Between Service Provision & Advocacy: Disability NGOs in Russia’s Regions

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Content

• Background
  – Theory, Motivation, Research Study

• Findings
  – Service Provision or Advocacy in Russia; An either or question?

• Conclusions
Background

• Advocacy:
  – Activities “to change policies or influence the decision of any institutional elite, government, or state institution” (Schmid, Bar, & Nirel, 2008: 581)
  – Formal and informal advocacy (Mosley, 2011)
  – Primarily associated with Rights organisations, but NGO providing services also function as advocacy organisations (Mosley, 2010)
  – ‘Democracy function’ (Taylor, 2006)

• Service provision:
  – Activities that provide specific assistance to the public
  – NGOs are increasingly called upon to provide services (Gideon, 1998)

• Motivation:
  – Part of PhD study looking at health and educational NGOs
Background

• Most of the data is based on fieldwork in 2008.
• Operationalised inductive research design
  – Primary data collection method were semi-structured interviews
• Study of NGOs in Samara, Perm, Sverdlovsk
  – Mainly in the respective capital cities
• Data draws on organisations that self-classify themselves as serving a constiuency with a disability (*invalidii*)
• Interviews with ca 30 disability organisation
  – Focus on exploring their activities and interactions with institutional environment
Findings

• Three Groups of Organisations
  – We used definition within the literature
  – Data drawn from the parts of the interviews that explore what NGOs understand as ‘advocacy’
    • Marionette Organisations (MO): “organisation create by the state or government officials and have no leadership or constituency in society” (Cook & Viongradova, 2006: 6)
    • Professional Organisations (PO): ‘organisations which are professionally run (i.e. full time staff members) and which have primarily received funding from foreign donors in the past’ (Crotty 2009; Henry, 2006)
    • Grass Roots Organisations (GO): ‘organisations which are primarily run by volunteers and which received little or no funding from foreign donor organisations’ (Crotty, 2009).
Findings

• Marionette organisations (Cook & Vinogradova, 2006):
  • Created by the state or government
  • Organisations such as VOI, VOS VOG
  • In terms of size these are the largest organisations (i.e. members)
  • Advocacy activities mainly informal
    – “call up a friend in the administration” (Respondent in Samara)
    – “we are in the same building as the department for (...) so we can just knock on the door of relevant civil servant” (Respondent in Yekaterinburg)
    – “we do not like working through demonstrations at all” (Respondent in Perm)
  • See themselves as ‘a cushion for public anger’
    – “we act like a buffer” (Respondent in Perm)
  • Advocacy needs to be ‘collaborative’ and ‘consultative’ engagement with the state
Findings

- **PO**
  - Often pursue a ‘rights protection’ agenda
    - Highlight what they have ‘learn’ from past foreign ‘western’ partners
    - Now looking to partner with NGOs in former ‘eastern bloc’ countries
  - Engage in service deliver
  - Most formal activities are limited to ‘participating in round tables’
    - “enlighten people about their rights” (Respondent in Yekaterinburg)
    - “increase the legal understanding of parents for their situation and what rights they have” (Respondent in Samara)
  - See resources rather than the state as main obstacle to NGO activities (advocacy/service)
  - Balance between advocacy activities and the need to access resources via the state
Findings

• GO

  – Small with limited reach
  – Lack capacity to engage in formal and overt ‘against’ the state advocacy activities.
  – Advocacy activities are used to
    • “Address bureaucratic road blocs” (Respondent in Perm)
    • Smooth their day to day operations
  – Focus on trying to establish relationships with the state by attending ‘fairs’ (see Spencer, 2011).
Conclusions

• Advocacy or Service provision
  – It seems for most disability organisations it is an either or decision
    • In particular if considering resource dependency on state provided resources.
  – Focus of the ‘current advocacy’ activities in NGOs might indicate that organisations in this sector lack the capability for advocacy.
  – External pressures to limit NGO engagement in advocacy activities.

• Formal advocacy not primary feature of Disability NGOs.

• Informal relations used to maintain a ‘harmonious relationship’ with state actors
Conclusions

• Organisations which are best position to advocate (in terms of size, potential to commit resources and potential to mobilise large public support) are least likely to do so.
  – Faced with institutional/organisational constraints

• PO see the need to balance access to state controlled funding with ‘open’ and formal advocacy
  – Hence they focus on informal advocacy

• GO lack political embeddedness and state access to engage in ‘advocacy’ beyond ‘dealing with bureaucracy’

• All organisations do not see themselves as responsible to holding the state to account (traditional advocacy)
  – Little focus on ‘influencing decision or policy marking’.
  – Little coalition building for policy change → this is the job of rights organisations

– There is a need to understand advocacy in Russian NGO differently, it is not about policy change.
Thank you for listening
Any Questions?