

# BRIEF | Lessons on Strengthening Advocacy Capacity

| By the Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, the Hewlett Foundation launched a [new grant-making strategy](#) to support local family planning and reproductive health (FPRH) advocacy in Sub-Saharan Africa. The goal: a vibrant civil society sector in sub-Saharan Africa that can capably and positively influence the family planning and reproductive health policies and funding decisions of their own national governments and of international donors. To realize this long-term goal, the strategy seeks to shift power towards local civil society organizations (CSOs) who advocate on FPRH in sub-Saharan Africa and to strengthen the capacity of these CSOs to engage in advocacy. From the strategy's establishment in late 2016, the portfolio has included 12 grantees (primarily international non-governmental organizations or INGOs) who serve as intermediaries providing capacity support to over a hundred local CSO partners in Sub-Saharan Africa.

During the first five years of the strategy's implementation, the foundation is undertaking an evaluation and learning process in partnership with the Aspen Institute's Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program. In this brief, we summarize key insights and lessons about capacity strengthening, gathered over the course of the first three years of this process. We also highlight key questions and lines of inquiry that we plan to continue to explore in the coming two years.

## What do we mean by “strengthening advocacy capacity”?

An organization's advocacy capacity is strengthened when it is able to more effectively use advocacy as a strategy to advance its public policy or social change goals and priorities. Our understanding of what it means to “strengthen advocacy capacity” draws on current literature, evaluators' experience, and recent learning in the fields of capacity development and civil society strengthening. Our definition of advocacy capacity includes: organizational skills and resources to develop and advance advocacy strategies; expertise in appropriate tactical skills; organizational commitment to a set of advocacy issues and engagement with the sector on those issues; and institutional resources, internal systems, and reputation to sustain advocacy. In this way, we recognize that advocacy capacity is not limited to discrete tactical or strategic skills; it also encompasses components of organizational effectiveness that are needed to engage in effective and sustained advocacy efforts. Efforts to strengthen these different kinds of capacity may include trainings or skill-building workshops, experiential learning opportunities (learning by doing), knowledge-sharing or networking opportunities, support or guidance offered by technical assistance providers or others with relevant expertise, financial resources, and material resources (e.g., computer software, security systems).

### IN THIS BRIEF

- What do we mean by “strengthening advocacy capacity”?
- How are CSO capacity needs identified?
- What forms of capacity strengthening support do CSOs receive?
- What capacities do CSOs prioritize?
- What are we learning about a principles-based approach to capacity strengthening?

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## How are CSO capacity needs identified?

There are two primary ways that Hewlett grantees and CSOs assess capacity needs in the context of the grantee-CSO relationships: structured assessment approaches, and more informal ad hoc processes.

**Structured approaches** include the [Advocacy Capacity Review \(ACR\)](#), a facilitated process that we developed to help CSOs take the lead in identifying their own capacity strengthening priorities. Two Hewlett grantees have incorporated the ACR into their process for identifying the capacity needs of the CSOs they support. Another grantee similarly employs a facilitated self-assessment process for CSO partners, using an institutional capacity framework comprised of a set of indicators. The ACR framework and similar structured approaches serve as reference points against which to track whether needs have been addressed and to flag areas that have not improved.

Another example: a grantee uses a two-step approach, where needs assessment is part of both the CSO grant application and the “pre-contract” mentoring phase with grant managers who have thematic expertise. This grantee trusts CSOs to identify their priority capacity strengthening needs. Identifying such needs as part of their grant application does not affect their chances for receiving funding. As part of the relationship building that occurs during the pre-contract phase, a grant manager can further clarify which capacity strengthening needs should be included in the budget. After that, the grantee says it “hands over the purse strings” to the CSO to use the budgeted funds to build its priority capacities. In a similar vein, another grantee has provided training and support to CSOs to use a self-diagnosis tool for identifying their own organizational development needs. It then provides small grants in response to the resulting organizational development proposals that CSOs develop.



*CSOs know what they want. They don't want consultants. They want to build the capacity within their own staff.*

- Grantee

A structured, systematic needs assessment process can create opportunities to enhance mutual accountability between the grantee and the CSO. That is, the grantee and the CSO can reach agreement about the CSO's needs and the grantee's commitments to respond. But this structured approach requires intentional follow-up. If the initial needs assessment is not anchored in a thoughtful capacity strengthening plan that is revisited periodically, it may become an increasingly outdated portrait of the CSO's interests and needs as time passes.

**Ad hoc approaches** tend to involve more informal processes for identifying capacity strengthening needs, often in response to capacity needs or interests that emerge. For example, one grantee described a bi-directional flow of frequent communication around needs assessment; sometimes the CSO identifies needs that it would like the grantee to help with, and other times the grantee flags a need that the CSO may have not previously recognized. Other grantees similarly described how communications with their CSO partners provide an opportunity to surface capacity needs that require technical assistance or support – though the frequency of those communications varied across grantees.

This kind of approach allows for organizations to respond to emergent needs, addressing questions and challenges as they arise. This is a responsive approach well-suited to joint implementation of projects, as it can keep work moving and focused on very concrete issues and solutions. However, such ad hoc or responsive approaches can privilege short-term tactical advocacy or even administrative capacity needs – potentially at the expense of the strategy's more ambitious vision for building durable organizational effectiveness.

## What forms of capacity strengthening support do CSOs receive?

Broadly speaking, the capacity strengthening support provided by Hewlett grantees encompasses a mix of more “discrete” forms such as training events, knowledge-sharing convenings, and tools or documents, as well as more “ongoing” forms such as emails or phone/Skype calls to provide technical guidance or help solve problems.

### Forms of Capacity Strengthening Support



#### Trainings

Examples:

- SMART advocacy workshop.
- Webinar on the Gag Rule.
- In-person training on resource development.
- Training on how to use newly installed accounting software.



#### CSO Learning Exchanges

Examples:

- Knowledge-exchange workshops bringing together a grantee’s CSO partners to enable peer learning and networking.
- A WhatsApp group for a grantee’s CSO partners to communicate on an ongoing basis.



#### International Forums

Examples:

- Support for CSOs to participate in international forums such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Population and Development.
- Support for CSOs to participate in a skill-building trip to the International Conference on Family Planning.



#### Tools and Written Materials

Examples:

- Advocacy manuals and issue fact sheets.
- Policy briefs on global initiatives like the SDGs and the Global Financing Facility.
- Online tools for developing workplans and M&E frameworks.



### Ongoing Forms of Support

Examples:

- Problem-solving help or advice provided by grantee staff in person or via Skype/phone or email. This may occur during regularly scheduled grantee-CSO communications on project progress, during virtual “office hours,” or at the initiative of the grantee or the CSO.
- The purpose of different forms of ongoing support varies, ranging from helping CSOs troubleshoot a specific problem to serving as a sounding board and mentor to CSOs.

Some of the capacity strengthening support that CSOs receive is fairly tailored, where grantees work closely with CSO partners one-on-one to address their specific needs – either in response to a formal capacity development plan or in response to an emergent need. Other examples of support are somewhat less tailored; they may be resources offered to a broad swath of CSOs, such as a webinar or workshop that serves as one of the grantee’s “standard offerings.”

In some cases, grantees’ efforts to help CSOs build specific capacities are not accomplished through a single training or visit, but rather **incorporate multiple components of support that unfold over time**. For example, one grantee is working with a CSO partner to develop and use an M&E system. The grantee has sought to support the capacity strengthening process over time by facilitating opportunities for discussion between a local M&E consultant and the CSO staff, developing a guide to help them make sense of focus group findings, and co-presenting a poster that drew on M&E data at the Ouagadougou Partnership annual meeting.

Grantees also elevated opportunities for CSOs to strengthen capacity by participating in international forums. For example, one grantee invited its CSO partners to apply for a sponsored skill-building trip to the International Conference on Family Planning. Assistance for selected CSOs included: travel costs; a preparatory workshop to help CSOs identify their learning objectives for the conference and whom they wanted to meet, which helped grantee staff learn how to support their goals; a WhatsApp group for CSOs to seek support and discuss opportunities; daily check-in meetings at the conference; an opportunity for CSOs to present on their project and receive feedback at a Speakers Corner; and a “close-out evaluation meeting” to reflect on lessons learned and follow-up action steps. Another example comes from a grantee who supports CSOs to participate in major UN meetings and regional conferences. In order to strengthen CSOs’ ability to “navigate and influence diplomatic negotiations” that occur in these forums, the grantee provides multi-day trainings to CSOs ahead of the forums so that they can immediately apply the knowledge and skills they learn. These approaches help shift power to CSOs by enabling CSO representatives to engage more effectively in conferences. Such participation in international forums helps CSOs expand contacts and networks, and build knowledge that they can share with their organizations when they return home.



*Our staff co-create a brave space where [CSOs] can talk through major decisions and/or challenges, and disclose sensitive concerns, like staff turnover or burnout.*

*- Grantee*

## What capacities do CSOs prioritize?

CSOs vary in their capacity strengthening priorities, reflecting their different levels of organizational maturity, size, and advocacy experience, as well as their different advocacy priorities, contexts, and relationships with grantees. Based on our 2018 survey of CSOs, we observed that the most commonly listed priorities encompassed diverse categories of capacities, from aspects of **advocacy strategy** formulation and evaluation to specific **tactical skills** to core components of **management and operations** such as financial resource mobilization (Figure 1). And any one CSO has multiple capacities it would like to strengthen.

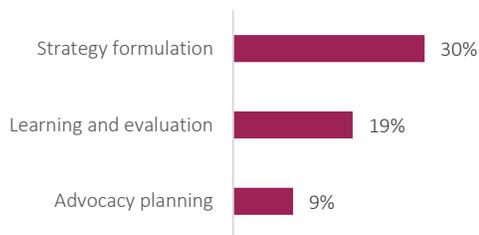
Additional information we gathered for a sub-set of CSOs yielded further insights into these priorities. For example, CSOs’ prioritization of messaging and communications reflected their interest in strengthening their ability to identify, package, and convey influential communications – to strengthen both their advocacy and

their organizational visibility and fundraising potential. The focus on networking and coalition building reflects CSOs’ interest in learning how to more effectively engage with others in the FPRH sector. CSOs who prioritized learning and evaluation sought to strengthen their ability to do things like track results and package data – which is relevant to both grant-specific monitoring and reporting responsibilities as well as more enduring organizational capacities to assess, learn, and adjust.

## Figure 1. CSO Capacity Strengthening Priorities

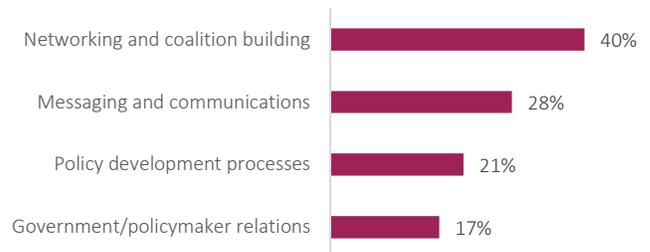
### Advocacy Strategy and Implementation

Organizations apply skills and organizational resources to develop and advance short- and long-term strategies.



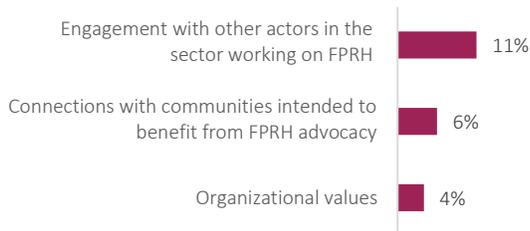
### Tactical Skills

Organizations have expertise in appropriate tactics or access to support implementing these tactics.



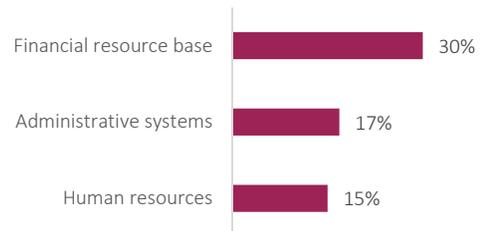
### Commitment to FPRH Advocacy

Organizations initiate and maintain continuous commitment to FPRH issues and engagement with the FPRH sector.



### Management and Operations

Organizations have the institutional reputation, internal systems, and sustainability to engage in and sustain FPRH advocacy.



*\*Note: A total of 53 CSOs responded to our survey in 2018. Each CSO named multiple priorities. The figure shows the most frequently named types of capacity in each of four broad categories included in the Advocacy Capacity Review.*

## What are we learning about a principles-based approach to capacity strengthening?

As reflected in the goal of this strategy, the Hewlett Foundation aims to build sustainable, effective local CSOs with the capacity to positively influence FPRH policymaking and funding outcomes. To achieve this kind of longer-term organizational effectiveness and sustainability, the foundation’s approach to capacity

strengthening is grounded in principles emphasizing power sharing, mutual accountability, tailored capacity assistance, longer-term funding partnerships, and a commitment to learning, sharing, and adapting. Our evaluation is exploring how practices aligned with these principles may contribute to strengthened capacity, as well as why certain practices do *not* help strengthen capacity. Thus far, one clear finding is that the power balance within a grantee-CSO relationship is partly contingent on the level of mutual trust. It typically takes time for organizations to develop the level of trust needed to be honest and open with one another, to give and receive feedback on what's working or not working, and to share power in mutually respectful ways. We have also observed that the strategy's stakeholders – the foundation, grantees, and CSOs – are evolving over time in how they understand the principles and the implication of these principles for capacity support. So, we are not evaluating whether grantee-CSO partnerships align with a single “right” way to strengthen capacity; rather, we are documenting a dynamic process in which multiple actors are exploring what it means to align with these principles – and what the implications are for the roles they play in the capacity strengthening process.

As we continue in our role as the learning partner for this strategy, we look forward to deepening our collective understanding of *how* CSO capacity is strengthened – and what practices or factors enable or inhibit the kind of sustainable advocacy and organizational capacities that the strategy aims to support. The questions below outline some of the areas of inquiry we plan to explore further in the upcoming year.

## QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE FURTHER

- How do CSOs determine capacity strengthening priorities for their organizations? To what extent are their priorities grounded in a vision for their organization's longer-term development vs. their immediate problem-solving or resource needs?
- How do power dynamics manifest in grantee-CSO capacity-building partnerships? How freely do CSOs express their needs? How much power and flexibility do they have in determining their own capacity strengthening priorities and the structure, content, and timing of the support they receive? How have grantees and CSOs resolved differences of opinion about capacity strengthening priorities or about the structure and content of the assistance offered?
- What is the “full package” of capacity support that a CSO receives – both from grantees and from other sources? How do different parts of the support complement one another? How do grantees take into consideration other resources that CSOs are drawing on? What are the implications of these other sources of support for grantees' own resources, time, and skills?
- How well have grantees and CSOs considered the change processes needed to authentically and durably “build” the CSO's capacity? How do grantees help ensure that CSOs have sufficient information, resources, and support to introduce and manage changes in their organization?