Information Politics, Transnational Advocacy and Education for All

Introduction

Successful advocacy requires research. Advocacy organizations need to gather evidence to show the extent of a particular social problem, the lack of official response to the problem, and solutions that could be fostered from the ground up. The process of gathering information and using it for political advocacy has been termed "information politics" (Keck & Sikkink 1998). In the past two decades, civil society organizations have played an increasingly prominent role in global educational advocacy and governance (Mundy & Murphy 2001; Mundy 2007). Civil society organizations carry out a significant amount of research into the (lack of) progress made on Education for All goals, monitoring and evaluating education policy and practice at local, national and regional levels, and offering alternative approaches to meet EFA targets. Yet little has been done to examine the evidence-gathering process to see what it can tell us about the role of advocacy research in education policy and the wider role of civil society in global educational change.

This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of evidence-based advocacy and educational governance. In order to do so, I examine information politics as carried out by two civil society organizations in the Education for All (EFA) movement. One is ActionAid International, a large international development NGO originally based in the UK but now headquartered in Johannesburg. The other is the Asian South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE), a regional network of education practitioners and activists currently headquartered in Mumbai. I explore one example of information politics carried out by each of my case study organizations: ActionAid's International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy, and ASPBAE's Asia South-Pacific Education Watch. My intention here is to shed light on how information is collected and disseminated by advocacy NGOs, and what this tells us about the internal dynamics and strategies of these organizations as well as the wider development education field of which they are a part.

Understanding the role of information in political advocacy

Gathering, generating, and disseminating information is the bread-and-butter of advocacy NGOs. These actors gain influence by accessing and reporting on information that is difficult to obtain, using their

diverse networks and, often, close connections with grassroots groups. Information politics is thus central to the legitimacy and authority of an advocacy organization. In fact, a number of scholars have argued that NGOs are able to assert themselves as legitimate public representatives in global governance largely because of the evidence they bring to the policy table. This is what Brown (2001) has termed "technical or performance legitimacy", and it is based on an NGO being acknowledged for its expertise, specialist knowledge and access to information that would otherwise be unavailable (Slim 2002; Edwards & Hulme 1995).

 Yet despite the centrality of information to political advocacy, there are relatively few in-depth examinations of how advocacy organizations use evidence to influence policy-making. Keck and Sikkink's seminal work on transnational advocacy networks (1998) was among the first to highlight the importance of research in contentious politics. In this work, transnational activists and their organizations are characterized as highly strategic, gathering, interpreting and framing evidence in order to persuade others to act and to gain influence as sources of reliable alternative information. Human rights groups are particularly prominent in literature of information politics, as they essentially seek to "promote change by reporting facts" (Keck & Sikkink 1998, 19).

Based on in-depth case studies, Keck and Sikkink have argued that the most effective advocacy research is that which links technical or statistical evidence with testimonials, as the latter provides a dramatization of the former, making an issue seem more real to the public. Their research also highlights the importance of networked structure, which allows advocacy organizations to gather and share information across wide geographical distances with minimal cost in terms of money or time (Keck & Sikkink 1998; Yanacopulos 2005). As will be illustrated by the case-studies in this article, organizations that have widespread and diverse networks with significant grassroots connection are more easily able to obtain hard-to-reach information and powerful testimonial evidence. This can help bolster their legitimacy as crucial actors in policy governance and as representatives of disadvantaged populations (Perkin and Court 2005; Van Rooy 2004; Slim 2002; Edwards and Gaventa 2001).

Scholars at the Overseas Development Institute have conducted a number of important studies on the links between research and global development policy (Court & Maxwell 2005; Court & Young 2005; Pollard & Court 2005). This body of work points to three broad factors that determine whether research-based evidence is likely to impact policy-making: the external political context, the

relationships between research and policy communities, and the quality of the evidence gathered. Successful evidence-based advocacy is able to gather credible and relevant data, package this information in a way that resonates with the target policy community, and take advantage of political opportunities to showcase this research. For example, Pollard and Court (2005) highlight the success of the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which gathered a massive amount of data on the impact of national debt and the benefits of debt relief, brought key policy-makers onside, and targeted political opportunities available at the G8 summit. The importance of being able to tailor evidence to fit with a particular external political context, such as a global conference or summit, will be further discussed in relation to the case-studies explored later in this article.

It should be noted that in international development policy, particular emphasis is placed on evidence drawn from the perspectives and experience of those impacted by poverty. These individuals and communities are rarely able to make their voices heard at the global (or even national) policy level, so the information is carried upwards by transnational NGOs who can more readily access policy-makers. This can engender significant gaps between the grassroots gathering and the transnational telling: "Local people, in other words, sometimes lose control over their stories in a transnational campaign" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998: p. 19). Vavrus and Seghers (2010) have shown that the partnership model of international development requires "the voices of the poor" to be included in reports, but these are "not written by the children, farmers, petty traders, or teachers" (p. 86), generally not even in their language, and thus significant power is placed in the hands of the organizations who carry out the research and interpret these "voices" for the purpose of policy-making.

Although a discussion of this power imbalance is beyond the scope of this particular article, it is important to bear in mind that gathering and disseminating evidence is far from politically neutral. In the field of international development, we face a constant challenge of balancing between good intentions and paternalism, and between empowerment and control. Furthermore, getting the "voices of the poor" included in advocacy work, research or policy-making is difficult both in theory and in practice. One short coming of the present article is its focus on two organizations that are large, relatively well-funded, and run by highly-educated individuals. I have not sought the voices of the grassroots civil society groups and country-level staff within ActionAid and ASPBAE's networks. Instead, this article focuses on the leadership of both organizations in order to shed light on how they gather information to use for the purposes of political advocacy. This research has required a careful

accounting of both the internal dynamics of each organization as well as of the external environment in which they operate. Balancing between these two arenas is conceptually difficult. The following section will discuss the theoretical frameworks I have used to help me accomplish this balancing act.

Conceptual Framework: accounting for external and internal dynamics in advocacy organizations

My research draws on social movement theory to understand how relatively powerless and under-resourced actors engage in collective action. It is perhaps somewhat contentious to characterize "Education for All" as a social movement given that the campaign originated as a state-led global governance initiative, and that civil society organizations were marginalized through most of the first decade of EFA (Mundy & Murphy 2001). However, both ActionAid and ASPBAE describe their advocacy in terms of participating in a global social movement (ASPBAE 2009; actionaid.org.uk, accessed 11 October 2013), and, as will be discussed here, I have found social movement theory to be a particularly useful lens with which to analyze the role of these actors in EFA governance.

A common framework in social movement theory is the political opportunity approach, which recognizes that the ability of activists to effect social change is highly context-dependent and shaped by factors external to the organization itself – a perspective shared by many of the authors discussed in the section above. The political environment in which advocacy NGOs operate place various opportunities and constraints on their social change efforts; thus political opportunity theory argues that the success of a movement is largely determined by structures within a given political system – for example, ruptures within a governing body or the presence of elite allies (Tarrow 1994; McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 1996; Smith, Pagnucco & Chatfield 1997). Activists will often use particular discourse to tailor their advocacy efforts to appeal to specific targets and political opportunities, a process social movement theorists call *issue-framing* (Benford & Snow 2000; Snow et al 1986).

A growing body of literature examines the political opportunities in global educational governance and the role civil society organizations play within this regime. The literature points to the importance of a global consensus on development education centred on the Education for All (EFA) agenda (Mundy & Murphy 2001; Mundy 2006; 2007; Jones 2007; Verger & Novelli 2012). Civil society organizations are widely seen by governments and international organizations as crucial for delivering the educational services stipulated in the EFA framework, and inviting civil society representatives into policy discussions

is also seen as an important legitimizing factor in global governance (Murphy 2005). Thus we see an array of new political opportunities for civil society advocacy, for example the EFA High Level Group Meeting, the Working Group Meeting on EFA and the Collective Consultation of NGOs on EFA. These venues serve to open up space for civil society advocacy, "within the sphere of entitlements by virtue of government sanction" (Tomlinson & Macpherson 2007, 12).

A number of authors have argued that these various EFA venues are largely donor-driven and privilege northern INGOs at the expense of southern civil society groups (Torres 2001; Kitamura 2007; Newman 2011). Particularly relevant to the purposes of this paper, Joel Samoff (2007) has shown that policy-oriented education research is most often commissioned by international organizations and donors and serves to institutionalize the power of these global players. An analysis of the global power structures at play in education research is beyond the scope of this paper. However, these critical perspectives point to the need for further examination into the connections between civil society advocacy research and the international aid regime.

It is important to note that the expansion of political opportunities for civil society within the EFA framework is not simply a product of the external environment. An array of civil society organizations, including ActionAid, ASPBAE and other members of the Global Campaign for Education, has been instrumental in opening these political spaces for civil society advocacy (Mundy & Murphy 2001; Verger & Novelli 2012). The Civil Society Education Fund, for example, was the result of political pressure from the Global Campaign for Education and it leading members, including ActionAid (Tomlinson & Macpherson 2007; McCormick 2011).

Although Sidney Tarrow (1994) has argued that political opportunities are not necessarily permanent, and can in fact be altered through the advocacy efforts of non-state actors, very few social movement scholars have focussed on this aspect of political opportunities, favouring an examination of how external structures shape movements rather than the other way around (Goodwin & Jasper 1999; Meyer 2004). This structuralist bias limits the utility of political opportunity theory for the present study: attributing collective action to political opportunities does not help us understand how activists work within, alter and even create these opportunities. In other words, this theory lacks a sense of how decision-making by key individuals, albeit individuals working within a broader environment, shapes collective action.

I would argue that decisions made by key individuals and organizations have had a profound impact on the way the EFA agenda has emerged and the shape of its discourse. James Jasper (2004; 2010) argues that we need to pay attention to what happens at the micro-level of decision-making in order to improve our understating of macro-level social change processes. This involves careful specification of who is actually making strategic choices: sometimes it is large groups of people trying to arrive at consensus; sometimes it is a single individual who is ultimately decisive. Taking a cue from this, the present study examines the way two case-studies of advocacy research were crafted, how ideas were proposed and how projects were implemented, looking at both external context and internal dynamics.

Case-study selection and research design

I chose to focus my research on ActionAid and the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE). This is an example of "most different" case study analysis: ActionAid is a large, well-funded northern INGO with roots in the British charitable aid sector, where ASPBAE is a smaller, relatively underfunded, southern-based regional NGO with roots as a professional network of adult educators. Yet they have a few key things in common that make them interesting cases for comparison in the context of this paper. Both organizations campaign for education as a fundamental human right, a duty for governments to provide and for international donors to fund. Information politics is central to the strategies of both organizations, as both gather significant data from their grassroots networks and use this to strengthen their advocacy campaigns. Both organizations are prominent within EFA governance and both have leading roles in the Global Campaign for Education – the largest civil society coalition in the development education field - making a study of their advocacy work particularly relevant. Finally, comparing northern and southern CSOs also allows me to counter the assumption that well-funded northern organizations invariably dominate governance regimes.

This study focuses on micro-level change processes by examining how these case-study organizations crafted informational strategies in specific contexts. I seek to understand how these strategies reflect both the wider global development environment and the agency of leaders within each organization. To do so, I relied primarily on qualitative analysis of key documents related to the International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy and Asia South-Pacific Education Watch. Some of these are publically-available in electronic format and others are internal documents accessed via the organizations'

headquarters. A list of these documents can be found in Appendix 1, with bibliographic details at the end of the article.

This textual data was supplemented by a small number of semi-structured interviews with former and current staff involved in each project (n = 7). Very little data from these interviews is included in this article for a number of reasons. Most crucially, many interviewees claimed only a very small role in each project and referred me to a single individual in each organization who was most heavily involved. This centralization of each project will be discussed in more detail later. Many interviewees also felt that too much time had passed for them to give an accurate recollection of events and instead forwarded me documents relating to the planning of each project. Finally, those individuals who were closely involved in each project to the extent that they could discuss details about the proposal and implementation are perhaps too close to give an unbiased accounting of how the project unfolded. For all these reasons, my analysis of both the Benchmarks and Education Watch relies overwhelmingly on textual sources.

I analyzed data from each organization using process tracing methods, examining the steps that led to a particular decision being made. Process tracing is particularly useful in studying strategic choice, as it focuses on the information accessed, judgements made, and relevant timing of events leading up to decision-making, relating variables to one another as causal processes (Ford et al 1989). I focussed in particular on what sort of inputs led to key decisions, which individuals or bodies were making these decisions and crafting strategies, and how these were ultimately implemented across each organization. Through this comparative work, some patterns and relationships began to emerge. These helped break down differences between each organization - large vs. small, northern vs. southern, well funded vs. under-funded – revealing that these distinctions, which seem so important in much of the literature of NGOs and global governance, are not as critical as one may assume.

Case Study 1: ActionAid's International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy

Research is a central activity for ActionAid's International Education Team (IET). The focus of this research is on gaps between official commitments for Education for All and the reality in national contexts. Most of these reports target northern donors and international financial organizations for their failure to live up to EFA promises (actionaid.org.uk/100240/education. Accessed 12 February

2013). In this section, I will be examining one major evidenced-based advocacy project carried out by ActionAid's International Education Team: The International Benchmarks for Adult Literacy.

The Context: The EFA Global Monitoring Report

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report (GMR) has been published annually by Unesco since 2002. Funded jointly by Unesco and an array of multilateral and bilateral organizations involved in Education for All, the GMR is "the prime instrument to assess global progress towards achieving the six 'Dakar' EFA goals" (Unesco.org, accessed 8 February 2012). The report is disseminated widely, but is primarily meant to target policy-makers, especially governments (Editorial Board for the Global Monitoring Report 2004). Each edition of the GMR draws on expert reports and scholarship from research institutes, aid organizations, UN bodies, governments and NGOs, and each focuses on a different aspect of the EFA agenda. In 2006 the focus was "Literacy for Life" and it is in this context that ActionAid developed the Benchmarks for Literacy.

In September of 2004, the editorial board of the GMR met in Paris to discuss the 2006 report on literacy. The draft report of this meeting (Editorial Board GMR 2004) provides valuable insight into the perceived gaps in the EFA framework concerning literacy. The report indicated that there was a need for a better understanding of the "diversity and complexity of literacy issues" based on "programme experience as much as statistical data" (ibid, 1). It went on to elaborate this point:

> What civil society initiatives can be scaled up, what value and scope do they demonstrate? Note that short-term approaches do not work – the report should show what does and does not work, with special attention to civil society experience...Adult literacy is one of the timed EFA targets – the report should look at what kinds and levels of investment are necessary to reach it, national budgets and international aid (ibid 6).

In October, ActionAid submitted a proposal for *The International Benchmarks for Adult Literacy* to Unesco and the Global Monitoring Report. The proposal explained that the Benchmarks would be based on a global survey of adult literacy practitioners in over 50 countries in order to determine "what works" in adult literacy programming. The output would be

> a simple framework that will help governments, policy makers and donors address and achieve the adult literacy goal set in Dakar…. It will produce indicative calculations about average costs of literacy programmes – which can serve as the basis for calculations of the costs of achieving the Dakar goal on literacy at national and international level (ActionAid 2004, 1).

This proposal provides a good example of what Snow et al (1986) term strategic issue framing, as it was designed to address the specific issues raised by the GMR editorial board as discussed above. ActionAid firmly placed itself as a link with civil society organizations carrying out literacy programs, and offered a practitioner-based solution to "show what does and does not work… what kinds and levels of investment are necessary" (Editorial Board GMR 2004, 6). It emphasized both its ability to collect data from diverse organizations working across the globe, and to analyze this data based on its expertise in the field (ActionAid & GCE 2005b, 3).

Through this proposal, ActionAid chose to frame its work in terms of accessing much-needed information on adult literacy. This required indicating there was a gap to fill, a policy problem that had yet to be addressed, and that they were best placed to fill this gap (Pollard & Court 2005). It argued that adult literacy was drastically underfunded by national governments and donors, and all but ignored in the wider EFA agenda. But most importantly, the proposal argued that there was a clear reason for this, "a lack of basic information about what works and how much it costs" leading to difficulties in measuring and evaluating literacy programs (ibid, 2-3). What was required was "tightly focused research" led by ActionAid and the GCE, who were "well-placed" to carry out this research due to their long-standing involvement in literacy programming and advocacy "given that civil society organizations have played such a key role in adult literacy as government support for the sector has diminished" (ibid, 4). The proposal was accepted, followed by four months of research and surveys of 142 individuals and 67 literacy programmes. *Writing the Wrongs: International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy* was published in 2005 and included in the 2006 EFA Global Monitoring Report.

The Benchmarks were designed to target other EFA policy fora as well, including the EFA Working Group, the High Level Group and the Donor Consortium on EFA. In all these cases, the Benchmarks were pitched as a way to re-invigorate the UN Literacy Decade, which had been declared in 2003 (ActionAid 2004). Crucially, the Benchmarks were designed to target the World Bank during its policy review process on adult literacy. Highlighting the importance of personal contacts and allies to political opportunity, ActionAid indicated in its proposal to GMR that it had already begun initial discussions with an individual at the World Bank to ensure that the Benchmarks would have "significant impact on the World Bank's policy positions" (ibid, 8).

Project design and implementation

The benchmarking project was conceived by then- head of the IET, David Archer, who played a leading role in the design and implementation of the project, including coordinating the research team and writing the final report, *Writing the Wrongs*. The extent of his involvement in the Benchmarks is such that, when asked about the reasons behind the project and its early conceptualization, he spoke in the first person ("I was trying to..."; "I wanted to...") indicating his deep personal attachment to this project (interview with David Archer, January 16, 2013). It is not surprising that the education team leader had such a prominent role in establishing the Benchmarks. Archer is well known for his expertise in, and commitment to, adult literacy and particularly for initiating the *Reflect* method (Sayed & Newman, 2009; dela Torre & Kannabiran, 2007). He has been responsible for much of the education research carried out at ActionAid, and is recognized inside and outside ActionAid for his studies on the influence of the IMF on education financing (Sayed & Newman, 2009).

A small research coordinating team of nine individuals, drawn from ActionAid and members of the GCE, assisted in the creation of the original Benchmarks survey. This was sent out to hundreds of organizations that were identified as carrying out good adult literacy programs. The survey consisted of 108 questions, dealing with a wide range of issues such as how literacy is defined, enrollment numbers, cost of the program, and the training of the facilitators (ActionAid & GCE 2005b). A total of 67 organizations responded. The coordinating team analysed the survey responses to draw up a list of twelve benchmarks. This list was re-circulated to the original respondents as well as to other literacy organizations (n = 550) for feedback before the final report was written by Archer and published by the Global Campaign for Education in 2005.

The Benchmarking project was conceived and led by ActionAid, so why decentralize the implementation of the project by carrying it out through the GCE? In an interview with David Archer (January 16, 2013), he indicated that implementing the Benchmarks through the GCE was a means to increase their legitimacy so that "it wasn't just one institution and one voice". The central concern seemed to be that, if the Benchmarks were just done by ActionAid's IET, it might look like a way to promote *Reflect*, their "brand" of adult literacy pedagogy. He also spoke at length of the larger concern of balancing ActionAid's brand identity in the GCE, explaining that much of ActionAid's education research carries the GCE brand – a fact that he acknowledged is not always welcomed by the marketing department: "It is a

sacrifice to our brand identity yes, but it is the right thing to do. We have sought to do research that will be taken abroad at the global level by the GCE so there is a larger voice behind it, so there is more legitimacy".

Funding the Benchmarks through Unesco's Global Monitoring Report also served to expand the reach and legitimacy of the project. It is important to note that it was not due to resource need that ActionAid submitted a funding proposal for the Benchmarks to Unesco in 2004. The project could have been funded by ActionAid alone, but carrying the work out through Unesco and having it published as part of the annual GMR was a way to broaden ownership and increase impact (Interview with David Archer, January 16, 2013). It also allowed the research to be more broadly legitimated to avoid the perception that the Benchmarks represented only the interests of ActionAid.

Crucial to the legitimacy of the Benchmarks was that they were based on input and feedback from hundreds of individuals and organizations. The Benchmarks background paper submitted to the Global Monitoring Report (ActionAid & GCE 2005b) began by explaining the wide reach of the research: 100 key informants, 67 programs across 35 countries, reaching over 4 million learners, feedback from 142 respondents in 47 countries, mostly from "low or middle income countries" (ibid 1). The above numbers are all in bold text, serving to highlight just how important they are for the credentials of the project and the researchers.

Throughout the Benchmarks proposal and background paper, ActionAid and the GCE's place within a broad civil society movement was made explicit. This was explained as key to the success of the project: "The fact that the research is managed by ActionAid together with the Global Campaign for Education provides a unique opportunity to secure broad-based support for this work" (ActionAid 2004, 1). ActionAid's network outside of the GCE is also highlighted: "ActionAid will share the outcomes through the International Reflect Circle (with 350 organizations in 60 countries). Core learning will also be put up on the various web-sites run by these organizations" (ibid, 7). Strong connections with other networks were also emphasized: "The International Council of Adult Education and its regional bodies will be particularly encouraged to draw on this work and disseminate it through their network" (ibid). And the reach of the Benchmarks was wide: distribution lists internal to ActionAid indicate that they mailed out copies to over 600 organizations and individuals in NGOs, universities, UN agencies, bilateral and multilateral donors.

However, despite the breadth of the data-gathering process, the Benchmarks were essentially an ActionAid project and the influence of ActionAid on the Benchmarks is quite clear. Although they did a commendable job of opening the floor to diverse voices, the responses to the Benchmarks survey do reflect the philosophical underpinnings of ActionAid. This perhaps shows an inherent bias in carrying out survey work among organizations identified by ActionAid and its associates as "good". For example, the second and third most common aims of literacy, as indicated by survey respondents, were "a literacy programme must help learners deal with the power issues around the use of literacy in their daily lives", and "just teaching people to read and write alone does not empower people". (ActionAid & GCE 2005b, 12). Many respondents "emphasized the importance of a rights framework – that literacy should be conceived explicitly as a right. Often the focus was on education / lifelong learning as both a right in itself and an enabling right – one which enables people to access or secure other fundamental rights" (ibid, 10). This is expanded into Benchmark 3 - a statement on governments as duty-bearers: "Literacy is a basic right and so the lead responsibility to meet that right has to be with the government. It cannot be the responsibility of NGOs to deliver on a right – nor is it feasible for them to do so" (ibid, 19). This language borrows heavily from ActionAid's own work on *Reflect* (ActionAid 2003) and on education rights (ActionAid 2007) thus indicating that, although the Benchmarks were decentralised in implementation, they clearly revealed the hand of their author.

Project follow-up

The Benchmarks were designed as a tool for policy-makers, particularly national governments but also international donors (ActionAid & GCE 2005b). To appeal to this target audience, ActionAid had to be highly strategic in the way they framed the twelve Benchmarks. Working with governments to encourage take-up of the Benchmarks was a key part of ActionAid's strategy – to appear not as an adversary confronting failed promises, but rather offering a solution for improving national literacy rates. Benchmarks 10, 11 and 12 focus on what governments can do towards this end, including an estimate of spending "between US$50 and US$100 per learner per year for at least three years" (ActionAid & GCE 2005a, 3). This sum is depicted not as an expense, but as an investment with high social and economic returns.

Using peer-reviewed academic research, the Benchmarks highlighted the role of adult literacy in improving gender inequity, infant mortality, GDP and addressing HIV/AIDS. This is supplemented with testimony from participants in literacy programs, detailing the benefits that have come with their new-found literacy skills. As Keck and Sikkink (1998) have argued, linking "hard" evidence and testimony is a powerful and effective combination in information politics. Adding to this a financial incentive – framing adult literacy not as an expense but a sound investment – indicates a high degree of sophistication in how ActionAid framed the Benchmarks as an advocacy tool aimed at national governments and international donors.

The Benchmarks were also designed to be used by civil society organizations as means to hold governments to account for promises made at the Dakar conference, recognizing that "there are limits to how far any material, even simple benchmarks, can be internalized by ministries of education without some continued pressure" (Archer 2008). *Education Rights: A Guide for Practitioners and Activists* (ActionAid 2007) offered a detailed analysis of how the Benchmarks could be used by civil society organizations advocating for adult literacy. This document went through each of the twelve Benchmarks, explaining its relevance for advocacy and program development, and offering specific questions that should be asked in order to contextualize the benchmarks. These included very clear and specific questions like "What is the length of literacy programme? And the frequency of meetings?" (228), to more complex questions such as "What is the level of the facilitators motivation? What motivates them?" (227) and questions requiring a high--degree of political engagement, such as "What proportion of non-governmental (including NGO, CSO, international and bilateral organizations) project support goes to adult literacy?" (230). In addition to over sixty-five suggested questions, the guide also offered broad suggestions for advocating for adult literacy via the Benchmarks, for example:

> You may wish to publicise the lack of investment in adult education locating this in relation to the right to education. You could develop press briefings, or a workshop or conference, to share the results of the review. These different uses suggest different levels of collaboration with the government to conduct the review and discuss the findings – some will be more confrontational than others (ActionAid 2007, 225).

ActionAid's efforts to encourage take-up of the Benchmarks indicates its ongoing balancing act between centralizing control over the way the benchmarks are defined, and decentralizing the way they are implemented. Of course, ActionAid cannot control whether its country programmes or partners choose to use the Benchmarks at all, much less whether they choose to follow the guided questions offered in *Education Rights*. By offering clear ideas of how to use the Benchmarks, ActionAid was attempting to

simultaneously guide the fruition of this project and encourage local ownership of it. The 2009 Education Review indicated that this was a successful strategy: of 27 country programmes, 17 indicate being "involved" or "highly involved" in promoting the Benchmarks, up significantly from 11 in 2005 (Sayed & Newman 2009, 22). The same review found that the Benchmarks were considered the second most important publication from the IET out of a list 13 (second only to Education Rights) with only 2 of 23 respondents indicating that they were not useful (ibid, 61).

Case study 2: ASPBAE and the Asia- South Pacific Education Watch

Research has always been a central activity for ASPBAE, owing in part to its original affiliation with university education departments. ASPBAE predominantly publishes reports on the status of education in Asian-Pacific countries, and these publications "form an integral part of ASPBAE's information, education and advocacy activities and efforts" (ASPBAE 2009a). In this section, I will be exploring one of the most significant advocacy research projects carried out by ASPBAE: The Asia-South Pacific Education Watch. EdWatch is "an independent, citizen-based monitoring mechanism for assessing the status of education at regional, national, and local levels" (ASPBAE 2009a). It has two central goals: to assess the progress on EFA goals, with a focus on access for disadvantaged populations; and to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to engage with education policy (ASPBAE 2009a; 2006).

The Context: Real World Strategies and the Midterm Review of Education for All

In 2006, the Global Campaign for Education launched the *Real World Strategies – Towards EFA 2015* project. *Real World Strategies* (RWS), funded through the Dutch government and the Commonwealth Education Fund, was designed "to support national education coalitions in the global south to develop strategic advocacy agendas and increase their capacity to hold governments to account on progress to EFA" (Moriarty 2010, 8). RWS supported 52 national EFA coalitions across the south. But rather than fund these coalitions directly, the GCE chose three regional partners to manage the project: the Africa Network Campaign on Education for All (ANCEFA), *Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación* (CLADE), and, for the Asia-Pacific, ASPBAE. It was through the financial support from RWS that Asia-South Pacific Education Watch was launched.

Education Watch was designed as a way to monitor and assess government progress on Education for All commitments. In order for ASPBAE to establish the need for such a project, it had to argue that official government data was unreliable, and that there was a pressing need for detailed, high quality research that could uncover the actual limits to achieving EFA. Thus the 2006 Education Watch proposal began by outlining the extent of the education crisis in the region, highlighting the "historical legacy of successive governments placing a low priority on their responsibility to provide free education of good quality to all its peoples" (ASPBAE 2006, 1). This was echoed in the 2009 Education Watch synthesis report: "centuries of neglect, underinvestment in education, corruption and inefficiency by successive governments in the countries of the region have left a grim toll in poor education performance" (ASPBAE 2009a, 1). The solution offered was an independent review of the status of primary and basic education that could fill gaps in official statistics.

Education Watch was specifically designed and timed to target an important political opportunity - the mid-decade review of EFA happening in 2007 and 2008 (ASPBAE 2009a; 2009b). ASPBAE has nurtured a strategic partnership with the Unesco office in Bangkok, and took advantage of spaces opened up for civil society input through the EFA review to push for inclusion of the Education Watch data. ASPBAE was invited to participate in, and present EdWatch findings at, a number of EFA mid-term events, for example the 8th EFA Coordinators' meeting in 2007, the South Asia EFA Mid-term Policy Conference in 2008 and various ASEAN-SEAMEO consultations on EFA (ASPBAE 2009b; Hart 2009).

The EdWatch project also represented an important resource opportunity for ASPBAE. When *Real World Strategies* commenced in 2006, the portion going to ASPBAE represented 45% of the organization's total income (Moriarty 2010). Thus acting as regional manager for *Real World Strategies* was a major for success for ASPBAE, in effect doubling its financial capacity. This funding was also highly flexible, allowing ASPBAE the freedom to prioritize how money should be spent to bolster EFA advocacy in the region.

Project design and implementation

Because funds were limited, ASPBAE's Executive Council had to be very strategic in deciding where to pilot the EdWatch project in order to achieve maximum impact and to avoid spreading resources too thinly. A former ASPBAE staff member recalled that "in our staff meetings we would analyze country by country, organization by organization, to see which are the ones that we should prioritize, where we

should put our efforts in, where are there actually possibilities of success, knowing full well that we cannot work with all the countries because we do not have those kind of resources" (Interview with former ASPBAE staff member, January 22, 2013). Out of the thirty countries in its network, ASPBAE chose seven national coalitions to pilot the EdWatch project in 2006. These were chosen "on the basis of their previous successful experiences in advocating education issues at the national level, and for their aptitude regarding country-specific issues and concerns. They were in the best position to carry out a national study on the scale that ASPBAE envisioned and required" (ASPBAE 2009b, 4).

It was important to ASPBAE that "Education Watch serves not only as disjointed national initiatives but also a coordinated regional initiative" (ASPBAE 2006, 2). To satisfy this, ASPBAE adopted a region-wide theme for EdWatch: *Addressing EFA Gaps, Focusing on Disadvantaged Groups*. Each sub-region had a specific focus: the national coalitions in South Asia were to focus on education financing and budget tracking; the coalitions from Southeast Asia were to focus on education access and quality for marginalized and under-served communities; and in the South Pacific focus was on literacy for out-of-school youth and adults (ASPBAE 2009b).

ASPBAE established a research framework to guide each of the EdWatch projects so that the data generated at country-level could more easily "feed into advocacy campaigns at all levels from the local to the national, regional and global" (ASPBAE 2006, 2). This framework included a set of common indicators, a common research methodology, and a common process for analyzing data and writing the final reports. For example, ASPBAE proposed that all EdWatch projects should use participatory action research methods and a shared set of survey instruments, based on those developed by CAMPE Bangladesh. These were

> household survey questionnaires, school survey questionnaire, private cost of schooling survey questionnaire, questionnaire for socio-economic information, community profile questionnaire, assessment of competency-based learning outcome, and literacy test instruments. For the Asia Pacific exercise these questionnaires can be adapted and translated in local languages based on contextual peculiarities and capacities of national coalitions for conducting detailed assessments (ibid).

Each of the selected national coalitions was invited to submit a proposal for EdWatch that fit the above themes and methodology, but "interpreted based on their country contexts and prevailing education issues." (ASPBAE 2009b, 4). ASPBAE then held a series of planning workshops for each sub-region to firm-up and strengthen the research plan of each coalition: "After drawing up and pre-testing research

instruments, as well as conducting national and local training workshops, the coalitions proceeded with data gathering" (ibid). The actual field work was carried out entirely by the research teams of each national coalition. ASPBAE took on the role of "backseat enabler", and focussed its activities on providing technical expertise and facilitating knowledge-sharing between the pilot projects through in-country workshops and sub-regional events (Castillo 2012; Hart 2009; ASPBAE 2009b).

 Having control over implementation reside at national levels was extremely important as the overall goal of EdWatch, as well as of *Real World Strategies*, was to strengthen these coalitions' capacity to carry out good policy advocacy work. ASPBAE defined the project as "both a research and a capability-building exercise... an occasion for building the capacity of partners" (ASPBAE 2009b, 6). An external review of RWS concluded that ASPBAE's approach of building the capacity of national coalitions to carry out their own EdWatch research highly successful, and indicated that ASPBAE had gone further than the other two regional networks in facilitating the creation of strong national coalitions while maintaining a cohesive regional identity (Moriarty 2010). Members of the coalitions also highlighted this decentralized implementation of EdWatch as a positive aspect of the project, reporting that this gave them a sense of ownership over the project and a feeling that they had become stakeholders in the regional EFA movement (Razon 2008).

Project follow-up

ASPBAE acknowledges that EdWatch contributed significantly to strengthening its voice in regional and global policy-making, allowing it to "participate actively in regional and global forums, particularly in the EFA mid-term policy review processes, the ASEAN-SEAMEO consultations on the EFA and the CONFINTEA VI assemblies. The EdWatch study results served as critical inputs to recommendations and advocacies arising from these forums" (ASPBAE 2009b, 64). External reviews (Moriarty 2010; Hart 2009) have praised the impact that EdWatch made in highlighting accountability gaps in EFA commitments: "Education Watch provided key data and evidence by which coalitions could hold their governments to account. It exposed the failure of both government policy and weakness in official data. It recommended feasible steps for governments to address the problem" (Moriarty 2010, 51).

As mentioned, ASPBAE also intended for Education Watch to act as a capacity-building exercise for national education coalitions (ASPBAE 2006). Keck and Sikkink's (1998) boomerang theory stipulates

that domestic NGOs whose influence on their own state is blocked can sometimes, through their connection with other NGOs and INGOs, use global governance venues as a way to apply pressure to their own governments. The EdWatch project revealed that many Asia-Pacific governments continue to disregard their EFA commitments and are not responsive to pressures from domestic civil society actors. In response, ASPBAE facilitated the access of three national coalitions (Bangladesh, Philippines and Cambodia) into the 8th Unesco EFA coordinators meeting in 2007 so that these coalitions could share the data and evidence emerging from EdWatch with policy-makers from outside their countries. The objectives were for these coalitions to gain a sense of a common regional platform and to see how national policies are influenced by regional and global decisions (ASPBAE 2011), as well as to "influence the official reports with data and evidence emerging from the Education Watch processes" (Moriarty 2010, 38).

Later in the year, ASPBAE brought representatives from four national coalitions to engage with policy-makers at the Technical Support Groups of UNESCO's Mid-Decade Assessment Steering Committee, providing these coalitions with "another opportunity for lobbying national governments' policy positions backed by Education Watch evidence" (ibid). That ASPBAE was able to facilitate the participation of national coalitions in global EFA venues was a huge step for these groups: this marked the first time any of them had taken part in transnational policy venues, and allowed them to influence the direction of EFA planning (Hart 2009). This was also important for ASPBAE's reputation in global governance fora and among civil society groups: according to a former ASPBAE staff member, "now when Unesco convenes a regional forum they always invite national coalitions for representation – this was big step for civil society and it was facilitated by ASPBAE" (Interview with former ASPBAE staff member, January 22, 2013).

Based on this success, ASPBAE has produced a series of five *Education Watch Toolkits*, each covering a specific "module" inspired by EdWatch pilots, for example budget tracking, literacy assessment, and monitoring school fees. These toolkits were designed to "encourage the replication of the EdWatch initiative. It is a concrete contribution in raising knowledge, confidence and overall civil society efforts in EFA monitoring and advocacy" (ASPBAE 2010). Each toolkit is a very detailed how-to guide, covering survey methodologies, interview guides, workshop plans, and suggestions of possible sources of information and data.

These toolkits can be seen as an illustration of ASPBAE's dual role as project director and enabler. The parameters of the EdWatch project are tightly defined by APSBAE's executive, while the implementation of the project, including which module to use and which issue to investigate, is left entirely in the hands of national civil society groups. Much like ActionAid's guide to using the Benchmarks in its *Education Rights* handbook, this design provides a cohesive platform for advocacy, while giving locally-based groups the opportunity to tailor their use of the EdWatch toolkit to suit their specific contexts and to build their own capacity as policy advocates.

Conclusions

The above case studies have illustrated a number of important points about how information is used by civil society organizations involved in Education for All. To begin with, we can see that the networked structure of both ActionAid and ASPBAE was an asset in terms of their ability to gather high-quality evidence and to claim that their evidence was representative of the needs of particular populations. These two factors – gathering hard-to-reach evidence and representing hard-to-reach communities - appear to be crucial for ActionAid and ASPBAE to assert themselves as legitimate players in educational governance.

We have also seen how the external political environment presents various opportunities for evidence-based advocacy. Both the Benchmarks and Education Watch were strategically framed and timed to respond to the opportunities presented by the dominant actors within education governance: various EFA high-level fora, the World Bank, international donors. At the same time, these projects were also designed to speak to the mandates and goals of each organization, for example ActionAid's focus on adult literacy and educational financing and ASPBAE's commitment to building a strong regional voice for EFA.

This article has also explored a specific organizational dynamic at play in both ActionAid and ASPBAE: advocacy strategies are crafted centrally, but implementation is highly decentralized. This appears to be a successful strategy: because the creation of each project was centralized, they were able to be concise and sharp policy points, offering a cohesive platform and avoiding the fuzziness that can come from multiple perspectives and definitions. They were also able to be produced quickly in order to target specific political opportunities within EFA governance. But implementation of the projects was highly

decentralized, allowing each to be broadly-owned and legitimated. Decentralization is a key way for the "nodes" in an advocacy network to gather and disseminate information, but it is also an essential way to balance centralized control by allowing the implementation of advocacy work to proceed in a way that incorporates a diversity of actors and maintains a sense of bottom-up, democratic decision-making.

This appears to support recent work by Wendy Wong (2012), whose study of human rights NGOs argues that the combination of centralized proposal power and decentralized implementation power is key to successful advocacy politics (Wong 2012). Yet it is important to consider what implications this organizational dynamic has in terms of the power INGO headquarters hold over their grassroots network. As previously discussed, in international development particular emphasis is placed on evidence drawn from the perspectives and experience of those impacted by poverty. But this evidence is generally carried from the local to the global level by larger NGOs whose legitimacy rests on their ties to both grassroots communities and global governance bodies. This article therefore points to a need for further research into evidence-based advocacy in the Education for All campaign. Future work should examine how advocacy research is translated from local communities to national and global policy fora, and whether or not this process can lead to more participatory and equitable educational governance.

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Appendix 1: List of primary source documents

	Public documents	Internal Documents	External documents and evaluations
The International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy	GCE & ActionAid 2005. *Writing the Wrongs: International benchmarks for Adult Literacy.* ActionAid 2005. *Rights to End Poverty: ActionAid International Strategy 2005-2010.* ActionAid 2007. *Education Rights: A Guide for Practitioners and Activists.* Archer, David 2007. *The Process of Developing and Using the International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy* Archer, David 2008. *Financing Adult Literacy.*	ActionAid 2004. *Developing and Verifying Benchmarks on Adult Literacy. A GCE/ActionAid Research Proposal for Unesco and the EFA Monitoring Group* GCE & ActionAid 2005. *Global Benchmarks for Adult Literacy. Background paper for the Education for all global monitoring report* ActionAid 2005. *Education Strategic Plan, 2005-2010.* ActionAid 2005. *Policy Strategic Plan 2005-2010.* ActionAid 2006. *Outline proposal for follow up work on the International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy.*	Global Monitoring Report on Education for All, Editorial Board 2004. *Draft Report of the Fifth Meeting.* Sayed, Yusuf and Newman, Kate. 2009. *Education Review 2005-2009 - full report.*
Asia South Pacific Education Watch	ASPBAE 2009. *Asia- South Pacific Education Watch - Reversing Education Disadvantage: Time for All to Act.* ASPBAE 2010. *Education Watch Toolkit: A Resource Pack for EFA Research and Monitoring.* ASPBAE 2011. *Adventures in Advocacy: Real World Strategies for Education in Asia.*	ASPBAE 2006. *Asia South Pacific Education Watch* ASPBAE 2006. *Summary of Discussions.* ASPBAE 2006. *Executive Council Strategic Review and Planning Meeting* ASPBAE 2006. *Draft 2006 ASPBAE Mission and Vision.* ASPBAE 2007. *The Impact of Informal School Fees: Cambodia Summary Report for the Asia-South Pacific Education Watch.*	dela Torre, Edicio and Vasanth Kannabiran. 2007. *Strengthening a Strategic Learning Partnership: An evaluation of ASPBAE- DVV International cooperation.* Razon, V. 2008. *Programme on Capacity-building for Education Advocacy: Accelerating Action to Achieve EFA: CEF-funded components 2006-2007, evaluation report for ASPBAE/CEF.* Hart, Jill 2009. *Commonwealth Education Fund: Final Report.*

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