LAQ Presentation at Freedom House
- Making Human Rights Campaigns Effective while Limiting Unintended Consequences: Lessons from Recent Research

LAQ Presentation at FHI 360
- Maintaining Civic Space in Backsliding Regimes
- Grassroots Reform in the Global South

University of Minnesota Presentation: Making Human Rights Campaigns Effective while Limiting Unintended Consequences: Lessons from Recent Research
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Q1: In your research, how were pretests typically carried out? What size group? How tested? If you could talk more about that.
A1: There was a variety of approaches, from large surveys with the target population to a broader more general strategy. It is a good idea to focus on the target group and use surveys to provide a baseline of how to ask questions about what that message makes them think of. It’s also a good idea to get open-ended responses, and a lot of studies used focus groups with various target or affected audiences. Essentially, you want to pretest with different types of people whom you anticipate receiving the message to understand their reaction. It is also important to remember that in every campaign you will have a different target group, and also sub-target group(s) that will have different interpretation of your message.

Q2: Not surprised that there was not a ton of literature on Human Rights (HR) campaigns but what other HR issues have been researched other than LGBTI?
A2: In the Africa context, the most discussed topics in the literature were HIV/AIDS, female genital cutting (FGC), some on teenage smoking. Other literature looked at promoting human rights in general as a universal discourse, but those articles were specifically in repressive contexts and focused on repressive state tactics and disappearances.

Q3: Did any of the research incorporate opposition research into their rubric, specifically around testing counter messaging for effectiveness and analyzing the amount of resources the opposition has, to mobilize and counter the message being put forward?
A3: Unfortunately, no one has researched this particular question. There is literature from elections and political campaigns from the US and Western Europe that might give insight on how negative advertisement works and what kind of effects those have, but nothing specific to human rights. The closest research we found was a research paper on movies in rural Sudan that examined four movies—one without any FGC messages and the other three with underlying messages relating to FGC with
health, marriage, and both. In general, this research was on the receptivity of the message among the groups watching the different movies.

Q4: Did you find anything on designing these projects in the beginning of the design stage? Are there more non-traditional ways that campaigns are designed to determine if it’s effective?
A4: We did not come across literature looking at the design stage. There was a case in South Africa regarding children’s rights, and covering the process of how an organization decided to go with TV and radio campaigns, but not other than that article.

Q5: So, is a lot of thought put into the causality of the design of the campaign? Short term and long term effects?
A5: Within HR-focused campaigns, the literature seemed more focused on campaign implementation rather than design. Studies will go into what went wrong in the implementation and what could have been fixed in the outset but it does not give us a good look at the whole picture. You could think of a campaign in stages and building of one another instead of this grand vision so as years and more funding/resources is available you can build on that. Part of this is a question of access: most of the research is looking at projects on the ground—scholars aren’t being brought in early enough. This is also a fault of the scholars in the relatively new field of HR not getting in on the ground to research the whole implementation process of these programs.

Q6: Were there any studies that show how long until you find the effects of the campaigns and whether the media used in this campaign made a difference?
A6: There is no consensus on what to expect. From the time the target audience receives the message to a behavior change occurring depends on the context in which the campaign has been run and the initial buy-in. Campaigns that are more interactive often have better timing and are more effective.

Q7: Is there anything that talks about the effectiveness of doing these types of campaigns in coalitions instead of organization?
A7: There’s well-known research that campaigns that target the state and have transnational partnerships working with local partners is effective. The other area for coalitions is in rural regions where a rights based group coalition is more effective since resources are spread thinner. However, it’s important that a local community/entity take ownership and outside organizations to take the backseat so that coalitions are credible to target audience.

Q8: What was counter intuitive in the research?
A8: That there isn’t very much research on human rights campaigns, specifically. That may organizations running HR campaigns aren’t connecting to the local audiences and media they want to target. That training for local journalists is often ineffective because what you need is not an off-the-shelf training but a continual relationship of mentoring and support.

Q9: What others things should implementers know to include in prep work?
A9: Be cognizant that target audiences don’t spread countrywide; target audiences can be quite small, and campaigns may need to use different methods and messages for subdivisions of the target audience. Identifying target audiences is important, but it is also important to identify and tailor to the subpopulations, and to pretest with everyone.
Q1: Backsliding is often a spontaneous process—it happens fast, and the reaction to it also happens fast and is also spontaneous. Do you get a sense from the literature of how you balance trying to engineer the response? Is there anything we can do with this information to figure out how best to support civil society reacting to backsliding as it happens?
A1: The literature doesn’t speak to how over-preparing doesn’t work. In the practical sense, you can’t force an alliance—that is very clear in the literature.

Q2: Are there strategies that don’t work in closing spaces, or work only in closing spaces? What does it mean there is no empirical evidence in the literature? Opposing the government in any space is a chess game—how do you exploit mistakes of the regime?
A2: We could carry out a research study to test this, but a literature review is different—a literature review looks at what is there in the academic literature, at the current point. Academic literature does look at government repression, and for good reason—it is easy to look at patterns of government repression. There is much less literature on how citizens respond to those patterns.

Q3: To what extent does the suggestion that supporting organizations to go into service delivery rather than advocacy during periods of backsliding actually enable a repressive regime?
A3: The literature does discuss this, and it is a legitimate, documented concern; however, the emphasis is that it is better to keep these groups alive, even if in a limited capacity or in a way that also supports the regime that is repressing them.

Q4: What about more informal movements—students protesting school fees and tuition, lack of jobs—what does the literature say about supporting that sort of movement in a backsliding context?
A4: There is a strong conclusion about the importance of protest and non-violent protest; the literature strongly suggests that we need to keep civil society alive in any capacity.

Q5: There are increasingly restrictions on funding civil society groups—were there any discussions in the literature on how to use other platforms to fund civil society organizations?
A5: The academic literature isn’t there yet—there is lots of practice literature on community philanthropy and we see some strategies emerging, but they haven’t been rigorously tested.
Q1: We understand that “throwing money at the problem”, in the sense of funding citizen groups engaged in a grassroots reform, comes with many caveats; what about supporting a reform to be achieved or scaled by using donor funds to improve the enabling environment for civic action?
A1: The enabling environment was considered a “transversal” rather than “sectoral” reform and so was outside the scope of what we studied. Also, the enabling environment is not covered very much in the academic literature; it is in the grey literature.

Q2: We’ve done a lot of work in connecting civil society and government at the local level, and work to try to scale that; the work follows the guidelines that you lay out—supporting coalitions to meet and build—but still, how does that then scale to the national level?
A2: One of the main issues raised in the literature is the question of how you make things sustainable, institutionalize them. The question is raised but there are not key findings that we could uncover as guiding principles, with the exception that the institutionalization can’t be top-down: it has to be grassroots-led, grassroots-supported, and that connection to the base must be maintained. Our main takeaway is that connecting people—bringing groups together for dialogue—is the most effective strategy, and it is very cheap to do. It doesn’t guarantee success, but it does increase chances of success and is the best return on investment.

Q3: What about institutionalization of citizen-government engagement and accountability fora? Does creating and supporting these help spur and scale grassroots reform?
A3: Hard to make any general answer to that question, because context matters so much, but there is the problem of managing the distinction between invitation and compulsion—are the people on either side—government officials and citizens—coming together for reforms that both sides care about? If not, the effort will be less successful; grassroots reforms need genuinely passionate and engaged grassroots actors and needs activists who know to, and how to, develop and maintain that grassroots constituency. And not just for the obvious reasons—also as a way to resist government co-optation of grassroots reforms in a way that would be detrimental to the effort. But need to be careful, because such co-optation can also be a mechanism for successful scaling.

Q4: Any data on best ways to nurture and support alliances?
A4: There are data on ways alliances fail—by not maintaining contact with and support from the “grassroots” the alliances were formed to represent and assist.

Q5: Next logical questions?
A5: The ones asked in this room. The next step may not be in the literature—they are the questions to guide new research. However, this sort of question isn’t the focus of academia right now.

Q6: So a main lesson is that the desire to have something that works in one place, and then be able to transpose it to another place and also have it work—which of course is something that practitioners always are looking for—that goal may be inherently incorrect?
A6: Yes, but with the caveat that academia also has its trends. Right now, the trend is very much context matters, things have to be localized; we had the opposite trend a while ago. The reality is probably somewhere in the middle.