

One Small Win at a time

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Why do small wins matter and how can they be evaluated?

Over the years, the importance of advocacy in bringing about policy change and significant transformation in the society, has been well established. Located ecosystems comprising of socio-economic factors, unique history of the region and organization advocating for change as well as a dynamic political climate, advocacy by its very nature is complicated and its impact is often indirect. Given the complex nature of advocacy efforts, the tools which adequately serve the evaluation of service delivery programs are not particularly helpful in evaluating advocacy efforts.

In case of service delivery programs, it is relatively easy to establish benchmarks to measure program effectiveness and chart out the progress towards goals. But with the socio-political environment playing a crucial role in success of advocacy efforts, the goals envisioned are usually long-term and go beyond the horizon of a typical one-to-two-year grant (Guthrie et al., 2005)¹. In a number of cases, there is hardly any significant change that can be measured during the grant period. The area of climate adaptation, for example, reflects the difficulty of 'attributing reduced impact specifically to adaptation, where success may not be apparent for decades and where impacts averted in the future are tricky to estimate' (Ford et al., 2013)². As noted by Guthrie et al. (2005), it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of most advocacy grants by the yardstick, "Did policy change?". In case of advocacy evaluation, the more pertinent questions could be, "How did the grantee's work create Mindspace for the issue at hand?" Or "Was the grantee successful in taking the necessary steps, big or small, toward the policy change? if yes, then how successful was the grantee?" When asking these questions, evaluators move away from the linear-rational evaluation methods which, as stated by Termeer and Dewulf (2019)³ are 'not suitable to provide balanced judgements for wicked problems, because they only fit the unambiguous contexts of tamed problems'.

The complex nature of advocacy poses several challenges and makes it difficult to follow a linear model of actualizing strategies. It also poses obstacles for the evaluation process and complicates the attempts to evaluate policy changes in terms of 'performance, effectiveness and legitimacy'. In the absence of clear causal pathways, interconnectedness as well as disconnectedness of advocacy efforts, it is useful to evaluate smaller wins within a non-linear complex system of advocacy efforts.

The frame of reference while evaluating small wins is 'an idea of making progress by accumulating small wins, in which linear policy development approaches are replaced by non-linear complex systems thinking' (Termeer and Dewulf, 2019)⁴. This perspective is rooted in Karl E. Weick's (1995)⁵ theories on sensemaking, Karl E. Weick and Quinn's (1999)⁶ theory of continuous change and Charles Lindbloom's (1979)⁷ idea of incrementalism.

As has been emphasized by Weick, sensemaking is a socially interactive process by which actors make their world logical and meaningful through talking and acting. It is not a passive act of discovering reality but an active process in which actors enact their environment by isolating elements for closer attention, probing some activities, seeing what responses that attracts, and seeing how people react, deepening their insights and so forth.

This ongoing process of sensemaking forms the basis for continuous change perspective wherein organizations are continuously adapting, learning, and improvising through small steps (Weick & Quinn, 1999).



The continuous change perspective even argues that changes cannot be simultaneously in depth, large scale and quick. Lindblom’s idea of incrementalism contributed to these perspectives by arguing that: ‘Incremental steps can be made quickly because they are only incremental. They do not rock the boat, do not stir up the great antagonisms and paralyzing schisms, as do proposals for more drastic change.’ Given these theoretical perspectives, small win, then, have the potential to accumulate into a series of small wins that may finally result in transformative change, but the strategy of small wins cannot be conceptualized as a linear approach. It is more a ‘retrospective summary that imputes a consistent line of development’ (Weick, 1984).

Identifying small wins:

Several times small wins are dispersed and harder to identify “than is one big win that is noticed by everyone...who defines the world as a zero-sum game” (Weick, 1995). Termeer and Dewulf (2019) have listed for crucial characteristics for a win to pass as a small win. The same are as follows:

- Small wins are concrete outcomes that go beyond creative ideas and promises.
- Small wins are not quick wins where people take fast and easy steps to solve simple issues and gain easy victories. They are in-depth change and include a change in attitude, mindspace, routines, beliefs or values.
- Small wins are of moderate importance and are ‘mostly located at a micro or local level because only that level allows people to effectively meet complexity and turbulence’.
- They involve a positive judgement and are ‘particular steps that make an important contribution to a more or less shared ambition’.

Table 1. Characteristics and indicators of small wins. (Termeer and Dewulf, 2018)

Characteristic	Indicator	Contra-indicator
Concrete outcomes	Visible results	Promises and ideas only
In-depth changes	Second- and third-order change Radical new practices	More of the same Quick wins Low hanging fruit
Moderate importance	Micro or local level Intermediate	Large scale Best practice
Positive judgement	Improvement Step forwards Related to shared ambition	Small loss for many actors

Analysing Small wins:

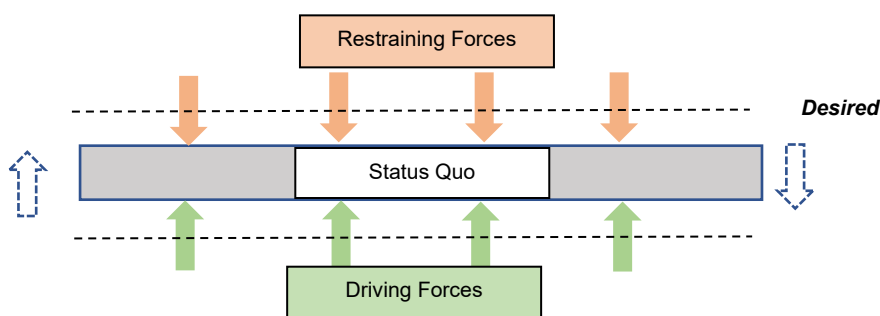
Understanding small wins through Karl E. Weick’s (1995) theories on sensemaking, Karl E. Weick and Quinn’s (1999) theory of continuous change and Charles Lindbloom’s (1979) idea of incrementalism, small wins can be analysed using several techniques. Here we discuss two different yet complementary techniques as possible methods of analysing small wins i.e. the exploratory technique of **Force Field Analysis** (Kurt Lewin, 1951) alongside **Narrative Assessment**.



a) Force Field Analysis:

FFA as a method includes an examination of factors (viewed as forces) to achieve a change (here, a small win), and facilitates identifying actions that would achieve the same. FFA, through explicitly laying out all the forces which inhibit or assist change/ win, helps to both overcome forces that work against and leverage forces that work in favour of achieving it.

The force field analysis method can be adapted to analyze the small wins. Force field analysis is an appropriate method of analysis as it helps in providing the comprehensive overview of the different forces acting on a potential change, and for assessing their source and strength. By knowing the pros and cons and visually plotting them, the advocates can develop strategies for future efforts to achieve similar wins, to reduce the impact of the opposing forces and strengthen the supporting forces. FFA helps expand the evaluation beyond the data itself to look at qualitative factors that may have an impact on the success or failure of advocacy efforts.



There are several steps to using force field analysis, beginning with defining the goal. These steps are described in Table 2. For each step, a description is offered. The steps are discussed in the context of a small set of participants (group) led by a facilitator.

Table 2

Step	Description
a) Define small win achieved	Define the goal achieved, including non-ambiguous and verifiable criteria/ assumptions that were in place for achieving the goal as well as restrictions.
b) Identify enablers and barriers	- Determine what forces are believed to be enablers, write them down, and then consolidate them. - Then determine what forces are believed to be barriers, write them down, and consolidate them.
c) Select major enablers and barriers	Of all the identified enablers or barriers, select the top few that are to be considered in more detail. Driving and restraining forces to be sorted around common themes and then be scored according to their 'magnitude', ranging from 1-5. (For example, rating each force by its importance and by the degree of control it exerts over that force)

The FFA can be conducted with members of the advocacy team. Having identified the small wins, the forces in support of the same are listed in a column to the left (driving the change forward), whereas all forces working against the change are listed in a column to the right (holding it back). The major driving and restraining forces are selected and from them, forces are sorted around common themes and scored according to their 'magnitude', ranging from one (weak) to five (strong). Prompting techniques,



including brainstorming, become important throughout the process as such techniques are often noted to increase the number of items elicited from a group (Browne and Rogich, 2001)¹.

To facilitate **the identification of enablers and barriers**, the following points are to be kept in mind:

- Free-form ideation should be encouraged, and each participant should be encouraged to independently contribute at least one enabler.
- A master list of enablers should be made.
- Similar enablers should be consolidated so that there is a unique set of enablers.
- Each enabler should be discussed to group satisfaction so that all enablers in consolidated list are clear to all.
- The same process should be used to list barriers, post the enablers are listed and agreed on.

To facilitate **the selection of major enablers and barriers**, the following points are to be kept in mind:

- At least one enabler and at least one barrier should be selected.
- Enablers and barriers that may also work in favour or against similar goals/ to-be-small wins should be focussed on.
- Weighted voting or dot-voting technique to elicit group input should be considered.

MindTools' Force Field Analysis worksheet layout may also be used to carry out the analysis. (www.mindtools.com/rs/ForceField)

b) Narrative Assessment:

The complexity of evaluating advocacy calls for understanding actions through which transformation happens and is carried out in specific settings at a particular period of time. Stories thus play a central role in getting together all these elements to convey a holistic account of both, small and big wins of the advocacy efforts while also communicating a point to take away from it; a learning. 'Narrative Assessment, which builds on the theory of change, involves the systematic co-construction of stories between advocates and Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specialists, ensuring that all the key elements are included in stories recounting the past unfolding of programmes' (Van Wessel, 2018)⁹ Outcomes often do not come in isolation but are connected and often occur in clusters. Different wins contribute to change over time, with new wins building on previous ones. Only stories can bring out these connections, which can be made plausible through reasoned accounts, largely drawing on an insider's perspective and knowledge, rather than being objectively assessed. Narrative assessment helps clarify how targets' attitudes, understandings or behaviours can be understood, at least partially, as responses to advocacy and helps contribute to the larger learning goals.

To conduct a narrative assessment, in-depth interviews can be conducted for each of the small wins identified, with the advocates managing and carrying out the advocacy program. These interviews may focus on:

- What made their efforts towards the small-win work there, at that moment?
- Were there challenges? How did they learn about them? How did they deal with them?
- Who were important players in this? What did they do that mattered?
- What was the relative role of other contributing factors, as the team observed?
- What makes them think the targeted stakeholders' position was different before their advocacy efforts?
- How was the political reality different from what they expected when they started?
- Apart from conducting in-depth interviews with the advocates, it is also important to conduct interviews with other stakeholders, review secondary documents and other project documents as relevant.



With these questions in mind, narrative assessment helps focus not only on the small wins but also on identifying and explaining disappointments and challenges. Different internal and external conditions and developments may contribute to different results. Identifying relevant internal factors can contribute to the development of internal capacities and identifying relevant external factors can contribute to a reconsideration of strategy and to enhanced understanding of both progress and failure. Thus, stories help to provide a view of the reality of advocacy work and its results in a way that outcome descriptions and 'evidence' cannot, thereby contributing to greater learning.

The use of the techniques of Force Field Analysis and Narrative Assessment complement each other to provide a holistic picture of the small wins that have been identified and help dealing with the unavoidable problems with measurement and evidence facing advocacy monitoring and evaluation.

¹ Guthrie, K., Louie, J., David, T., & Foster, C. C. (2005). The challenge of assessing policy and advocacy activities: Strategies for a prospective evaluation approach. *The California Endowment*. Retrieved September, 15, 2009.

² Ford, J. D., Berrang-Ford, L., Lesnikowski, A., Barrera, M., & Heymann, S. J. (2013). How to track adaptation to climate change: A typology of approaches for national-level application. *Ecology and Society*, 18(3), 40.

³ Termeer, C. J., & Dewulf, A. (2019). A small wins framework to overcome the evaluation paradox of governing wicked problems. *Policy and Society*, 38(2), 298-314.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. London, UK: Sage

⁶ Weick, K. E., & Quinn, R. (1999). Organizational change and development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 361–386

⁷ Lindblom, C. (1979). Still muddling, not yet through. *Public Administration Review*, 39(6), 517–526

⁸ Brown, G.L. and M.B. Rogich, 2001, 'An Empirical Investigation of User Requirements Elicitation: Comparing the Effectiveness of Prompting Techniques', *Journal of Management Information Systems* 17 (4), 223-249.

⁹ Van Wessel, M. (2018). Narrative Assessment: A new approach to evaluation of advocacy for development. *Evaluation*, 24(4), 400-418.