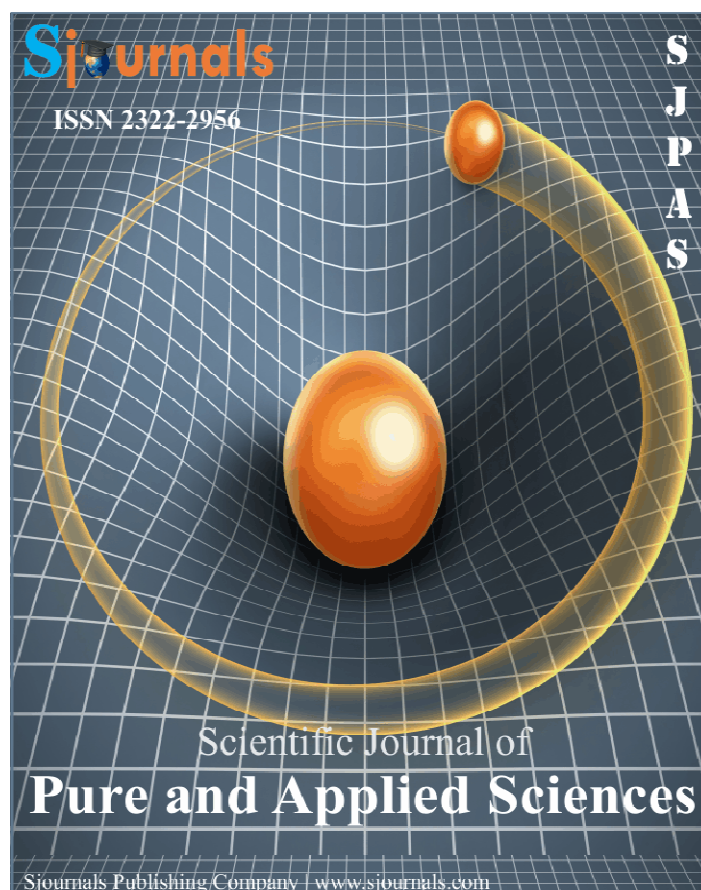


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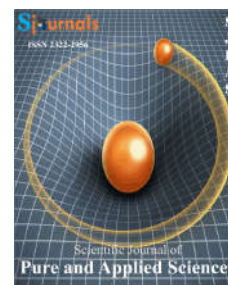
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Scientific Journal of Pure and Applied Sciences

Journal homepage: www.sjournals.com

Case study

Advancing advocacy through national early childhood development networks

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history,

Received 09 December 2018

Accepted 10 January 2019

Available online 17 January 2019

iThenticate screening 11 December 2018

English editing 09 January 2019

Quality control 16 January 2019

Keywords,

Advocacy

Early childhood development

Advocacy networks

ABSTRACT

While much has been done to address the situation of children around the world, much more needs to be done to ensure that the rights of all children are protected and that they are able to live up to their full potential. More needs to be done specifically to address the low funding and resource allocation to Early Childhood Development (ECD), slow implementation of policies, limited access to services particularly by the poor and vulnerable, variability in the quality of services as well as the lack of coordination amongst service providers in different sectors. As more country early childhood development networks emerge, it is important to look at the role advocacy networks play in ensuring that children are supported through holistic efforts that meet their health, nutrition, educational and cognitive developmental needs. This paper takes a case study approach looking at the impact of Advocacy Networks and the role played by the Zimbabwe Network of Early Childhood Development Actors in addressing early childhood development policy gaps and membership challenges in Zimbabwe.

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1. Introduction

For a long time non-profit organizations working within the early childhood development (ECD) sector in Zimbabwe have been said to operate in silos with little or no coordination amongst them. According to Vargas-

Baron (2005) integrated programs help countries maximize the effectiveness of their investments in children. Furthermore, the limited availability of local empirical evidence to guide relevant and effective programming as well as the lack of coherence among various actors has always been a concern that needed to be addressed. This situation calls for urgent action to rethink strategies and design approaches that will lead to the implementation of more effective, efficient, sustainable and contextually relevant programmes. This will result in a more rapid improvement of outcomes for the youngest and most vulnerable children in communities. In order to secure lasting advocacy efforts in the early childhood development sector, an advocacy network was formed in Zimbabwe in order to bring together implementers, policy makers, academia and funding partners.

1.2. Why early childhood development advocacy networks?

Numerous programs have been designed and implemented to ensure children are not only surviving but are also supported to develop well. It has been increasingly important to also support capacity building initiatives aimed at developing leadership within the ECD space but also to ensure the necessary infrastructure is developed to support service delivery. The needs of young children are found across multiple sectors and therefore, it is important to find a connecting point or an intersection where the various service providers converge and focus on the child. A network can be that convergence point. According to Spring (2008) being in a network increases the possibilities of success in most endeavours.

With this starting point, it is important to identify partners that can support the acceleration of progress in achieving the developmental needs of children so that there are improved child outcomes at country level. In order to do this, country early advocacy networks have to bring together different service providers with an aim of ensuring that they are able to build up on their singular strengths to produce a holistic product that the child is able to benefit from.

Thus, the premise behind the establishment of ECD Advocacy Networks is to ensure that those organizations that where doing relatively well alone can do a whole lot better and go farther when their synergies are combined with those of other organizations. Notwithstanding the fact that there are many challenges that are found when running a network organization. In essence bringing together different organizations so that they agree on one common agenda more often than brings tension and other problems. As Exley et al. (2011) note, understanding power relations within policy networks can give an insight into how dominant ideas and values flow through networks and into policy reform and how these discourses become globalized. It is through these many experiences that this case study was designed, first looking at the formation of the Zimbabwe Network of Early Childhood Development Actors (ZINECDA) and then the impact of its work and contributions to the ECD sector in Zimbabwe.

1.3. An idea whose time has come - Birth of the Zimbabwe ECD Network

Phase 1 - Forming the organization (April 2011 - April 2012)

During this initial phase, Community Development Institute (CDI) financial support made it possible for Patrick Makokoro (author) to participate in the World Forum Foundation's Global Leader for Young Children mentorship project. During the World Forum Foundation meeting in Hawaii in 2011, the author identified the absence of a coalition or body of organizations in Zimbabwe that would regularly come together to discuss early childhood development (ECD) issues as a huge gap. He decided to address this gap by taking on the establishment of such an organization as his Global Leaders Advocacy Project which was a requirement of all Fellows in the program.

Through seed capital support provided to the author by the World Forum Foundation, he began the ground work to establish the organization. This was done through extensive cross country consultations with various ECD organizations, academics as well as individuals who shared a passion of the sector. The organization was then incorporated by the author in August 2012 as the Zimbabwe Network for Early Childhood Development Actors (ZINECDA). A Board of Trustees was also established to support the execution of the vision for the organization.

Phase 2 - Preparation for launch (April 2012 - August 2012)

Following the incorporation of the organization in August 2012, a nationwide baseline research was carried out in order to gather data and carry out a mapping exercise to identify the organizations, individuals and

academic institutions working on early childhood development in Zimbabwe. The key activities of the baseline research and preparation for launch included:

1. Mapping of existing organizations at a district and provincial level
2. Identifying core strengths of these organizations and establishing cooperative agreements
3. Development of cooperation pathways at a district, provincial and national level
4. Development of the Advocacy network governance structure, constitution and administrative policies and procedures
5. Establishment of a network website and information portal

Phase 3 - Launch of network (August 2012 - October 2012)

With backing and financial support from Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA), the newly formed networked organized an all stakeholders meeting that was attended by five organizations from each of the ten provinces in Zimbabwe. This stakeholders meeting was used to launch the Network and the immediate activities after the launch where as follows:

1. Establishing ten provincial chapters
2. Membership recruitment drive at a provincial level
3. Dissemination of the baseline research report to all provinces
4. Development of the first five year strategic plan

1.4. Purpose of the study

This study was an internal impact evaluation process to examine the impact of the Zimbabwe Early Childhood Development Network (ZINECDA) in coordinating early childhood development organizations, advocating for ECD policy development and implementation.

1.5. Objectives

The study was guided by the following specific questions:

1. Explore the extent of coordination between partners, different government agencies, beneficiaries and other stakeholders.
2. Has the organization provided good value for money for its investors, partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries?
3. Did the organization make significant contributions to the early childhood development sector through its advocacy efforts?

2. Methodology

The evaluation used the multi-methods approach within qualitative research design - a system that entails using several data collection approaches, all of them qualitative. Merriam (2009) believes that qualitative research due to its focus on discovery, insight and understanding offers the most valuable data, making the largest difference to practice and peoples' lives. This design is cost-effective and yet allows for depth, especially in explaining why a project may have achieved specific results or not. Cohen et al. (2011) suggest that the research design must fit the purpose and this is stressed by Murkherji and Albon (2014) who propose that within any research the methods need to be justified by the researcher as to why the design is the most appropriate. Potter (2009) states that qualitative methods with a small holistic focus produce descriptive data surrounding the individuals and the setting in which the research is based. Within this design, the evaluation combined the following as sources of data:

a) Primary and secondary data: The evaluation gathered primary information from ZINECDA members, provincial chairpersons, heads of individual preschools, board members of ZINECDA, and provincial chairpersons and ZINECDA staff. To triangulate against and validate with the data that was collected from the field, documents with relevant program information such as progress reports, minutes of meetings, financial reports, work plans and related others were reviewed to assess the organization's progress towards its goals and achievements.

b) Mix of face-to-face and virtual or online data collection methods: Considering the wide coverage of ZINECDA across the country, the evaluation used a combination of face-to-face and virtual interviews to collect primary data. While Provincial Chairpersons and ZINECDA members in the provinces were interviewed through online means like Skype, WhatsApp calls and emails, data from Harare-based stakeholders was collected through face-to-face group and individual interactions.

c) Individual and group engagements: The research engaged ZINECDA members both individually and in groups.

d) Generalized and single case analyses: The qualitative design that the evaluation applied allowed it to collect information on general trends experienced across the ZINECDA partnership and special cases experienced in specific provinces or ECD centers.

The targeted data sources of the research included the ZINECDA staff, stakeholders, Board members of ZINECDA and relevant documents from the organization. Data collection was done within a participatory and consultative atmosphere where research tools that best suited different respondents were applied. In line with target information sources above, the research held in-depth interviews, observed the participants during meetings (Participant observation), reviewed the organization's key documents and engaged in social media discussions.

2.1. Participant observations

Some of the data was gathered through participatory observations, through attending meetings held by ZINECDA Chapters in 3 provinces. Sitting in the meetings allowed the observation of committee meeting proceedings and deliberations by members. It also allowed for the evaluation to engage the participants of meetings collectively and individually.

2.2. In-depth interviews

All key stakeholders and key informants such as ZINECDA staff members, committee members and Provincial chairpersons all took part in the impact evaluation of ZINECDA through in-depth interviews. The interviews were held face to face and virtually through internet and telecommunication channels that were available and suitable during data gathering (Skype, Emails and Social media platforms). To keep the research tool focused on the evaluation criteria a semi structured interview guide was used as reference. Every research respondent group had their own semi structured interview guide that contained matters that related to their association with the organization. For instance, the committee members of ZINECDA covered matters that pertained to the benefit and the impact of ZINECDA towards their ECD Centres and the recommendations for the organization while the Ministry of Education covered matters pertaining to the policies that are related to what ZINECDA does as an organization.

2.3. Social media discussion

ZINECDA has a vibrant social media presence and in particular utilizes the WhatsApp message service for its communication with members. The WhatsApp messaging groups provided a platform to provoke questions in the group which in turn allowed the group members to discuss them and provide real time feedback.

2.4. Desk review

The documents related to the ECD program were reviewed to track the progress of the organization in implementing its programs. The findings from these documents were triangulated against or validated with the findings of the methods that were used to collect primary data.

2.5. Sampling

To collect data from the people with firsthand information and knowledge of the organization and its programs a purposive sampling was used. Visits to some of the ECD Centers whose owners are members of ZINECDA who had vast knowledge and exposure when it comes to early childhood development were undertaken. ZINECDA committee members for the Harare Province were observed during their meeting and they were also engaged through one on one interviews after their meeting.

2.6. Profile of the evaluation sample

Table 2

The participants who were engaged during the research.

Data collection method	Sample size per respondents					Total
	Program beneficiaries	ZINECDA members	ZINECDA staff	Stakeholders/ Duty Bearers	Key informants	
In-depth interviews	3	4	4	2	0	13
Social media discussions	0	7	0	0	0	7
Participatory observation	6	11	1	0	2	20
Totals	9	22	5	2	2	40

3. Key findings of this study

3.1. On provincial chapters

1. Provincial Chapter Committees have been set up in all 10 Provinces of Zimbabwe and are functional, their vibrancy depending on the capabilities and connectedness of chairpersons. Some provinces are therefore more active than others.

2. National Steering Committee meetings and exchange learning workshops are an opportunity for provincial chapter capacity building, but these are infrequent due to funding gaps

3. Ideally the National Secretariat should regularly visit Provincial Chapter teams to monitor and support their activities, but interaction is mostly virtual, online - less physical (budget constraints) because National Secretariat does not have suitable official vehicle(s). However, communication between the National Secretariat and Provincial Chapters - "regular" and "effective"

4. ZINECDA started with 54 members (2012) and number shot to 114 by 2015, to 225 (2017) before declining to 174 to date

5. The evaluation also found that membership diversity as one of ZINECDA's chief strength. Key patterns of member diversity include:

1. Geographical diversity: Rural and urban (high and low density)
2. Maturity status diversity: Young and Seasoned ECD Centers
3. Functional diversity: Disability People's Organizations, churches, individuals, CBOs, NGOs.

3.2. On coordination and partnership

1. ZINECDA's performance in coordination and partnership is generally on track, though needing strengthening:
2. A culture of partnership has been inculcated from the grassroots to the national level (members to AGM)
3. National Secretariat with departments that mirror the key functions of the organization facilitates effective coordination (information sharing, events management, progress and outcome reporting, capacity building, resource mobilization, national advocacy)
4. Inter-province coordination has room for improvement and needs support through exchange visits
5. Need for Provincial Coordinator, M&E Officer, Project Officers for coordination to improve
6. Need for increased funding for national programs

3.3. On efficiency

Efficiency was the area where ZINECDA was most challenged due to resource gaps, although the coping strategies that it used enabled it to make substantial progress:

1. Financial and administrative systems are oiled
2. Lack of vehicles limits logistical fluidity and coordination. However, creative utilization of social media

modestly fills this gap

3. Funding gaps limited the range of programs implemented
4. Devolution enables the organization to achieve more with less
5. Activity-focused funding accelerated important foundational developments such as the setting up of provincial structures, development of national five-year strategy

4. Discussion on findings

In view of the evaluation's findings, resource mobilization is ZINECDA's leading priority. The evaluation showed that the network is very clear about what it needs to achieve and about the challenges that need to be addressed because of the baseline researches that it carried out and the strategic plan that guides it. It has capacity to professionally manage grants, as evidenced by its financial audit reports. The evaluation showed that limited funding deprived the organization of specialised positions within the Administration Team of the Network to push such important agendas as monitoring and evaluation, proposal development and provincial coordination. Volunteerism during the founding phases of the organization, multi-tasking, multiple use of private spaces among Provincial Chairpersons and the effective use of social media and the internet are coping mechanisms that have enabled the organization to ride past its resource limitations. It is expected that increased funding will result in the following:

- » Stronger national Secretariat oversight through more frequent and regular National Steering Committee meetings
- » More frequent field visits for program coordination, due diligence, M&E, program support and exchange learning
- » Expanded and coordinated district chapters, leading to increased visibility and growth in membership
- » Increased balance between desk work (documentation) and fieldwork (program implementation) due to improved capacity to recruit and remunerate additional specialized staff
- » More frequent and structured member capacity building and exchange learning activities, which are the key pathway towards improved child development outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The Zimbabwe ECD Network has made tremendous success in bringing forward the voices of grassroots organizations working in the early childhood development sector. It is the authors' view that the organizations working on various issues whether nutrition, education, stimulation and health can only do well if the weakest link in the chain is made stronger. Therefore, the ECD network should strive to build the capacity of its members so as to have high quality programs being delivered in the communities. Grassroots movements and networks have a critical role to play in providing direction on issues such as defining quality, promoting access to education and advocating for increased government spending on ECD (Makokoro 2019, In press). It is time for a multi sectoral approach in providing integrated programming aimed at ensuring that children served through various early learning initiatives receive the best.

Recommendations

The strengths and weaknesses of ZINECDA identified through this evaluation are the basis of recommendations. Specifically, the evaluation showed that ZINECDA is indisputably a very necessary establishment that fills the gap in Zimbabwe's primary and secondary education sector. From its inception to date ZINECDA has swiftly established itself nationally and provincially, with district structures slowly building up on the foundation of the nine established so far, and a vibrant National Secretariat glues everything together. With a five-year national strategy and research evidence to inform programming, ZINECDA is set to achieve more in ECD advocacy as it overcomes the existing gap in funding.

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How to cite this article: Makokoro, P., 2019. Advancing advocacy through national early childhood development networks. Scientific Journal of Pure and Applied Sciences, 8(1), 833-839.

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