Assessing the Future of AIDS Activism

Transnational activism for an effective, comprehensive HIV response: Lessons from the coalition to mobilize power activism, strategy (COMPASS) Africa

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Background

HIV/AIDS advocacy and activism have transformed the epidemic in countries, communities and globally. Resources for advocacy and activism are shrinking at the moment that they are needed; approaches to advocacy funding reflect donor perceptions of optimal strategies and the exigencies of grant making. It’s critical to understand the types of activist architecture (in terms of coalitions, funding and strategic planning) that effectively redistribute power and ensure accountability at community, national and global levels.

The Coalition to Build Activism Power Strategy and Solidarity (COMPASS) Africa was launched in November 2017 to unite civil society coalitions in Malawi, Tanzania and Zimbabwe with advocacy partners from the region and global North in a coalition committed to “business unusual” activism and action. The coalition began work with a set of “campaigns” with predefined “wins” in thematic areas core to a comprehensive response.

“Business Unusual” Advocacy and Activism in Practice

COMPASS Africa seeks to build on long histories of bold activism led by and for people living with and at risk of HIV, and to provide resources, community and strategy to continue this work in the current climate, where governments and funders place a premium on data-driven decision making, and multiple stakeholders play roles in setting policies, budgets and service delivery model. The COMPASS structure matched in-country groups (Tanzania) and pre-existing coalitions (Malawi and Zimbabwe) with Global North partners with core competencies in data analysis (amfAR), strategy (AVAC and Health GAP), sexual and reproductive health and rights (CHANGE), and key population-focused human rights (MICRT). PZAT joined as an Africa-based center for innovation in monitoring, evaluation and learning, and a launching board that carried through the coalition work. These partners worked together on country landscapes, campaign design, implementation, evaluation and iteration. After two years, the coalition looked back at progress against pre-identified goals and unanticipated progress in thematic areas identified as critical to an effective comprehensive HIV/AIDS response.

Results

Of the 13 campaigns defined at the outset, COMPASS partners recorded wins in 38 percent of the campaigns and partial wins in an additional 38 percent. Looking at “wins” in focal areas that were not pre-defined in the campaigns, half of the work resulted in tangible shifts in policy, program design or investment and against the specific campaigns as defined by partners. The largest challenges lay in campaigns focused on domestic resource mobilization; many campaigns with pre-specified and responsive targets linked to differential service delivery saw concrete gains. Partners track progress against pre-specified campaign (see R, below) so that supports constructive discussion and strategic decision making with an emphasis on impact, not pre-specified deliverables.

Discussion

We assert that the difference in “win” rates between pre-specified goals versus focal areas reflects the degree to which successful advocacy and activism retard opportunities as they arise. Outcomes in domestic resource mobilization and “differential service delivery” across the two analyses reinforce the degree to which there are significant challenges for the former, and significant donor-driven prioritization for the latter. Discussing outcomes and challenges in this framework identified important differences of success (government commitment versus expenditure) and highlighted areas for further exploration in tactics, strategy and outcome assessment using the COMPASS Coalition Advocacy Assessment Tool (C-CAT). The tool, like the campaigns, are works in progress, with their power deriving from the people who use them in the field.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

The COMPASS approach has demonstrated impact by linking diverse groups with well-differentiated roles into a coalition focused on activism at headquarters and country levels and building a culture of mutual trust and cooperation. Further development of shared tools and vocabulary for defining targets, strategies and outcomes. At times, different partners assessed campaign outcomes differently—the tools developed are embedded in a collaborative, ongoing dialogue aimed at iterating on activist goals and approaches. Understanding where differences of interpretation emerge supports future planning; we build power as we iterate, and use this power to take on additional issues, including emergent crises like COVID-19.

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Evaluation of Activism and Advocacy: Novel Tools

Tool: COMPASS Campaign Advocacy Assessment Tool (C-CAT)

Part I. This part of the tool will ask you to rank a campaign or campaign towards achieving the “wins” to date. Please use the appropriate color cell.

Part II. This part of the tool will ask you to rank the significance, influenceability, and durability of the “wins.” Please use the numerical scale below and shade the cell to help you rate the level of significance, influenceability, and durability of each “win.”

Part III. This part of the tool will ask you to rank the significance, influenceability, and durability of the “wins.” Please use the numerical scale below and shade the cell to help you rate the level of significance, influenceability, and durability of each “win.”

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