The advocacy-impact gap: A bottom-up analysis of NGO advocacy/campaigning and sustainable livelihoods in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

While non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are pivotal in advocating for policies that support sustainable livelihoods in Zimbabwe, a discernible disjuncture often emerges between their advocacy work and the realisation of tangible, sustainable benefits for communities. This article explores this "advocacy-impact gap" by examining community perspectives on the work of three leading Zimbabwean NGOs: ActionAid Zimbabwe (AAZ), the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA), and the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD). Based on qualitative data from focus group discussions across six districts and key informant interviews, this research finds that while communities value NGO-led awareness and capacity-building efforts, they also identify significant limitations. Key critiques include the transient, project-based nature of interventions, the difficulty in attributing specific livelihood improvements to advocacy, and a pronounced "insider-outsider" dynamic where positive impacts are largely confined to direct participants. Consequently, this study contends that bridging the advocacy-impact gap necessitates a strategic shift. NGOs must move beyond a narrow focus on policy victories to embrace sustained, community-driven approaches that confront the "implementation gap" and cultivate genuine local ownership, particularly within Zimbabwe's challenging context characterised by weak governance and political instability.

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1. Introduction

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are widely recognised as significant actors in promoting sustainable development, particularly in contexts where state capacity is limited or governance structures are contested (Abiddin et al., 2022; Al Mokdad, 2025; Deshmukh et al., 2024; Tarisayi, 2023). In recent decades, a notable shift has occurred within the NGO sector, with organisations moving from direct service delivery towards a greater emphasis on advocacy and campaigning (Archer, 2017; Cascant-Sempere, 2022; Chapman & Fisher, 2000; Hickey & Mitlin, 2004). Campaigning NGOs, with their focus on raising awareness, mobilising support, and advocating for policy change, are now at the forefront of many development interventions (Banks & Hulme, 2012; Desai, 2024; Klugman, 2011; Yanacopulos, 2015). However, the effectiveness of these efforts is a subject of intense debate, as high-level policy "wins" often fail to translate into tangible improvements for the communities they are meant to serve (Crutchfield, 2018). This disconnect is a central problem for development practice and theory. This article develops and empirically grounds the concept of the "advocacy-impact gap": a multi-dimensional chasm between NGO advocacy activities and sustained, equitable improvements in community livelihoods.

The advocacy-impact gap can be understood through the lens of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), which assesses well-being through tangible assets and capabilities (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998). When advocacy fails to enhance these livelihoods, a gap emerges. While critiques of NGO effectiveness are not new, this study advances the discussion by theorising this gap from the ground up. Using the rich, qualitative perspectives of community members, it identifies three core facets of the gap: the well-documented *implementation gap* (the disconnect between policy and practice), the *sustainability gap* (the failure of short-term projects to create long-term resilience), and the *equity gap* (the uneven distribution of benefits of NGO programming).

This phenomenon is particularly acute in challenging socio-political contexts like Zimbabwe. Decades of economic instability, coupled with a restrictive political environment and weak governance, create formidable barriers to translating policy into practice (Dendere & Taodzera, 2023; Raftopoulos et al., 2020). It is within this complex environment that this study examines the work of three of Zimbabwe's most prominent campaigning NGOs: ActionAid Zimbabwe (AAZ), the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA), and the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD). These organisations were

purposively selected because their diverse thematic focuses which span from social, environmental to economic justice, provide a comprehensive lens through which to analyse the advocacy-impact gap across different sectors of campaigning NGOs' work.

By prioritising community voices, this study offers a granular, bottom-up understanding of why advocacy efforts often fall short, addressing the following research question:

How do communities in Zimbabwe perceive the impact of campaigning NGO advocacy efforts on their sustainable livelihoods, and what factors contribute to the perceived gap between advocacy and tangible, lasting change?

This paper transitions from this introduction to a terse review of the relevant literature, followed by a detailed methodology. The core of the article integrates the findings and discussion, before concluding with the study's implications and a proposed agenda for future research.

2. Theorising the Advocacy-Impact Gap

A central challenge in development studies is assessing the real-world impact of NGO advocacy. While advocacy is celebrated for its potential to create systemic change (Cramer et al., 2017; Klugman, 2011), its effectiveness is notoriously difficult to measure (Ambegia, 2024; van Wessel, 2018). The causal pathways linking a specific advocacy campaign to concrete improvements in a community's well-being are often long, indirect, and complicated by numerous external factors. This creates a significant challenge of attribution (Crack, 2018; Weible, 2023), often leading to a focus on easily quantifiable outputs (e.g., policy documents changed) rather than on tangible, long-term livelihood outcomes (Fox & Brown, 1998). This measurement problem leaves the process between advocacy input and the livelihood impact as a "black-box" making it difficult to understand precisely where and why interventions succeed or fail.

The SLF provides a useful, if incomplete, starting point for analysing these outcomes. The SLF's holistic focus on different forms of capital (human, social, financial, natural and physical) offers a way to conceptualise the multi-faceted nature of well-being (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998). It helps in identifying what should be changing at the community level. However, the framework has been rightly criticised for its limited attention to power dynamics and political processes, often treating the institutional context as a given

rather than a politically contested space (Natarajan et al., 2022; Small, 2007). This is a critical oversight when studying advocacy, which is an inherently political act aimed at shifting power. This study addresses this limitation by using the advocacy-impact gap as a conceptual tool to operationalise these political and practical disconnects, providing a lens to diagnose the blockages that the standard SLF analysis might miss.

The Zimbabwean context provides a critical case for examining this gap, as it is a real-world manifestation of the SLF's theoretical limitations where a vibrant NGO advocacy sector confronts immense structural barriers. The country's history of political contestation, economic instability, and a shrinking civic space creates an environment where the link between policy and practice is exceptionally weak (Moyo, 2024a; Muchadenyika, 2017). Restrictive legislation (such as the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Act of 2025) and state suspicion of civil society mean that even when NGOs achieve policy "wins," the political will and institutional capacity to implement them are often absent (Dendere & Taodzera, 2023; Moyo, 2024a). This creates a pronounced "implementation gap," a core component of the broader advocacy-impact gap. While existing research has explored the role of Zimbabwean NGOs in human rights and governance (Hellum et al., 2013; Moyo, 2024b; Raftopoulos et al., 2020), less attention has been paid to systematically analysing the livelihood impacts of their advocacy from the perspective of the communities themselves. This study fills that void by providing an empirical, bottom-up examination of the advocacy-impact gap in a context where it is most starkly visible.

3. Methodology

This article draws on a subset of data from a larger PhD qualitative study on the nexus between campaigning NGOs and sustainable livelihoods in Zimbabwe. The broader study employed a multiple case study design focusing on ActionAid Zimbabwe (AAZ), the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA), and the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD). For this article, we selectively focus on the data that most directly illuminates the advocacy-impact gap from a community perspective: the focus group discussions (FGDs). Data from key informant interviews (KIIs) with NGO staff and campaigners as well as documentary analysis are used primarily for triangulation and contextualisation.

The primary data was collected between August 2024 and March 2025, and it involved 180 participants in FGDs across six diverse districts, Harare Central, Harare Rural, Epworth, Chitungwiza, Binga, and Nkayi, to capture a range of urban and rural contexts. The sample size was designed to achieve thematic saturation, the point at which new data collection ceases to generate new analytical insights regarding the core research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diversity of perspectives based on gender, age, livelihood activities, and level of engagement with NGO programs. This process was aided by local leaders and NGO field staff. This study acknowledge that this recruitment strategy introduces a potential for selection bias, as these gatekeepers may have directed researchers towards participants with more favourable views of NGO work. This risk was mitigated by actively seeking out a wide range of community members, including those not directly involved in NGO projects, and by maintaining a critical awareness of this potential bias during data analysis.

A rigorous thematic analysis was employed, following the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). To ensure analytical credibility, the coding framework and emerging themes were developed by the lead researcher and iteratively reviewed and refined in collaboration with the co-authors. This process served to challenge assumptions and enhanced inter-coder reliability as advocated for by Cole (2024). The primary validation strategy was triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Findings from the community FGDs were systematically cross verified with data from 27 KIIs and extensive documentary analysis (which included annual reports, project evaluations from the three organisations). This allowed for a more robust interpretation of the community perspectives by comparing them against organisational and policy-level narratives. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo was utilised to manage and organise the data.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. The study received formal ethical clearance from the Durban University of Technology's Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) before data collection began. A critical component of the methodology was securing informed consent from every participant prior to their involvement in the study. To ensure and protect participant anonymity and confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from all transcripts and reports, and the collected data was stored securely.

4. Findings: Community Perspectives on Campaigning NGOs' Impact

The focus group discussions with community members across six diverse districts in Zimbabwe yielded a complex and multifaceted picture of the perceived impact of campaigning NGOs on sustainable livelihoods. While participants generally recognised the value of NGO interventions in areas such as raising awareness about critical issues, building local capacity, and providing certain forms of direct support, a series of significant concerns and limitations emerged. These concerns coalesced around three major themes: a perceived disconnect between high-level NGO advocacy efforts and tangible improvements in daily life, a critique of the short-term, project-based nature of many NGO interventions, and a marked unevenness in the distribution of benefits of NGOs interventions.

4.1 Knowledge and Empowerment: Essential but Insufficient

Across all six districts, a consistent and clear finding was the community's recognition of the significant role campaigning NGOs play in raising awareness and building local capacity. This was often the most visible and appreciated form of NGO impact. The awareness-raising activities encompassed a broad range of topics directly relevant to community livelihoods, from public health and climate change adaptation to economic literacy and civic rights. In Harare Central, for instance, participants credited NGO interventions with improving their preparedness for recurrent cholera outbreaks, a persistent threat in many urban areas (Dzinamarira et al., 2024; Marumure & Nyila, 2024). As one resident explained, this knowledge had direct, practical value: "*Before the NGOs came, we did not know how to protect ourselves from cholera. Now we know about water purification and hygiene.*" Similarly, in the more rural districts of Binga and Nkayi, participants highlighted how NGOs provided crucial information for adapting to climate change and environmental challenges. "*They taught us about conservation farming, and some gave us drought-resistant seeds. This has helped us, even when the rains are poor,*" shared a farmer in Binga, illustrating how NGO interventions contributed to livelihood resilience.

This increased awareness was frequently linked to a sense of empowerment, with community members reporting feeling more confident in advocating for their rights and engaging with local authorities. Participants described a newfound ability to articulate their needs and challenge unjust practices. As one participant in Chitungwiza stated, this represented a fundamental shift in their civic identity: "*We know we should speak out, and we are not*

afraid to do so anymore. The NGOs have taught us our rights." This sentiment, echoed across multiple focus groups, suggests that NGOs have contributed to strengthening both human capital (through knowledge and skills) and social/political capital (through enhanced civic participation).

While the value of this empowerment was consistently acknowledged, community members also expressed a clear-eyed understanding that it was a necessary but not sufficient condition for achieving sustainable livelihood improvements. The data reveals a critical distinction between knowledge and agency on the one hand, and tangible outcomes on the other. As one participant in Harare Central pointedly observed, information has its limits in the face of material deprivation: "*as far as they invest in giving information, … when a disaster strikes, information alone is not enough.*" This statement encapsulates the limitations of a purely informational approach, highlighting the need for complementary interventions that address structural constraints. Furthermore, even when empowered to participate in civic processes, community members encountered systemic barriers that rendered their newfound agency ineffective. Another participant in Harare Central shared their frustration with the unresponsiveness of state actors: "*we do participate in budget consultations because of the agency that the training gives us, but the government is not responsive, … what else can we do? I think still their (NGO's) work is not getting there.*" This highlights the "implementation gap," where the tools of empowerment are provided, but the political structures required for them to be effective are absent.

4.2 The Disconnect Between Campaigning "Wins" and Lived Realities

A recurring theme was a significant disconnect between the macro-level advocacy efforts of these organisations and the tangible, day-to-day experiences of community members. While NGO staff and campaigners often pointed to policy "wins" as evidence of their impact, many community members struggled to identify specific, concrete improvements in their livelihoods that they could directly attribute to these advocacy efforts. This challenge of attribution was acknowledged even by NGO staff. As one ZIMCODD informant admitted, "*We can say we did it, but underneath everyone would be wondering, did we really contribute to the change or someone else did, or it is mere coincidence?*"

NGO informants frequently cited specific examples of policy changes they believed their organisations had influenced. A ZELA informant, for instance, highlighted their

contribution to the drafting of the Mines and Minerals Amendment Bill, stating, "*We have been struggling for years for the government to come up with a sound Mining and Minerals legislation. The bill was finally gazetted in 2023, and we were strategically positioned to contribute to its drafting due to our expertise.*" Similarly, a campaigner with AAZ mentioned their involvement in advocating for the government to sign and ratify the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), noting, "*We started the conversation as a talk of signing and ratifying the charter, after that it became a conversation of adherence to the principles especially chapter 9 on governance focusing on anti-corruption and other things*". However, these examples of policy engagement, while significant from the perspective of the NGOs, did not readily translate into perceived impacts at the community level. As a participant in a Binga focus group succinctly put it, "*All that talk about policies, it is just talk, it does not reach us here. NGOs come and talk, but nothing changes much. We still have the same problems. Maybe they are doing something, but we do not see it.*" Another participant in Binga added that, "*I am sure by now we have good policies, they (NGOs) work on many policies before, and most of them were changed, but change in results is zero, always zero.*" These sentiments were echoed across multiple study sites, and they reflect a profound disconnect between the macro-level focus of NGO advocacy and the micro-level realities of daily life.

This disconnect was further illustrated by contrasting perspectives on specific policy changes. While a ZIMCODD campaigner pointed to the implementation of women and youth quotas in parliament as a direct result of NGO advocacy— "*For me the impact of our work in policy is self-evident, look at the women and youth quotas*"—community members were less likely to make this connection without further probing. Similarly, while AAZ staff highlighted their contribution towards advocating for devolution, a community participant in Chitungwiza stated that "*Devolution, yes, that has made a difference...I think the NGOs pushed for that,*" but immediately qualified this by highlighting the "implementation gap": "*the thing is that devolution often comes with very little funds but the concept that the NGOs pushed for is good.*" Another participant, from Epworth, captured the pervasive sense of frustration: "*They [NGOs] come here and talk about our rights, about the constitution, about corruption. They even claim wins on changing this and that (policy) but nothing changes. The police still demand bribes, the council still does not fix the roads, and we still struggle to get water.*"

4.3 Transience and Discontinuity in NGO Engagement

Beyond the disjuncture between macro-level advocacy and micro-level impact, a further, and perhaps even more fundamental, challenge emerged from the community focus group discussions: the perceived transience of NGO interventions and the resulting lack of sustained support for livelihood improvements. This concern, articulated consistently across all six study districts, highlights a critical limitation of the dominant project-based approach to development that characterises much of NGO work (Cuel, 2022; Zoomers, 2006). Participants frequently used phrases like "*NGOs touch and leave communities,*" and "*jump from place to place*" highlighting the perceived lack of consistent presence and long-term commitment.

A particularly evocative metaphor, used by a participant in Harare Central, captured this sentiment clearly: "*The NGOs come, they train us, they give us some resources, and then they leave. It is like they plant a seed but then do not water it.*" This image of a neglected seedling, initially nurtured but ultimately left to wither, illustrates the community's perception of NGO interventions as fleeting and ultimately unsustainable. While the initial "planting," the training, resources, or awareness-raising, is valued, the lack of ongoing support is perceived as a critical failure that undermines the potential for long-term growth and resilience.

In Nkayi, a rural district heavily reliant on agriculture (Zikhali, 2018), a participant directly linked this transience to a lack of continuity and a failure to build upon previous efforts: "*They come with a project, they do it for a year or two, and then they go. Then another NGO comes with a different project. There is no consistency.*" This observation highlights a critical flaw in the project-based approach: the lack of institutional memory and the potential for fragmented, uncoordinated interventions that fail to address the underlying structural causes of vulnerability.

The problem of discontinuity was also raised in Binga, a district particularly vulnerable to climate change (Muzamba, 2022). One participant described the frustration of interventions driven by external funding cycles: "*They do good, we do not lie, but they go away and sometimes not to be heard from again, or at times when they come back, they do come back with a different subject.*" This sentiment was reinforced by another community member, who added that the constant shifting of focus "*leaves us (communities) feeling used, abandoned and undermined, … and that also undermines our trust in all NGOs.*"

4.4 The Uneven Distribution of NGO Impact

Another critical finding that emerged from the community focus group discussions was a sharp dichotomy in perceptions of NGO impact, directly connected to the level of direct engagement between community members and the organisations. This "insider-outsider" dynamic reveals a significant limitation in the reach and perceived effectiveness of campaigning NGO interventions, particularly concerning the broader impact of advocacy efforts. While those community members who had participated directly in NGO projects or campaigns ("insiders") often reported positive experiences and tangible benefits, those with limited or no direct contact ("outsiders") expressed significantly greater scepticism and struggled to attribute positive changes in their communities to NGO activities.

This disparity in perceptions was consistently observed across all six study districts, suggesting a systemic challenge rather than an isolated phenomenon. "Insiders," those who had participated in NGO-led training programs, received direct material support, or been actively involved in advocacy campaigns, frequently spoke of enhanced skills, increased income-generating opportunities, wider social networks and a greater sense of empowerment. For instance, participants in Harare Central involved in model building livelihood skills development projects reported learning new tailoring techniques, enabling them to improve their businesses and support their families. In Binga, members of a model Internal Savings and Lending Schemes (ISALS) supported by NGOs highlighted the transformative impact of these initiatives on their financial security and ability to invest in their livelihoods. These individuals often explicitly linked their improved circumstances to the specific interventions of the NGOs. However, the experiences and perceptions of the "outsiders," those who had not directly participated in NGO programs, presented a stark contrast. These community members often expressed a lack of awareness of NGO activities or a belief that their impact was limited or non-existent. As one participant from Harare Rural, who had not been directly involved in any NGO projects, stated, "*I hear about these NGOs, but I do not really know what they do. Maybe they help some people, but I have not seen any difference in my life*." This quote encapsulates a common sentiment among those outside the immediate sphere of NGO influence: a sense of detachment and a questioning of the relevance of NGO work to their own lives. This sentiment was not isolated; in Nkayi district, a participant in a focus group discussion stated, "*We have not seen much impact from the NGOs on our livelihoods to be honest. Maybe those who work*

directly with them on the gardens have, but for most of us, things have not changed much. We see the developments the government is making with roads, but not much from the NGOs."

5. Discussion

The findings from community focus groups reveal a significant "advocacy-impact gap," a concept this paper defines through three interrelated dimensions: implementation, sustainability, and equity. The community's frustration with the disconnect between policy "wins" and their lived realities speaks directly to the *implementation gap*. This aligns with a vast body of literature on policy failure, which argues that the journey from policy formulation to on-the-ground change is fraught with political and institutional obstacles (Fowler, 2019; Hudson et al., 2019; McConnell, 2010). In the Zimbabwean context, this is exacerbated by a crisis of governance, where state institutions lack the capacity and political will to enforce policies, particularly those championed by civil society actors viewed with suspicion (Muchadenyika, 2017; Muronda & van der Waldt, 2023; Shayamano, 2025). The community narratives suggest that NGO advocacy often stops at the level of legislative change, failing to grapple with the "street-level bureaucrats," the local officials, police, and service providers, who are the ultimate arbiters of policy in practice (Lipsky, 2010, 2023). Without a strategy to influence these actors and adequately empower communities to demand accountability at the local level, policy victories remain symbolic rather than substantive.

The critique of transient, "touch and leave" interventions highlight the *sustainability gap*, a direct consequence of the "projectification" of development (Graan & Rommel, 2024; Holavins, 2020). Driven by donor funding cycles that demand measurable, short-term results, NGOs are often incentivised to deliver discrete projects rather than engage in the slow, complex work of building enduring local institutions (Banks et al., 2015; Mazambani, 2018). This model, as the findings show, creates a cycle of dependency and disillusionment. The metaphor of "planting a seed but not watering it" illustrates how this approach fails to build the local ownership and capacity necessary for sustainable livelihood improvements. This resonates with critiques of "NGO-ization," which argue that this project-based logic can depoliticise development and fragment social movements, replacing long-term structural change with a series of disconnected, short-lived interventions (Choudry, 2020; Lang, 2022; Shivji, 2006).

Finally, the "insider-outsider" dynamic reveals a critical *equity gap* with significant consequences for NGO legitimacy. The concentration of benefits among direct participants suggests a failure to achieve broad-based community impact, undermining the very promise of advocacy (Archer, 2017; Chapman & Fisher, 2000). This pattern is consistent with the well-documented phenomenon of elite capture in development projects, where better-connected, more educated, or more powerful community members are better positioned to access and control the resources offered by external agencies (Platteau, 2004; Rajasekhar et al., 2018). While not necessarily malicious, this dynamic means that NGO interventions can inadvertently reinforce or even exacerbate existing community level social inequalities (Tsiga et al., 2016). This finding challenges NGOs to look beyond simply counting beneficiaries and to critically examine the social and political dynamics of their targeting strategies, asking not just "who is being reached?" but also, crucially, "who is being left out, and why?".

6. Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research Directions

This study has provided a bottom-up, empirically grounded exploration of the "advocacy-impact gap" in Zimbabwe. By centering community perspectives, it has moved beyond general critiques of NGO effectiveness to identify and analyse three core dimensions of this gap: implementation, sustainability, and equity. The findings demonstrate that while communities value NGO support, their lived experiences are characterised by a profound disconnect between high-level advocacy and tangible improvements in their livelihoods. The study's primary theoretical contribution is the conceptualisation of the advocacy-impact gap as a framework that challenges simplistic, linear models of policy influence. It offers a more nuanced analytical tool by integrating critiques of policy implementation with those of project-based development and equity concerns, providing a holistic lens that is particularly relevant in contexts of weak governance. By grounding this concept in community narratives, this research underscores the need for theories of development to more seriously account for the perspectives of those they aim to serve.

The practical implications for stakeholders are significant and demand specific, actionable changes. The findings point to the key necessary and timely interventions. For NGOs, the focus must shift from celebrating policy "wins" to actively supporting and monitoring policy implementation. This requires moving beyond short-term, project-based interventions towards long-term partnerships that build genuine local capacity, explicitly

address the equity gap, and integrate advocacy with tangible livelihood projects that demonstrate the value of policy change. For donors, the dominance of short-term funding cycles that prioritise easily measurable outputs must give way to more flexible, long-term funding models. These should allow for adaptive management, value the slow work of building local institutions, and support advocacy focused on policy implementation, not just formulation. For policymakers, the implementation gap is, ultimately, a failure of governance that requires creating an enabling environment for civil society, genuinely decentralising power through devolution, and investing in transparent, accountable state institutions that can translate policy into practice.

This study is not without limitations; as a qualitative case study, its findings are context-specific and not intended to be statistically generalisable, and the recruitment strategy employed in this study presents a potential for selection bias. These limitations, however, open up a clear agenda for future research. Future studies should conduct quantitative research to measure the scale of the equity gap, undertake comparative case studies to explore how the advocacy-impact gap manifests in different political contexts, and engage in longitudinal research to track the long-term impacts of different NGO strategies. Ultimately, bridging the advocacy-impact gap is one of the most pressing challenges facing the development sector in general and campaigning/advocacy NGOs in particular. This research serves as a call to action for all stakeholders to listen more closely to community voices and to work collaboratively towards a more just, equitable, and sustainable future where advocacy leads to real, lasting, and transformative change.

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