically not controlled. Even with a (relatively) simple form of advocacy—influencing policymaking that takes place within prescribed processes—timing and sub-processes may shift, and rules and norms that typically govern such processes can be manipulated or upended. (And likely the more contested the issue, the more prone processes are to manipulation.) Advocacy to achieve more transformational change, such as changes in social norms and shifts in power, has even less definable boundaries.

The reaction of the individuals the advocacy is seeking to influence is not predictable. Here, history, power, and relationships among actors and the interplay with other issues also govern how those individuals respond. We can make reasoned judgments about likely responses to particular interventions, but even so they may not garner the expected response.

And what influenced a decision cannot be definitively understood. Change, or the absence of it, for example, will be influenced by motivations known only to individuals, if even them. Advocates can plan to influence decisions based on their best available intelligence, but decision-makers may even find it difficult to explain their motivations even if they want to (which they often won’t).

System states can flip, often unexpectedly. How a particular issue plays out will depend on the specific political and social context, and at different times there will be different opportunities and constraints. Contexts can change very rapidly and in ways that in most advocacy situations are essentially impossible to factor into planning with any reasonable degree of confidence.

Because of these and other factors, there are, inevitably, aspects of advocacy and change that can’t be definitively understood.
1. Accommodating uncertainty

It’s typically very difficult to pin specific changes to the influences of particular advocacy efforts. The precise linkages between cause and effect are uncertain. »
This starting principle is widely accepted rhetorically but not always acted on in practice. While robust evaluative practices and critical thinking can help sharpen focus about the plausible connections between advocacy and change, we can’t reasonably expect to reach certainty in our conclusions. We should accept (and make explicit) that there is an inevitable element of uncertainty in judgments reached. This points to the need to think probabilistically and to bring rigor to interpretation as well as to information gathering.

Where we are now

In some advocacy contexts, there may be some reliable, definitive evidence available — where there is a discrete, defined decision and a documentation trail behind it, for example. But in most cases evidence is simply not conclusive and conclusions can be contested.

It’s important to be systematic and rigorous in gathering evidence and identifying the various factors and influences that came into play. Part of this invariably involves gathering stakeholder input, which is often the source of valuable information and insight. However, in drawing on the viewpoints of different stakeholders about what happened and why, it’s typically the case that:

- In highly contested and politicized contexts, people don’t tend to have strong incentives to tell the full truth as they understand it.
- Any individual will only have a limited, subjective view of the situation, between which views it’s typically not possible to choose; each has its own internal validity and rationale.
- Motivations are in any case themselves only partially consciously knowable. This is well established in behavioural psychology, for example in that “actions and emotions can be primed by events of which you are not even aware” and because of the biases that create a disjunction between the experiencing self and the remembering self.1

Therefore, reaching conclusions on the basis of available evidence typically means having to make sense of subjective (and not always reliable) information, with a range of perspectives on the same campaign or advocacy moment. Doubt should be incorporated and respected. We should be much more comfortable and explicit in recognizing and factoring in the barriers to certainty and in embracing uncertainty as a result.

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Different perspectives on the same campaign or event

There can always be (and basically always are) different perspectives on the same campaign or advocacy achievement. It is not generally possible to choose objectively between. As identifies in Analytic Activism⁴ in relation to Occupy Wall Street (OWS):

“Was OWS successful? Was it powerful? What does winning look like for OWS? Is it the complete overthrow of the global finance system? Is it the prefigurative political goal of exposing a wider public to alternative perspectives on wealth and inequality? Is a set of policy outcomes that … curtail the unfettered power of financial elites? Or is it the empowering and life-changing experience of OWS participants themselves? Different scholars and activists cluster around each of these definitions. Some view OWS as a dramatic success that signals a shift in 21st century politics. Others view it as a flash point that eventually spluttered and failed. How we define success will determine how we ultimately view the work of OWS activists. But there is no common definition, nor will there be. The debate over the impact of social movements rests on an unstable foundation since the very nature of impact is subject to debate.”

Each judgment has its own internal validity and rationale and can be supported with a plausible case.

The value that MEL brings is not to interrogate all the different perspectives and trawl through all the evidence to choose among them in order to finally reveal the truth. It’s about reaching a defensible judgment, weighing up how well the evidence supports different perspectives, and using that to stimulate reflection and support learning.

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Occupy_Wall_Street_Crowd_2011_Shankbone.JPG
There’s a tendency to downplay the inherent uncertainties that make reaching definitive conclusions problematic. This reflects a concern that avowals of uncertainty somehow lessen the value of conclusions reached and/or the analysis behind them. The opposite is true: A group of judgments that have accompanying confidence ratings conveys a lot more information and represents the state of affairs much more accurately than a group of judgments that seemingly carries the same high certainty (but doesn’t actually). As the authors of Getting to Maybe put it, people seeking funding support to achieve social change “often are required to pretend to know more than it is possible to know.” And this pretense is squeezing out space for meaningful reflection.

**Strategies to align with needs and realities**

**Consider the best interpretation of information by reviewing the strength of evidence and the broader credibility of the case**

Making collective sense of information and extracting useful meaning from it involves thinking about:

- The quality of the evidence (amount and consistency), and
- The credibility of the case (vs. what we would expect, from theory and practice).

This means looking at a broad sweep of information that can be taken up as evidence and used in analysis. As the graphic below outlines, they are:

- Raw data and information: These are various details about activities of advocates or others, relevant developments, or other information that is documented and can be verified. This information can illustrate things such as the content and magnitude of activities but does not in itself provide evidence of influence.

- Filtered information: This is typically the type of information that a campaign might track or report to funders. Information of this nature may also be reconstructed from multiple sources as part of evaluation processes. It can provide highly valuable insight when it comes from people closest to the advocacy work or issue who are necessarily well-informed and draw on deep and rich experience. But this evidence also is limited because it is necessarily not comprehensive, filtering out and elevating information according to the perspective and biases of the authors — and, particularly in the case of funder reports, oriented to a particular audience.

“It makes sense to supplement information with informed opinion and to filter the aggregated evidence through the lens of interpretation”

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• Informed opinion: Views, based on observation or participation, about what happened, the influences involved, and the significance of developments vary according to the positioning of different actors. Opinions from individuals with an informed perspective about advocacy effectiveness and influence offer critical insight into reactions to an advocacy effort. On their own, they are also necessarily subjective but aggregated can provide a helpful composite picture.

The three types of evidence—raw data and information, filtered information, and opinion—taken in combination and systematically reviewed, layered through an interpretive prism of evaluators and advocates (or whomever is involved in the analysis), can typically support robust (although not definitive) conclusions being reached.

The ideal, and the hope, might be that information alone provides definite answers, but in practice that’s very rarely the case. In the social sciences more generally, “the typical evidence collected is more like shell casings than a smoking gun”⁶ — and this is especially the case in advocacy, given its particular uncertainties and unpredictabilities. It makes sense to supplement information with informed opinion and to filter the aggregated evidence through the lens of interpretation.

Figure 1:
Sources to draw on in evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw data and information</th>
<th>Filtered information</th>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Judgement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raw data or information that is verifiably accurate – but that in isolation may reveal little</td>
<td>Factual information filtered through an analytical prism that may help point to certain conclusions – but rarely definitely</td>
<td>Different perspectives that reveal understanding of what happened – but that are necessarily subjective</td>
<td>Aggregated analysis of all evidence, taking into account considerations of its credibility and plausibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collecting the information carefully and systematically analyzing it reveals how strong and consistent it is and can form a starting point for identifying perspectives and biases that may be at play.

But it’s also relevant to consider how well theory and past evidence supports a particular viewpoint. For example, looking at precedents and drawing any conclusions from that about what might, and might not, influence specific decision-makers. Benchmarking against comparable campaigns would allow for more robust comparison over time. Examining whether available relevant theory, such as policy or behavioral change theory, is consistent with conclusions reached in the specific evaluation effort also can help support the robustness of results.

This approach emphasizes a combination of the strength of evidence and the wider credibility of the case being advanced. It requires both good information and good interpretation of that information.

The challenges of getting to certainty in advocacy don’t invalidate the effort to review and learn. They make it more important. And it remains possible to make reasoned, defensible judgments based on the best evidence, filtered through an expert interpretation. But the usefulness will often come in the quality of the interpretation and the discourse this generates more than the purity of the research method employed.

“The challenges of getting to certainty in advocacy don’t invalidate the effort to review and learn. They make it more important”
Making a plausible case for influence despite lack of conclusive evidence

Consider an advocacy campaign aimed at convincing government officials in Zambia to expand funding for programs that integrate reproductive health care with HIV/AIDS treatment services. The campaign was structured around a set of tactics that had been used to positive effect in past campaigns (involving production of briefing papers about the problem, meetings with policymakers, and some media outreach) by a coalition of advocacy organizations. In those campaigns, ultimately, government officials made decisions that supported the campaign’s objectives.

In evaluating the role of the campaign in these decisions, there was evidence that the campaign had reached and engaged the same policymakers who were responsible for making decisions related to the campaign’s goals. Campaigners also tracked positive and negative communications from policymakers and how the campaign responded to challenges and questions from them. This and other information populated a timeline that correlated campaign activities and subsequent developments. There were also some gaps; the few decision-makers who agreed to be interviewed were also close allies to some of the organizations involved in the campaign, and they argued that the campaign had been influential but were not familiar with the campaign’s actions or messages.

There was also some good past evidence that the officials involved were at least potentially receptive to the combination of approaches deployed in this campaign and that they had in the past taken into account inputs from the actors involved in this campaign, which indicated that claims of access and influence in this case had at least some plausibility. Based on this history (and with no reason for thinking that this dynamic of influence had subsequently shifted), there was a high theoretical credibility that the campaign could have positively contributed to the governments in question making the desired decisions on this occasion, too.

Overlaying this analysis strengthened the case that the campaign had had an influence notwithstanding some gaps in evidence in direct support of that conclusion.
Be explicit in setting out levels of confidence in findings and analysis

Some judgments will be more strongly justified than others. To delineate these, the authors suggest that evaluators consider being explicit in their level of confidence in their findings and that any summary analysis should capture the fact that the judgment reached may have a very strong basis or may be more speculative.

Taking a note from social scientist Philip Tetlock’s *Superforecasting,* which explores judgment and prediction, we should experiment with using a standard lexicon to set out the level of uncertainty to help make sense of the available information. (As Tetlock notes, “Few things are either certain or impossible. And ‘maybe’ isn’t all that informative. Your uncertainty dial needs more than three settings.”)

So, drawing on Tetlock’s analysis, we propose a six-item scale when presenting conclusions in advocacy MEL — such as around advocacy influence — along the following lines:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Levels of confidence in conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CERTAIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRONGLY LIKELY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROBABLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSSIBLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGHLY UNLIKELY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFINITELY NOT THE CASE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the categories of Certain and Definitely Not are more like book ends than categories that would be in regular use, given how rare it is for there to be no room for doubt.

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In distilling judgments, we should present a summary narrative explanation indicating levels of confidence in the conclusion. This could include:

- A summary of the evidence and analysis underpinning the judgment
- Confidence in the assertion – using standard language that goes beyond "Maybe;" and
- Commentary on possible alternative perspectives

The following table illustrates an example of a set of conclusions about Sightsavers’ Put Us in the Picture campaign that called on the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) to develop a strategy for disability-inclusive development. It is drawn from an evaluation of the campaign and used with kind permission.8

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### Table 2: Summary Analysis of Sightsavers’ Influence and Contribution to DFID’s commitment to developing a disability framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of analysis</th>
<th>Evidence basis</th>
<th>Confidence in the assertion</th>
<th>Commentary on alternative perspectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NGOs played a contributory role in ensuring the parliamentary Select Committee inquiry took place when it did.</td>
<td>Our analysis is that the Select Committee had been considering holding an inquiry into disability and development issues over a long period. NGOs had been calling for this, contributing a groundswell of opinion that made holding an inquiry more likely. Increasing prioritization of disability in international development (post-MDG) processes helped, too, while the receptiveness of several IDC members to an inquiry was decisive in the NGOs’ aim being achieved.</td>
<td>STRONGLY LIKELY</td>
<td>We don’t have sufficient information to fully understand the historical roots of the inquiry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Select Committee report was the critical moment in influencing DFID to make a positive commitment to developing a disability-inclusive program of work.</td>
<td>This was universally cited as highly significant, the key moment in the campaign. This report, and the recommendation that DFID should develop a disability strategy, led to ministerial support being activated, as DFID’s response to the Select Committee report confirms.</td>
<td>STRONGLY LIKELY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sightsavers was influential in helping to shape the recommendation that the Select Committee made for DFID to develop a disability strategy.</td>
<td>The Select Committee report itself cited strong input from civil society, including Sightsavers, that DFID should develop a disability strategy. This is likely to have bolstered the Select Committee’s own decision to make this recommendation. More than one source identified that some key references in the Select Committee report can be attributed to Sightsavers.</td>
<td>STRONGLY LIKELY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sightsavers was influential in shaping the content of DFID’s Disability Framework.</td>
<td>Differences between early thinking within DFID and the content of the final framework suggest that DFID was open to outsider inputs, including from NGOs, during the development process.</td>
<td>PROBABILE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sightsavers’ public campaigning, particularly through engagement with MPs, added to the overall influencing approach.</td>
<td>Some argued that public campaigning helped give momentum to the issue, and some well-placed sources acknowledge that having MPs raise issues was helpful in keeping DFID’s attention on a positive resolution.</td>
<td>POSSIBLE</td>
<td>Some questioned whether the numbers of the public involved were sufficient to really make much of a difference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sightsavers was the leading NGO in calling for and influencing the content of the disability framework.</td>
<td>The financial and human resources Sightsavers invested over time was significantly more than the resources committed by others, and its attention to the issue more sustained and consistent, as evidenced by the inputs and analysis delivered in this time. The quality of Sightsavers’ contribution was universally acknowledged.</td>
<td>STRONGLY LIKELY</td>
<td>Some characterized Sightsavers’ role more as being in the forefront of an already-united group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Planning for unpredictability

Most advocacy takes place in contexts that make results unpredictable and in which the level of control that a single actor or group of actors can exert over the situation is highly limited."
This presents a particular planning challenge for an organization, campaign, or group of advocates thinking about how best to use their particular assets to help effect change. This is the starting point for most advocacy campaigns, and “theory of change” has become a popular term, broadly interpreted, to express this general thinking.

In its most thoughtful form — iterative, deliberative processes that surface and challenge notions about how change happens — theory of change processes can support good advocacy strategizing, which can then underpin good planning and monitoring.

But theories of changes that optimistically assume a predictable course, and that overestimate the influence of a single actor within the complex ecosystem of change, ultimately miss the very information that could make them useful and end up having limited or no explanatory power.

Where we are now

What’s your theory of change?

This question is so ubiquitous now that querying whether it is a meaningful to ask could be considered heresy.

But there are widely different interpretations of the term. It can mean a variant of a linear logic model showing in simplistic terms how a program or advocacy campaign will deliver change. It can be used to describe a complex map of influences affecting an issue. It can simply be a synonym for “strategy.” And processes for developing theories of change may be highly participatory, involving stakeholders, outsourced to consultants, or some combination of these.

So instead of whether one has a theory of change, the question should be: How good is your theory of change? Or: How useful is it?

 Anything that falls under the banner of theory of change in advocacy should:

- Accept the reality that advocacy takes place within a complex and dynamic context and doesn’t fall into the trap of implying that one actor (i.e., the one producing the theory of change) drives change;

- Factor in unpredictability and support speedy adaption in response to good, real-time intelligence about changes to the context and through continuous testing and recalibrating;

- Recognize the friction involved in creating change (and doesn’t simply set out a representation of how one thing leads seamlessly to another);

“Theories of changes that optimistically assume a predictable course, and that overestimate the influence of a single actor within the complex ecosystem of change, ultimately miss the very information that could make them useful”

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2. Planning for unpredictability

- Demarcate between a simplified representation of reality and the complexities of change in real life; and
- Make the thinking visible by articulating the hypotheses and assumptions behind the change process, which helps to identify where the most uncertainty lies and therefore the greatest opportunities for learning.

**Strategies to align with needs and realities**

**Work from the problem to the response**

Theories of change often start from, and then institutionalize, the understanding that there are ripples of influence that flow out from a single actor’s interventions toward a long-term goal.

This could be characterized as a Ptolomaic approach to planning, in which the campaign is situated at the center of things (the starting point for all subsequent change). It implies levels of control and influence that almost never exist, given all the other actors and factors in the mix.

Grounding the strategy in the root cause of the problem, rather than starting from the specific interventions of a single actor, supports a more Copernican view of change. This orientation places a particular intervention within a constellation of influencing factors, recognizing that in most cases any contribution one actor can make is very unlikely to be center stage.

Within this broader perspective, the advocacy strategy can hone in on the specific decision-makers whose actions can address the problem, as well as the barriers and incentives that influence the actions of those specific individuals or groups.

This is a corrective lens, shifting from an approach that places advocates’ inputs and objectives at the center to one where planning starts with the influences that drive a particular problem and the existing barriers to action and then places an actor or group of actors within this, with each asking:

1. What is the current balance of incentives to action/inaction?
2. Which are the most important factors preventing action on this issue?
3. On which of these are we best placed to intervene?

“Grounding the strategy in the root cause of the problem, rather than starting from the specific interventions of a single actor, supports a more Copernican view of change”
The balance of incentives and barriers will vary according to the issue and the target. However, for a typical advocacy campaign aimed at influencing a particular decision-maker, for example, the kind of factors that come into play to create positive action are likely to be along the following sorts of lines:
The same Ptolomaic dynamic often prevails in evaluations that seek to isolate the role of one specific factor, about which a lot is known (the campaign), without giving due attention to other factors. But isolating one advocacy effort from other influences can convey a false sense of influence (and certainty about that influence) and can easily lead to misrepresenting the wider dynamics of change.
Stemming from this, a more useful approach to developing learning for future advocacy would be to focus on issues, and how they were resolved as the starting point, and assessing the role of funding and the investments in the context of that wider perspective. So, the ordering of questions during monitoring and evaluation would be:

1. What happened?
2. What were the key influencing factors driving the outcomes, and what were the key barriers to those outcomes?
3. Within these, what role did the actors under review play?

**Move from static ToC graphic to dynamic strategy**

Dynamism and adaptation are requisites of effective advocacy. Theories of change that are predicated on predictability run counter to this.

First, an advocacy theory of change should not be carved in stone; they should grow and change as programs learn. This means regularly revisiting the advocacy theory, critically reviewing its elements and assumptions, and adjusting in response. This is hard to do with a beautiful graphic that was subjected to multiple sign offs. Ideally, advocates would regularly use their theory of change in this more fluid way, documenting the learning and changes along the way. This documentary breadcrumb trail would be a terrific resource for subsequent evaluations.

Following from this, planning and monitoring systems and processes also need to support the learning, feedback loops, and experimentation that enables adaptive management. The authors recognize that making this shift is challenging. Campaigns that involve large coalitions can be difficult to shift because doing so requires deliberation and consensus. Advocacy can be constrained by funding or donor planning and reporting requirements. And involving advocates in more reflective processes and better monitoring requires both time and resources.

But, importantly, starting with a contextualized, dynamic strategy creates the conditions that can in turn support more adaptive advocacy in response to good (real-time) intelligence about changes to the context. From there, essentially, the challenge is simply stated but hard to enact in practice. Advocates need to think more like evaluators and evaluators need to think more like advocates.
We also need to recognize that not all advocacy needs or benefits from such structured planning or processes. The push for structure and adherence to certain norms can undermine support for the type of genuine advocacy and movement growth that happens in organic and unplanned ways. There may helpfully be some element of coordination within campaigns, but widespread and spontaneous actions enabled by social media, like #MeToo, are not orchestrated around a conference room table. Loss of central control and distribution of agency is a feature of advocacy, not a glitch in it. This is evident in even small-scale local advocacy, like the 2001 Harvard University living wage sit-in, where an organizer explained, “By a week in, the whole operation had become so vast that what any one person could know about was only a small fraction of the activity going on.”

**Ensure theory is friction-based**

Theories of change should take full account of power dynamics and of different actors’ motivations to act or not in certain ways. The theory of advocacy should incorporate dynamics that are anticipated to advance or thwart an agenda, available civic and political space and how to utilize it, and other actors that are competing for the same space or sharing the agenda.

However, linear, project or campaign-centered theories of change can easily sideline these factors by encouraging the conceptualization and presentation of a somewhat frictionless change process, where x (if only there is enough of it) will lead to y.

A more friction-based approach amplifies attention to the stated connections between the various components of the theory by truly questioning how interventions can be expected to address the barriers to change. This means capitalizing on the knowledge and experience of advocates and drawing on relevant theories of social and political change. While not predictive, this combination of practical and theoretical knowledge can be used as a starting point for considering the complex dynamics of change in specific contexts.

Assumptions about how all these factors interact should also be front and center. Theories of change that sideline assumptions do not have salience. To be meaningful they should truly explain the dynamics of change. This is where the friction comes in. What is stopping someone from acting differently? What might motivate them to do so? Why might our tactics work or not? Where we are saying “x leads to y,” what do we understand about the conditions under which this is likely and when it may not happen?

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10 Mark Engler and Paul Engler, This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century (PublicAffairs, 2016).
Theories of change should also incorporate vulnerabilities, such as assumptions about what conditions are likely to change or, if the advocates bet wrong, will likely affect whether the advocacy will have the planned influences. If the risk is significantly high, planning should incorporate considerations about how to mitigate the risk. In this process, advocates should also explicitly recognize and challenge assumptions related to our own cultural and ideological biases.

**Delink purposes around communications and advocacy strategy**

A simplified, distilled theory of change may be useful for communications purposes. Having a summary version that enables others — who may be invested in the work but who aren’t engaged in the molecular details of the campaign — to understand the basic logic can help cultivate and maintain support. The trade-off is that simplifying the strategy to that extent risks distorting how advocacy really plays out and as such has limited or no evaluative merit.

In contrast, more complex theories of change that seek to identify multiple interrelating factors contributing to and acting as barriers to change can be useful for planning but fail as communication vehicles to wider audiences.

It’s prohibitively difficult to produce a theory of change that is both a representation of reality that is sufficiently faithful to be a useful resource for planning and evaluation and also easily understood by those outside the campaign. It is so difficult, in fact, that it would be better to think of two separate outputs. Trying to conflate the two very much risks falling between two stools, doing neither thing well.

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Figure 4: Theory of change as way of making sense of reality

Figure 5: Theory of change as communications vehicle

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Focus on the quality of the process as much as the product

Much of the literature on theories of change stresses the importance of process along these kinds of lines, but in practice the focus is typically on the output, with less attention paid to the quality of the reflective process.

Advocacy without thoughtful, critically reflective planning risks replicating ineffective approaches. In the case of planned advocacy work, it makes sense to involve the people who will be doing the work in mapping out the strategy and approach. Advocacy driven by a single individual, however visionary, can reinforce power hierarchies and squelch dissenting ideas. And even when there is a group involved, if those participating have similar perspectives and experiences, the group will often operate to common assumptions that do not receive sufficient scrutiny. It’s important that planning processes involve a diverse group, including people who bring an outside view.

Coming to agreement around a common frame for a problem and an advocacy campaign or program’s role within it is an important process. For example, processes to develop theories of change involving advocates and other stakeholders can be very useful in aligning understanding of how change happens and to surface and explore assumptions baked into the work.

We should give more attention than we often do to the process when planning and ask more questions about it in evaluation.

“It’s important that planning processes involve a diverse group, including people who bring an outside view”
3. Understanding contribution

As advocacy MEL has developed in recent years, there has been a lot of focus on methods that best assess an actor’s contribution to a specific outcome. But the risk is that a too-simplistic understanding of “contribution” is skewing our approach to evaluation (and to planning). »
We can push thinking about contribution further, to fully recognize the realities of how social change comes about (and of the mechanics of causation more generally).

A cause tends toward achieving an effect, but it doesn't guarantee it because that depends on other factors, and it's the range of factors that deliver the effect. Therefore, we should avoid the starting point where we think of contribution as singular and additive. In reality, contribution is combinational and dispositional.

To be more relevant and useful to advocacy, we need to situate assessment of contribution more clearly within a consideration of the kind of role it makes sense for a particular actor to play and the kinds of conditions likely needed for that to be effective.

**Where we are now**

Over the years there has been a move from evaluation focusing on attribution to a focus on the contribution of a particular advocacy campaign to change. But in practice it's a little bit difficult to see how much of an advance this is, or what the difference is, given that the concept of contribution is essentially framed as “percentage attribution.”

This plays out, for example, in summary assessments of the role a particular organization or network played in a particular process. Role-rating scales are increasingly prevalent in evaluations, typically set out like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undetectable</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
<td>One of Many</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Vital</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Summary models that score contribution on a linear scale (e.g., from negligible to vital) risk being oversimplistic to an extent that they fundamentally misrepresent reality.”

Summary models that score contribution on a linear scale (e.g., from negligible to vital) risk being oversimplistic to an extent that they fundamentally misrepresent reality. This kind of categorization conflates prominence and importance; in this reading, you can’t be both Vital and One of Many. But these are separate things.

It’s good to represent findings in a distilled way. But this kind of distillation only makes sense if you think of contribution as additive (so everyone contributes something and it all adds up mathematically). But in complex contexts such as advocacy, interventions don’t add up mathematically, they radically interact.

Advocacy scenarios are typically characterized by multiple actors and factors continually interrelating and exerting mutual influence. In these kinds of contexts, it makes much more sense to look at the whole picture and try to understand the combinational effect of the collective effort. It’s actually the conjunction of factors and how they interrelate in ways that lead to a particular outcome that is the most salient question.
There is a tendency in evaluations, for example, to seek to isolate the role of one specific factor about which a lot is known (the campaign) and not giving due attention to other factors. This is the kind of Ptolemaic starting point that the authors think is unhelpful to understanding. In the same way that planning should start with the problem statement at the center, it makes sense in monitoring and evaluation to start with the extent to which a particular outcome has occurred and work backward to causes.

Contribution is an important, foundational issue in advocacy. There are valid and important questions around what happened, what was useful, or not useful. There are also certainly pressures to demonstrate isolated and identifiable outcomes. This is widely seen as being the key route toward justifying resource allocation by donors and those responsible for management and governance, for example. But if we start on the wrong foot, trying to isolate and quantify a single cause, then where we end up will not be meaningful.

And expectation of, and desire for, high contribution ratings risks skewing advocacy effort away from more complementary joint working practices. If everyone wants to be in the lead, and seen to be in the lead, then the focus ends up being on incremental change that doesn’t require combinational effort, and the dynamical effects of joint working are lost.

In any case, not being able to state contribution isn’t necessarily a sign of a weakly delivered campaign. Indeed, this will sometimes be a positive sign. Given what we know about how change happens, there are many cases (particularly more intractable issues) where it’s not possible — and not desirable — to see a single organization’s specific fingerprints on an outcome because ideally that organization will have been successful in bringing in other actors. Rarely would one actor be identifiable/singled out in a dynamic movement.

“No being able to state contribution isn’t necessarily a sign of a weakly delivered campaign. Indeed, this will sometimes be a positive sign”
Sometimes it’s the school nurse, the baker, and the teachers

Evaluation of a complex, contested policy-change process in a community illustrates the importance of looking at contribution in a more multidimensional way, beyond the role of a formally organized campaign.

In 2015, Vermont passed education reform legislation requiring all towns with school districts with fewer than 900 students to merge with other districts. It set off a wave of contentious local decision-making, made even more challenging by the confusing conditions of the policy and the state’s multiple attempts to adjust it.

In one community, the merger was supported by community members with school-aged children who felt joining with neighboring districts was a means to access more educational options; another group, mostly farmers and landowners concerned about loss of the community’s traditional schools and potential rising taxes, opposed it with equal passion. Over the course of two years the debate about what to do created deep divisions. Neighbors stopped speaking, and the state police were called in to deal with stolen lawn signs that had been re-purposed by the volunteer fire department for its Halloween haunted house.

The merger ultimately passed by four votes.

Evaluation of the role of the pro-merger group suggested that it had effectively used its technical knowledge of the state’s education law, helped sympathetic community members understand the terms of the debate, and mobilized them to vote. It was responsible for critical tactical wins, such as when it persuaded the state board of education to reject an initial proposal based on non-compliance with the law. They were well-coordinated with skilled and committed volunteers.

However, it alone did not deliver this “win.” Indeed, missteps along the way may have undermined their own objectives. When the revised merger proposal was put to the towns for a vote, the deciding factor was actually the elementary school nurse — a beloved figure known for her compassionate attention to over a generation of children — and her baker husband. They reconsidered their opposition to the merger shortly before the vote and launched their own effort to persuade neighbors to support it. Late-breaking engagement by the community’s teachers, another respected group which had avoided the controversial debate, reframed the focus as about safeguarding the future of the elementary school. The engagement of the nurse, the baker and the teachers introduced a third way between the tensely polarized camps.

Thus, while the formally organized pro-merger campaign was instrumental in mobilizing, organizing, and navigating the technical challenges of the merger vote, it alone is unlikely to have won the day. Not taking into account the importance of deeply rooted champions, particularly those who are viewed as “neutral” and not tainted with association with a campaign in a particularly contentious policy-change situation, would have missed one of the most critical lessons of the campaign.
Strategies to align with needs and realities

Start from the understanding of contribution as a combinational effect

Advocacy typically involves one actor, teaming up with others, and interacting with a range of other factors. So, an appropriate inquiry would be how a particular contribution fits in the wider mosaic of influences.

It would be better to think of a particular intervention as a context-sensitive disposition teaming up with other dispositional causes to produce an effect that none could have produced alone. And from this starting point we can we approach understanding how a particular intervention makes a contribution from a more realistic perspective.

This way of thinking points more helpfully to the kinds of assessments that can best inform understanding about past effectiveness and future strategy:

- Does the contribution seem proportionate to the effort/investment?
- Did a specific organization or actor add a specific niche function that was otherwise missing?
- Was there sufficient clarity about what the wider mosaic of influences were or planning for what they could be?
- Were elements of the campaign appropriately calibrated to respond to those positive/negative influences?
- Are the actors working in complementary ways (doesn’t require being unique or in lockstep with one another).

Move beyond linear categorizations of contribution and think more in terms of a typology

Shifting the lens from levels or amount of contribution to the typologies of actors contributing to change can help us better understand how a campaign worked and how to structure more effective campaigns in the future. Thinking about what roles various actors played in a particular campaign, how well they played them, and how they interacted and might interact in the future could be a more useful approach to understanding effectiveness.

There is a fairly finite set of roles any one actor or organization might play in advancing an issue. An organization may play more than one role in a campaign, and may shift roles in response to resources, opportunities, comparative skills or other factors.
Table 3: Typology of roles in advocacy joint working

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPOLOGY OF POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTION</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOLE ACTOR</td>
<td>The sole actor calling for the change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRIMARY ACTOR</td>
<td>The actor that coordinated the approach, corraling and organizing others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEAD CONTRIBUTOR</td>
<td>An actor that made a leading contribution, was prominent throughout, stayed the course, and made a number of significant interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTOR</td>
<td>An actor that played an important role but may not have been vital to the result. There may be a case that the outcome would have happened anyway.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEED SOWER</td>
<td>The actor that initiated the campaign and sowed the seeds, which then took a life of their own. This makes their fingerprints on the final result difficult to see (but in a good way because of the momentum it generated).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAM CONTRIBUTOR</td>
<td>An actor that worked as part of a team, among whom it’s difficult to disentangle who achieved what. Isolating the factors may not be possible and is probably not that helpful: it’s the combinational effect that is key.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVER-THE-LINE GETTER</td>
<td>An actor that made a discrete or niche, but undeniably vital, contribution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEY ROLE PLAYER</td>
<td>One of a small number of main players, each fulfilling a particular role. Each actor adds value; each is vital.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explaining your contribution on the basis of this kind of typology opens up an opportunity to draw out lessons from exploring questions such as:

- What role did the organization play?
- How intentional was it?
- How well did the organization play it?
In land-rights advocacy in northern Tanzania, the Pastoral Women’s Council was a seed sower and built upon years of community programming when the Women’s Rights and Leadership Forums (WRLFs) it helped found in turn acted as primary actor when it organized resistance to government seizure of traditional lands\textsuperscript{15}. As the campaign evolved, and community and other organizations joined the effort, the WRLFs became team contributors. Tanzanian non-governmental organizations filed a constitutional case on behalf of the affected communities, serving as leading contributors that provided the legal advocacy corollary to the public mobilization. There were many key role players. Tanzanians living abroad sent money, and local community members provided support, such as livestock to feed protesters who were staging a sit-in. University students were also key role players, who organized social media in support of the campaign. Sympathetic policymakers and faith-based leaders also made a niche but vital contribution.

Advocacy happens in widely varying contexts, working against all sorts of prevailing winds. So whether an outcome was achieved should not be taken at face value.
Looking at an outcome in isolation gives only a partial picture and says nothing about how much of a successful result it is given the context, how it was achieved, what trade-offs may have been involved, or how sustainable it is.

Only by understanding these wider questions does it become possible to understand the implications of what has changed and what that signals in terms of future strategy.

**Where we are now**

It’s right that we give attention to outcomes and in particular whether established objectives have been achieved. But alongside such assessments we need to be more interested in offering a critique of what that reveals.

Without a wider contextual analysis of outcomes achieved, the risk — increasingly realized in practice, in the authors’ experience — is that strategy is being skewed. If the sole judgment about a campaign is around whether the stated outcomes are achieved, that may give a clear incentive to set easily achievable objectives, for example.

Narrowly defined objectives can lead to narrow investigations that look only at those objectives. Such an assessment doesn’t factor in what else is changing, or not, and what that reveals about the likely significance and sustainability of any change.

It will often be better to make progress toward an ambitious, stretching objective than to fully achieve a narrow, incremental change. But where the change sought is so big and the campaign is so molecular, it becomes impossible to draw a reasonable connection between the two by just evaluating within the narrow window of the campaign. Judgment about progress toward that ambitious objective can be supported by critically assessing different levels of outcomes across dimensions that influence the higher-level change.

“Whether an outcome was achieved should not be taken at face value”
Using a larger frame when assessing advocacy to add reproductive health education in public girls’ boarding schools in northern Nigeria

The local advocate leading the effort to integrate a reproductive health curriculum in girls’ boarding schools learned that, due to funding shortages, the girls did not have sufficient resources to purchase sanitary napkins and had resorted to cutting pieces of their foam mattress to repurpose for this use. There was also resistance among school officials to introducing reproductive health education. The local advocate changed tactics and successfully advocated for public resources to fund sanitary supplies for the girls. While he knew he would miss the one-year project milestone to get schools to agree to adding the reproductive health curriculum, he felt it was important to address what were clear and immediate needs in order to create openness and cooperation in the schools. The project evaluation suggested a failure to achieve objectives. A more widely focused review would have integrated the significance of the change that was achieved and recognized that the limited time frame promised to the funder was insufficient to obtain the scale of change promised. (Some months following the evaluation, the schools agreed to pilot test the reproductive health curriculum.)

It’s also the case that the events we label as outcomes in advocacy are never really endpoints; they are more like artificially imposed milestones. Judgments can change radically over time as contexts continue to evolve. The significance of something is only determined by what happens next.

The conclusion is that advocacy outcomes should be considered and analyzed within their context of both space and time.
Strategies to align with needs and realities

Contextualize results when presenting them
It’s clearly important to analyze whether specific outcomes have been achieved. But alongside this, to give a particular result meaning, we should assess:

- The extent to which outcomes achieved can be regarded as successful in the circumstances, given the landscape of possibilities and the headwinds the advocacy is working against;
- The extent to which results are likely to be sustainable;
- The extent to which results are likely to have positive impact (in the sense of leading to positive change in people’s lives); and
- What needs to happen next to ensure sustainable, positive impact.

This means looking beyond the objectives set for the campaign and situating any change achieved in a wider landscape, considering the bigger picture in which a particular outcome sits.

Interrogate/understand progress across multiple dimensions
Transformational, sustainable change typically takes place through making advances across multiple dimensions.

The model below arrays the multiple dimensions of campaign outcomes that can signify progress or change. It shifts from a linear causal chain to acknowledge the different levels and types of dynamics that can be shifted through campaigning. For campaigns aimed at changes in policy, laws, systems, or other higher-order changes, it can help identify other types of changes or progress that create conditions that can enable those changes to happen.

The model identifies the following dimensions of change:

1. Behavior change outcomes: Changes related to the attitudes, interest, and actions of specific communities, stakeholders, or populations.
2. Public agenda/social norm outcomes: Shifts related to the public environment that makes sustainable change more likely.
3. Policy outcomes: Changes to institutional policy, laws, and practice.
5. Internal outcomes: Enhanced ability of organizations or groups to achieve their goals.

Each of these dimensions interacts with the others and helps propel or stymie change.
### Elements in a campaign victory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boundary outcomes</th>
<th>Interim outcomes</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviour change (Bc)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Public agenda (Pa)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Policy (Po)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in behaviours of individuals or groups</td>
<td>Changes to the public environment that make sustainable change more likely</td>
<td>Changes to constitutional policy and practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Civil society (Cs)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Internal (I)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Power (P)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthened community and civil society role and influence</td>
<td>Enhanced ability of the organisation or group to achieve its goals</td>
<td>Shifts in power relations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Figure 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solid understanding of the barriers to action</th>
<th>Favourable media and social media coverage and traction</th>
<th>Research/policy analysis seen as credible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robust behaviour change strategies in place</td>
<td>Champions engaged</td>
<td>Influencers and decision makers engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structures encouraging &amp; preventing action rebalanced</td>
<td>Issue on higher up public agenda</td>
<td>Signals of support from decision makers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual beliefs and attitudes shifted</td>
<td>Issue on higher up public agenda</td>
<td>Commitments made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social context for action improved</td>
<td>Terms of debate shifting</td>
<td>Policy developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals’ (belief in) capability to change enhanced</td>
<td>(Shifts in) public support visible</td>
<td>Influence of opposing forces diminished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in behaviour effected and sustained</td>
<td>Positive shifts in social norms and increased public space for progressive approaches</td>
<td>Policy funded and implemented in ways anticipated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture and processes that support effective advocacy organically embedded</strong></td>
<td>Civil society forces for change strengthened</td>
<td><strong>Explicit and implicit power dynamics within relevant structures and across society rebalanced</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This framework provides a way for thinking about the meaning of what has changed, how significant it is, how sustainable, and the likely prognosis. It’s through these multiple pathways, in combination, that change occurs and is embedded, or doesn’t and isn’t.

Even where a specific advocacy effort or campaign does not expressly seek to make progress across all of these streams, it may still be worth looking across the whole “change landscape” to see what’s in place and what isn’t and from there make judgments about implications. For example, a specific policy change may be typically fragile unless underpinned by wider changes. (Issues could include key public audiences’ support for a particular policy approach and how the power dynamics play out in terms of whose voices are heard and whose are excluded from future debate about the policy and its continuing appropriateness.) So to make sense of what a particular campaign has achieved, it needs to be considered in this wider context.
Sustainable, transformational change occurs through shifts across multiple dimensions

The U.S. Supreme Court ruling on Roe v. Wade allowed abortion on the basis of privacy, which is not guaranteed by the Constitution. It was the most opportune route to legalization at the time, but as a result of the weak legal foundation it has seen a constant risk of overturn ever since. So, in 1973 a huge victory was achieved that has never been assured thereafter.

Brown v. Board of Education declared segregation in education unconstitutional, but it took the shifts in power and social norms that the civil rights movement helped institute to bring widespread changes in practice. The same dynamics are playing out today. As Black Lives Matter co-founder and artist Patrisse Cullors noted in a 2017 interview:

“I believe that this work of Black Lives Matter is actually healing work. It’s not just about policy. It’s why, I think, some people get so confused by us. They’re like, ‘Where’s the policy?’ I’m like, ‘You can’t policy your racism away.’ We no longer have Jim Crow laws, but we still have Jim Crow hate.”

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5. Staying oriented on what is useful to practitioners

What’s practically useful to effective advocacy can be at odds with more traditional and formal evaluation practices. »
Efforts to develop approaches to demonstrating measurable results have their place, and collectively we should get better at understanding what happens because of advocacy efforts. Some of this thinking has been very helpful in bringing clarity to difficult areas and in providing frameworks to navigate challenging concepts. But there’s a risk of distorting strategy and focus (toward outcomes that are easily achievable, for example) or of going further than reality allows.

If advocacy MEL is not being designed in a way that usefully informs advocacy practice, advocacy will not benefit from advocacy evaluation in a way that campaigners find convincing. This will make good practices around learning and reflection harder to embed.

Further, the orientation to formal, complicated, and resource-intensive processes risks privileging approaches that are out of reach to all but the best-resourced advocates and campaigns.

Where we are now

Campaigners are often skeptical of the added value of evaluation. They tend to want to get on with the work, unencumbered by processes that distract attention from it. Evaluation practices can challenge advocates’ preferred ways of working. At the same time, managed well, they can support critical reflection and help sharpen awareness of what’s happening, or not, and, as a result, support more effective advocacy in current and future campaigns.

The argument here, and throughout this paper, is grounded in the principle that evaluation should be judged first and foremost by its utility. Evaluation that better integrates the unpredictability and uncertainty of advocacy, we argue, will generate information that is more accurate and reliable and, therefore, more useful.

“Utility” has long been recognized as a foundational starting point for evaluation and is also included in the first set of evaluation standards, which are “intended to increase the extent to which program stakeholders find evaluation processes and products are meeting their needs.”

While these principles are widely referenced, we should continue to aspire in practice for more useful evaluation when it comes to producing credible information advocates can use and learning they can act on.

In the authors’ experience, the most difficult things in advocacy and advocacy evaluation, are:

- The need to be outcome focused, which means thinking backward in time (from the desired end state) in ways that aren’t intuitive;

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• Getting the balance right between action and reflection, to allow space for the latter, in the context that valuing reflective processes can be a prevailing challenge for activists;

• The ability to identify and then act on learning, especially strategic (as opposed to tactical and operational) learning, which is a particular challenge in advocacy, where the milestones are less obviously signposted, when results are difficult to interpret, and achievements are difficult to be sure about; and

• That the focus on “results”, has, at least in some cases, led to bifurcation of evaluation “for us” (to promote learning) and evaluation “for the donor” (to demonstrate return on investment).

There are real cultural challenges to advocates being better equipped to learn from their experience and develop increasingly effective influencing strategies and tactics. Advocates may typically respond to expectations of demonstrable, measurable results that can be attributed to their contribution by scaffolding evaluation processes on top of campaigns. Energy goes into tracking lots of information that is difficult to actually aggregate and use.

In contrast, ask an advocate what evaluation process they find most useful and one of the most common responses we hear is “after-action reviews.” Such reviews — a practice also known by other names such as intense-period debriefs — involve a simple but structured process where advocates assess what happened, the implications, and what to do next. There are no complicated frameworks, algorithms, or technical requirements, yet that's what advocates find give them the information they need to do a better job.

This highlights that what's useful to effective advocacy can be at odds with the evaluation practices that are valued and resourced. In part, a polemic is created by two, often distinct, evaluation stakeholders: funders and managers on the one hand, advocates on the other. In advocacy, there can be a tension between these groups and what they need from evaluation.

In what may be the most creative and innovative corner of the evaluation field, there has been a proliferation of ideas and experiments that are geared toward putting information in the hands of the people who are doing the work. This reflects that advocates tend to benefit from assessments that are unfolding and informing them as they do the work but that retrospectively looking at what happened and making judgments about it is often most useful to funders and managers.

Michael Quinn Patton, responsible for developing and popularizing the concept of utilization-focused evaluation, notes, in the second edition, “A major new concern has emerged that perhaps too much attention is being paid to evaluation — attention of the wrong kind — leading to expecting more than evaluation can deliver, high stakes decision-making that goes beyond the evidence, politicization, and distortion of findings, misuse of evaluations, bloated rhetoric about accountability, huge expenditures on poorly done and useful studies, and a likely decline in quality as demand has outstripped the capacity for high-quality supply.” Utilization-Focused Evaluation, 2nd ed., p. xvii
Both orientations — to real-time learning and to evaluative review — require resources, and, in the authors’ experience, often-scarce evaluation resources are typically directed to the end of the campaign. This is despite rhetorical recognition of the value of real-time and developmental evaluation principles to advocacy. (As noted in the text box, we echo Patton’s concern that the expectations and promise of evaluation risks outstripping the results it can plausibly produce — and at the same time gives short shrift to the needs of the advocates/campaigners.)

Meanwhile, the orientation to formal processes that are complicated and resource-intensive means they are not only out of reach of most advocates, but they are out of reach to all but the best-resourced advocates/campaigns.

As evaluators, we can do better. We should continue to challenge ourselves to better orient and focus the putative value of MEL to advocacy. That we are too often asked by advocates to help “prove our impact” in a way that advocates don’t necessarily believe or use but which validates their efforts to external audiences and funders is indicative.

So, if the untapped value of advocacy evaluation lies with practitioners being equipped to make good decisions, what does that mean for approaches to support them?

**Strategies to align with needs and realities**

**Doing MEL differently**

Probably the most useful processes are about doing the simple things right. This means prioritizing the participation of the people doing the work. Ensuring processes are accessible to advocates, using language and frames that are relevant to their work, and resourcing their participation is a start.

Saferworld’s approach — on the next page — and others like it are intentionally streamlined and designed to fit into the slipstream of organizations’ work. But we know from Saferworld’s experience over five years of refining its approach that it takes care, attention, and time to do it well.

That something so simple as after-action reviews could be so useful tells us something about not just the value but also the difficulty of embedding reflective processes. It’s a matter of getting advocates to sit down and capture what they know and pushing them a bit further to analyze the significance and implications of what they’re seeing, and then acting on these.

There are still resource implications, and for busy organizations even the simple processes may feel burdensome, but taking as a starting point “What is practical and useful for practitioners?” can at least help mitigate this.
“An outcome is something that others do differently”

Saferworld, a global non-governmental organization, has drawn on a streamlined version of Outcome Harvesting to develop an organizational approach to monitoring, evaluation, and learning for its work.

The aim was to address the barriers to generating useful real-time information in complex and volatile contexts. The approach is simple and practical and strips out jargon, but it allows for complex discussion and analysis. The focus is on supporting the people doing the work to monitor and evaluate their work as they go along and make evidence-based decisions.

The system needed to be straightforward while handling the complexity of their work, and the approach provides a structure for advocates to consider, talk about, and analyze what they’re seeing. It involves keeping a running tab of who is doing something differently. These are reviewed at six-month intervals where staff discuss what’s different (based on the evidence of outcomes gathered) and analyze why it matters, as well as the implications.

Based on over five years of working to integrate the approach, Church emphasizes that space to reflect in a structured way on change is valued by staff but that to embed such an approach requires time and facilitation: “Like most change processes, [it] requires leadership, guidance, and practice – one-off trainings don’t work.”

Value methodologies that support effective advocacy

After-action reviews can’t answer all the questions that can benefit advocates. They rely on the recollection of the advocates, who are often deeply embedded in their own systems of beliefs and anchored in a campaign-oriented perspective. We need methodologies that build on what works and integrates information and perspectives so that, post-campaign, the groundwork for the sort of post-hoc assessment that other stakeholders find useful is in place.

Streamlined approaches, such as developing campaign timelines and bringing together feedback from partners and other stakeholders, can provide right-sized and useful information without being overwhelming or costly. While procedurally these are simple, the biggest challenge to using them often is the space, time, and critical lens to use them.

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At the same time, evaluators need to resist approaches that aren’t a good use of resources or don’t produce reliable, useful results. All sorts of organizations, not just campaigning organizations, express concern that the types of data and results they are expected to produce are often out of line with what they are resourced or equipped to produce. A competitive funding environment, and power dynamics between advocates and some of those making requests of them, also makes it difficult to push back against unrealistic expectations. Evaluators can play a role here as coaches, supporting systematic approaches in advocates, and as external reviewers, providing balanced insight that is clear about the boundaries of uncertainty.

In sum, there are opportunities to use evaluation to support better campaigning and advocacy, by:

1. Creating space for busy people to reflect critically on their work, which is different than simply documenting activities;
2. Elevating focus to outcomes, rather than tactics, which doesn’t always come naturally and takes a lot of work;
3. Creating accessible institutional memory of the learning, and actively referencing it, adding to it, and applying it to future campaigns;
4. Having and commonly buying into a plausible strategy, which means recognizing and coming to terms with cultural challenges around people from different disciplines having different ideas about best ways to achieve change; and
5. Brokering useful methods and approaches that produce good value for limited evaluation resources and using tools as a second-order resource that, once purpose and direction are clear, can serve as an organizing vehicle and can help facilitate interpretation.

Build strategic evaluative thinking in advocates

There is a tendency in advocacy to default to a focus on tactics — the short-term moves that help push a cause forward — at the expense of the bigger picture. And the authors’ experiences, supported by findings from research into actual evaluation practice, is that advocacy MEL is more successful at supporting tactical shifts than strategic ones.19

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In order for MEL processes to be truly useful, they should open up space for advocates to question assumptions about strategic direction as well as assessing delivery of the prevailing strategy. Shifting to a more evaluative lens should challenge advocates to process and question their own observations about progress toward the overall changes the campaign is driving toward, as well as the implications for their work going forward. Glenda Eoyang, in her “Adaptive Action” practice, which facilitates response to complex and unpredictable systems, distills this approach to a reflective process based on three simple questions: What? So what? Now what?

Capturing this developing “internal hypothesis” also creates value for others who may benefit from knowing what happened — not only those who are part of the wide campaign or interested in the work but also advocates who may be involved in the advocacy in the future. It also opens up a new possibility for the relationship between advocates and evaluators, where the latter essentially test an already-established internal understanding of influence (instead of reconstructing the logic of influence from raw data, which is typically the approach necessitated, in the absence of a coherent, well-documented internal position). This is the desired direction of travel in terms of use of evaluation as validation signaled by Sarah Rose at Save the Children, for example.

In the absence of this information being captured, institutional memory of advocacy is often thin, relying on the recollection of people who were there. Valuing space for interpretation, and documenting what results, can also support checks and balances in advocacy decisions. Particularly in spaces where advocacy is driven by personalities, or there are pressures or inclinations to respond to external interests or fads, it can help introduce an opportunity to more fully interrogate the data supporting decisions.

An intrinsic part of the process should also be finding time to also look across individual campaigns and draw wider lessons. Looking for patterns across campaigns, and figuring out what they tell you about how you plan campaigns, where the weak points are in executing them, and where intelligence falls short, also can signal important learning about what is working or not.

All this requires a cultural shift, which in turn requires a multifaceted approach to embedding evaluative thinking but basically comes down to understanding the incentives driving behavior and thinking about how you can shift the existing balance of incentives.

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AVAC’s outcomes-focused critical analysis

AVAC, an NGO working on global HIV/AIDS-related advocacy, received funding from USAID to develop and implement the Coalition to Advance and Support Prevention Research (CASPR) project. It is aimed at cultivating a sustainable, Africa-centered network dedicated to helping accelerate biomedical HIV-prevention research through various advocacy efforts. CASPR initially developed a traditional, logic model-based monitoring and reporting framework that facilitates reporting to funders. AVAC also recognized that such approaches often miss important details and useful learning that can be generated from the collaboration and insight of the nine CASPR partners, so it designed a participatory monitoring and evaluation process, “SPARC” — Simple, Participatory Assessment of Real Change.

Drawing from Outcome Harvesting and similar participatory evaluation approaches, SPARC aspires to engage project partners in identifying signs of progress and outcomes across the network’s four priority objective areas and its development as a network. It also aims to encourage CASPR partners and AVAC project staff to see themselves as active contributors to and users of monitoring and evaluation. The intention is to encourage AVAC and its partners to focus beyond specific project deliverables and to look at the bigger picture of the network and the HIV prevention research field and to critically reflect on its pioneering work.
6. Evaluating more transformational advocacy

There has been a lot of attention in advocacy evaluation on developing and promoting robust ways of assessing what has been achieved in the past and a particular actor's contribution to those achievements. »
This paper sets out some ways to adapt evaluation approaches so that they reflect the realities of advocacy and are more “complexity-friendly.” This means thinking about contribution differently, situating assessment of outcomes in a broader context, building in uncertainty metrics, etc.

But to push the argument further, in this section the authors note that, while such assessments are often useful:

- **Even when applied to more discrete advocacy contexts, they may reveal very little about likely future effectiveness.**
  
  Events are not repeatable. History only runs once, every context is different and reflects its own unique histories. So even in contexts where such assessments are possible, and make sense, the learning from them may be limited.

- **For more transformational advocacy, they may not make sense, in that they don’t fully take into account the reality of the context.** In more transformational advocacy, ultimate changes sought are diffuse and long term. Change along the way is sometimes rapid, often stalled, dependent on all kinds of inter-relationships, subject to a swirl of interacting actors and factors that can’t be predicted or even realistically understood, path-dependent but constantly evolving. The desire to be able to make assessments about contribution in such contexts simply doesn’t align with what is possible.

### Where we are now

**Advocacy is a spectrum.**

At one end, there are discrete interventions aimed at achieving incremental change, for example as part of a defined policy process. At the other end is more expansive and transformational advocacy, involving seeding, building, and supporting movements that seek diffuse and long-term outcomes, for example.

There are many situations where defined policy advocacy is an insufficient or inappropriate approach. Space to influence policy may be constrained (in low-receptive or hostile environments, for example), and so advocates need to address those constraining factors through longer-term, more broadly based influencing interventions. Therefore, achieving change becomes about challenging dominant power relations, reframing debates, seeking to encourage and support cultural shifts, augmenting marginalized communities’ voices, etc.

Change happens, or not, as a result of multiple forces both pushing for and resisting progress interacting in unpredictable and opaque ways.

And the more transformational the advocacy, the less measurable are the outcomes and the less clear and definable the contribution. But, as noted, even at the more discrete end of the advocacy spectrum, there are some limits to be aware of (in terms of the information conveyed by such assessments).

“The more transformational the advocacy, the less measurable are the outcomes and the less clear and definable the contribution”
The situation may be summarized as follows:

Figure 7: Understanding contribution to outcomes in discrete and transformational advocacy

We can conclude from this that:

- In some cases, such assessments only give a partial answer to questions of future effectiveness; and
- In other contexts (relating to more aspirational, long-term interventions), such assessments represent the wrong focus of evaluative attention.

However, these cautions do not mean that we are left without meaningful opportunities for learning and accountability, just that we might need to take a different approach and think differently about what is important.
Strategies to align with needs and realities

Develop and apply set of metrics around fitness for purpose

It’s well-established that advocacy takes place in a context that is archetypally complex; it has the characteristics of non-linearity, in which change is emergent, dynamical, co-evolutionary, adaptive, and uncertain.22

There are things we can and do know about how an organization, group or network might set itself up to be effective when operating in these kinds of contexts.

We know enough about these kinds of contexts23 to be able to set some parameters around what advocacy readiness would look like (i.e., the characteristics that indicate a prospect of being able to intervene in ways that are likely to be effective).

From this, we can pull together a sense of the key elements that combine to represent the extent to which an organization or constellation of actors is well-placed to bring influence to bear.

Drawing on what we know about (a) effective advocacy and (b) the dynamics of complex systems, we can set out the capabilities that make it more likely that an actor or group of actors will be well-positioned to engage in dynamic change processes in a sustained and effective way.

Arguably, the ideal relationship between a group of advocates and those providing backing for the work would be a trust-based one in which requirements (around reporting, for example) are limited to periodic checks on the quality of learning that is occurring and the depth of its application.

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22 As distilled for example in Michael Quinn Patton, Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use (Guilford Press, 2010).

Some supporters of advocacy can operate within such parameters, but many do not feel able to. Where there is a need to set out some accountability pointers, these could reasonably include tracking and assessing the extent to which an actor or group of actors:

- Is well placed within an ecosystem of actors and audiences;
- Is engaged in good-quality collaborations;
- Has internal campaign management systems and processes that support effectiveness;
- Has a working culture that facilitates effective advocacy;
- Is well placed to learn from experiences and from the environment;
- Has developed a good capacity for learning;
- Actually applies learning in evolving practice;
- Shares learning;
- Builds and distributes power, internally and externally; and
- Is impact oriented in decision-making.

The table below expands on these themes, suggesting specific attributes to look for in assessing strengths and opportunities for improvement.

These are just suggested areas, to kick off more debate in the sector about these indicators/questions areas, and to open up space to test and adapt them. Clearly the themes of interest, and the more detailed questions that sit behind them, would depend on specific situations and judgments about what is important.

But the kinds of areas to consider would include:
Table 4: Advocacy “fitness for purpose” metrics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>WHAT TO LOOK FOR</th>
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| POSITION IN THE ECOSYSTEM OF ACTORS       | Your connectivity with multiple stakeholders  
                                        | Your embeddedness within networks of allies  
                                        | Different audiences’ perception of your credibility  
                                        | Different audiences’ perceptions of your legitimacy  |
| QUALITY OF COLLABORATION                  | Levels of trust amongst partners and allies  
                                        | Support for and encouragement of collaboration spaces  
                                        | Sense of bringing added value  
                                        | Willingness/ability to pool resources  
                                        | Willingness/ability to subsume brand  
                                        | Democracy and diversity of participation  
                                        | Quality of information flows  |
| APPROPRIATENESS OF INTERNAL MANAGEMENT AND PROCESSES | Quality of intelligence (power/stakeholder analysis, etc.) on which decisions are made  
                                        | Plausibility of strategy  
                                        | Deliberate focus on, and ability to identify, likely leverage points  
                                        | Ability to exploit leverage points, including through reactive/responsive capabilities  
                                        | Technical capacities to deliver effective influencing interventions  
                                        | Quality of interpretation/willingness to open up to diverse opinion  |
| CONDUCIVENESS OF INTERNAL CULTURE         | Culture of testing and adapting (vs. command and control)  
                                        | Collaborative mindset  
                                        | Learning systems in place  
                                        | Attitude to risk  
                                        | Tenacity and commitment to long-term involvement  
                                        | Willingness to delegate or defer to those best placed to understand the context  |
| LEARNING CAPACITIES                       | Good access to information  
                                        | Good intelligence and understanding of targets’ motivations, resources, relationships  
                                        | Good processing of that information  
                                        | Good space to consider implications  
                                        | Involvement of diverse actors in reaching judgements  
                                        | Good quality interpretation, stress testing assumptions  |
| PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF LEARNING         | When considering strategy  
                                        | When considering tactics  
                                        | In reviewing organisational assumptions about change and the best strategic interventions you can make to help it come about  
                                        | Willingness to be transparent and share learning  |
| POWER DISTRIBUTION                        | Investment in distributing internal leadership  
                                        | Investment in communities’ agency  
                                        | Investment in grassroots partners’ capacity  
                                        | Understanding of power that looks beyond visible power/decision-making  |
| ROBUSTNESS OF IMPACT FOCUS                | Extent to which positions are based on good evidence, appropriately disaggregated according to gender, race, ability/disability, etc.  
                                        | Plausibility of the case that if you achieve your goals it will lead to positive change  
                                        | Attention to what happens after your campaign goal is achieved (e.g. to ensure policy is implemented)  |

Advocates can set some standards around these themes and areas, as well as track and assess them.
In planning and reviewing more discrete advocacy interventions, apply “fitness for purpose” assessments alongside assessments of results

Assessing what a discrete advocacy effort has achieved — and a particular actor’s contribution to that achievement — is important in order to develop a more reliable understanding of what happened and as validation of past investments.

However, even in these circumstances, evaluation of individual efforts bumps up against some real obstacles when it comes to learning, in that to be useful to support learning, there would ideally be some clear application to future effectiveness. But the predictive usefulness of assessments of outcome and contribution — even in discrete advocacy contexts — is questionable. They may reveal little about the extent to which an organization or group is well placed to be effective in the future.

In such circumstances, fitness for purpose assessments could work as an intentionally forward-looking element that would complement assessments relating to outcomes and contribution to them.

When reviewing (or planning) more transformational advocacy, apply these “fitness for purpose” assessments as an alternative to assessments of outcome/contribution

Significant effort has been directed at understanding, supporting, and measuring the development of movements.24 However, measuring what happens as a result of movements and other broadly based interventions is inherently problematic.

The factors that complicate evaluation of individual advocacy efforts or campaigns are magnified. We might want to, but we can’t, apply the same model that may still hold at the more incremental end of the advocacy spectrum to these examples of more transformational advocacy.

It’s important to track progress — across multiple dimensions of change (as in Figure 5: Elements in a campaign victory) — in order to have the knowledge to support (re)strategizing. However, it doesn’t make sense for one actor to be held accountable for achievement, or not, of higher-order outcomes that are beyond their immediate control or influence.

So what do we do when faced with a situation where there are so many actors and factors, operating over so much time and space, that tracking contribution to outcomes can be no more than a shadow-chasing exercise?

In such circumstances, traditional approaches fall apart but “fitness for purpose” indicators can provide the basis for both accountability and learning, replacing and acting as an alternative to assessments relating to outcomes and contribution to them.

“Fitness for purpose assessments could work as an intentionally forward-looking element that would complement assessments relating to outcomes and contribution to them”

Practical steps for evaluators, advocacy practitioners, and funders

The uncertainty and unpredictability of advocacy means that rather than searching for a non-existent “royal road”, we should be looking to find the best ways to follow the natural pathways. The political, social and environmental challenges we face are huge and the advocacy community needs to be as effective as it can be in response. So it’s vital that monitoring and evaluation approaches support and bolster efforts to be effective and we hope this paper contributes to broader conversations about how they can best do that.

First, everyone involved in MEL — funders, senior managers and boards, advocacy practitioners, and evaluators — has a role to play in helping ensure it is oriented and supported in a way that is grounded in the way advocacy influences change. All need to help build a culture of critical reflection and adaptation in response, which will ensure MEL efforts contribute to more effective advocacy.

• **Funders** and **senior managers and boards** need to set reasonable expectations for MEL priorities, including managing demands for assessing the contribution of single grants or single actors. They also need to support MEL with resources and staff time and foster a culture of adaptation in response to critical reflection.

• In addition, **advocacy practitioners** need to proactively include MEL in plans and prioritize using it in a way that sharpens analysis of what happened, its significance, and how to respond.

• **Evaluators** play a role in supporting all of these efforts. In particular they need to be explicit about the bounds of what is feasible to measure and design and support approaches that engage but don’t overburden practitioners.

There are specific steps throughout planning, measuring, implementing, and learning from advocacy that we can apply in implementing these changes. Developing practices should include the following:
Table 5: Steps that can apply in implementing changes

| DESIGNING MEL PROCESSES AND APPROACHES | Prioritize approaches that facilitate real-time reflection and apply or develop tools that support this. Give explicit attention to identifying and addressing the cultural and management challenges that make it difficult for advocacy practitioners to embed MEL in their work. Develop more nuanced understanding of contribution and modify approaches and expectations that incentivize attention to proving the value of one advocacy campaign or organization. Create accountability and reporting mechanisms for advocacy that respect its inherent uncertainty and messiness. |
| PLANNING | Interpret theories of change in a way that values the process of sense-making as well as any graphic model produced as a result. Involve diverse views in theory of change development processes and surface and explicitly challenge assumptions about how change will happen. Start from the problem and the barriers to change and situate any single actor’s response as part of a range of factors acting on the problem. Set out theories of change that are deliberately adaptable and build in moments to review and adjust plans. Demarcate between products to support communications and those to support active strategizing and consider when it may be useful to create separate products. |
| MONITORING AND EVALUATION | Actively test and revise theories of change in response to learning and developments. Assess progress toward outcomes across multiple dimensions of change that are relevant to the broader vision. Assess the significance of outcomes in their context, rather than simply taking them at face value. Consider contribution as a combinational effect and assess single actors on the basis of a typology of roles and how they interact with others. Incorporate measurement of fitness for purpose calibrated to the type of change being sought: For discrete advocacy interventions, apply these fitness for purpose assessments as complementary to assessments of outcomes and contribution; When reviewing (or planning) more aspirational advocacy, apply these fitness for purpose assessments as an alternative to assessments of outcome/contribution. Encourage probabilistic conclusions that incorporate uncertainty, and include in summary judgments: A summary of the key evidence to support the judgment and the basis for it; Confidence in the assertion using clear scalar confidence ratings; and Commentary on possible alternative perspectives. |
| LEARNING AND APPLICATION | Prioritize meaningful discussion about conclusions and their implications among practitioners. Support transparency about conclusions and learning and sharing with broader communities. Demonstrate what adaptation has actually occurred as a result of deliberative learning. |
Bibliography


Notes
“The uncertainty and unpredictability of advocacy means that rather than searching for a non-existent ‘royal road’, we should be looking to find the best ways to follow the natural pathways.”