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Instrumentos que possibilitam a tarefa complexa de avaliar *advocacy* internacional: aprendizagens da experiência de uma ONG Brasileira

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Tools for the complex task of evaluating international advocacy: lessons learned from the experience of a Brazilian NGO

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## Abstract

This article summarizes some of the lessons learned during Plan Políticas Públicas' (PlanPP) evaluation of a Brazilian NGO (here referred to under the pseudonym *Mundo Sem Armas* or MSA) in their advocacy efforts to inspire and shape the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) process in the United Nations (UN) as a part of a network of concerned civil society organizations (pseudonym *Coalizão Anti-Armas* or CAA). The primary goal is to tie the incipient theoretical literature on advocacy evaluation to the concrete experience of forming a methodology given the nature of the information sought and the large, complex system within which this project needed to be executed. The bulk of the text details some of the tools the PlanPP team employed along with their advantages, disadvantages and the conclusions which emerged from their application.

## Keywords:

Advocacy Evaluation, Systems, Software, Qualitative Analysis

## Introduction

This article summarizes Plan Políticas Públicas' (PlanPP) evaluation of *Mundo Sem Armas'* (MSA)<sup>2</sup> international advocacy work, particularly the efforts centered on the United Nations Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). The primary objective of the evaluation was to provide an image of MSA's actions and the context in which they have unfolded from the perspective of colleagues and associates in both government and civil society. MSA intended to utilize this image as (a) a planning

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<sup>2</sup> As highlighted by Patton (citation below), the disclosure of results in advocacy evaluation, particularly when occurring in an ongoing context, is a sensitive affair. The 'independent' nature requires that the evaluator maintain strict separation between the identity of the respondents and the information they provide, even from the client (PlanPP took strict precautions to maintain the privacy of questionnaire respondents and interviewees). The 'advocacy' aspect requires caution with regards to disseminating results and forthcoming decision-making processes so as not weaken the effort by revealing strengths and weaknesses to the opposition. It is due to these concerns that the claims and evidence presented have been accordingly altered from their original form presented to the client.

PATTON, M. Q. *Advocacy Impact Evaluation*. v. 5, n. 9, 2008.

instrument with which to shape future strategies in international arms control advocacy, and (b) as an independently-collected base of empirical information on MSA's effectiveness to be shared with funders.

Advocacy evaluation is a complex, delicate, task. Throughout the project the PlanPP team was challenged to not only reflect deeply, and inducing beneath-the-surface conclusions, but also to react swiftly, seizing opportunities and developing partial products in real time. The capacity to accomplish these tasks derived from many facets of the interaction with the client, and the usage some technological instruments. The lessons learned include more meta-level considerations such as the importance of considering the interaction between human/theoretical aspects and the technological tools employed to implement them, as well as more practical concerns such as the advantages and disadvantages of particular software packages.

The first section provides a brief background of the project, including both the salient features of the advocacy evaluation literature and the real-world context. The second section explicates how, given the restraints and opportunities present in the background, the PlanPP team designed the evaluation methodology. The final section ties these methods to some examples of the results that were derived from their application.

## Section I: Evaluation Background

Advocacy evaluation is an “elusive craft,”<sup>3</sup> not only due to the fact that it is a new and evolving field, but also because the sophisticated methodological toolkit brought to bear on social programs aimed at product or service delivery is widely inapplicable to most strategies of political influence. The incipient literature on the subject (commissioned mainly by a few foundations attempting to develop strategies with which to improve the results of their advocacy-dedicated portfolios) highlights three features relevant to the case study presented here:

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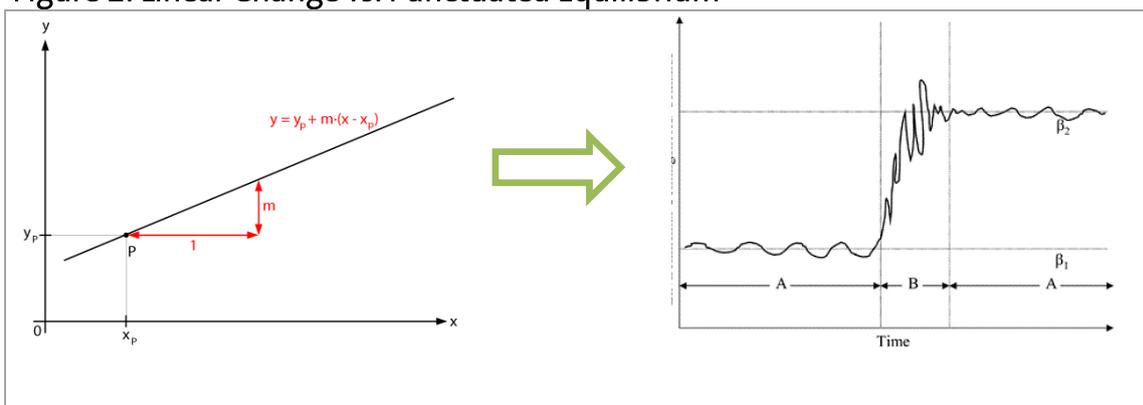
<sup>3</sup> TELES, Steven; SCHMITT, Mark. The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy. **Stanford Social Innovation Review**, v. Summer, p. 38-43, 2011.

1. Achieving political influence necessitates distinct strategies and organizational structures. In terms of the former, advocacy efforts are normally characterized by a multiplicity of distinct activities aimed at a broad swath of intermediate outcomes. The pace of advocacy activities often follows a ‘punctuated equilibrium,’ whereby smooth, linear change is replaced long periods of stability followed by brief spurts of intense activity (see Figure 1: Linear Change vs. Punctuated Equilibrium):

“While policy victories can sometimes seem quick because they occur in sudden windows of opportunity, they often require years of groundwork and several attempts and failures.”<sup>4</sup>

Precise timing is therefore even more crucial than in standard program evaluation. Information may only be relevant for a few weeks, days, or even hours. Taking the time to lay a base of empirical information is important, but the evaluator(s) must be open and prepared to present progress on-demand, sometimes quite suddenly.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1: Linear Change vs. Punctuated Equilibrium**



2. Advocacy networks tend to eschew neat, hierarchical structures in favor of diffuse webs. The methodologies for both collecting and

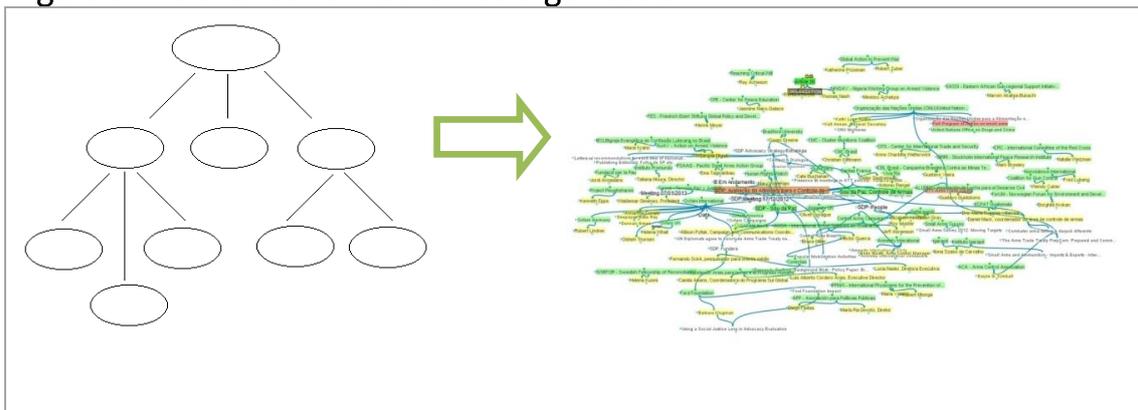
<sup>4</sup> BEER, Tanya. Best Practices and Emerging Trends in Advocacy Grantmaking. n. January, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> COFFMAN, Julia; BEER, Tanya. Evaluations to Support Strategic Learning : principles and practices. n. June, 2011 and WEISS, Heather. Advocacy and Policy Change. **The Evaluation Exchange**, 2007.

disseminating information therefore should be adapted accordingly. In the concrete sense, this adaptation may imply the creation of different versions of the data collection instrument(s) and/or the creation of results ‘packages’ to be shared with different sets of actors.

3. The final outcome of advocacy, often the implementation of a law or political policy, can take years to manifest if indeed it ever does. Even in the event of success, establishing a causal link between advocacy and the outcome is usually difficult if not impossible. The focus of the evaluation will usually be on intermediate outcomes and process – the small steps and the paths taken between them.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 2: Hierarchical vs. networked organization<sup>7</sup>**



4. Although all evaluations depend on their spatial/social/cultural context, advocacy evaluations are especially sensitive. To the degree possible, advocacy evaluation results should be possible to disaggregate by strategy, time-period, actor, and other pertinent

<sup>6</sup> FORTI, Matthew. **Measuring Advocacy – Yes We Can!** Disponível em: <[http://www.bridgespan.org/Blogs/Measuring-to-Improve.aspx#.Ugwl\\_ZKshFB](http://www.bridgespan.org/Blogs/Measuring-to-Improve.aspx#.Ugwl_ZKshFB)>. Acesso em: 13 Feb. 2013; BEER, Tanya. Best Practices and Emerging Trends in Advocacy Grantmaking. n. January, 2012; COFFMAN, Julia. **Lessons in Evaluation Communications Campaigns: Five Case Studies**. Cambridge, MA: [s.n.], 2003; **A Practical Guide to Advocacy Evaluation**. [s.l.: s.n., s.d.]; **Advocacy Evaluation Update**. Washington, DC: [s.n.], 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The network visualized here was constructed with empirical data on MSA’s international advocacy network with the same Personalbrain software used to organize the interview citations (discussed in Section II: Evaluation Methodology)

dimensions so that actors within the network of stakeholders can extract the information most relevant to their particular interests.<sup>8</sup>

The cloud of civil society surrounding the ATT process exhibits the types of emergent structures and non-linear behaviors typical in advocacy evaluation. The form of the network itself and the distribution of tasks has adapted dramatically in response to both internal and external forces. For example,

“[Organization A] help coordinate the [CAA] to plan and organize and to some extent just keep everyone in touch...At some point the funding they received [to do these activities] started to disappear. The original idea was to rotate the role, but [Organization B] was willing to take it on at some expense to themselves. They didn't get compensated for all the work they put in.”

As of 2006, the success of the civil society campaign birthed a new external reality, that of a formal UN Process, to which CAA adapted actively:

“When the negotiations became viable and a process was established we realized we had to be more professional and coordinate better...After a few years we decided to establish a more formal [steering board],”<sup>9</sup>

and passively:

“I think the move to the new [UN] building<sup>10</sup> severely affected the amount of pressure and presence civil society was able to have in

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<sup>8</sup> WEISS, Heather. Advocacy and Policy Change. **The Evaluation Exchange**, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> All following quotations have been transcribed from the interviews done as a part of this evaluation. These were confidential interviews, and therefore the speakers must remain anonymous.

<sup>10</sup> As part of the Capital Master Plan (CMP), the UN Headquarters Complex in New York was renovated between 2008 and 2013. During the period, some many functions were temporarily shifted to other locations. For more on the project see: **United Nations Capital Master Plan**.

the UN...The building move really changed the dynamic because...civil society became an undifferentiated mass. We couldn't tell who was a diplomat and who wasn't."

An uneven tempo characterized the long road towards the final approval of the ATT by the General Assembly of the UN on April 2, 2013.<sup>11</sup> Even after entering the grueling and metronomic UN negotiations, pieces of the process continued to constantly evolve, sometimes rapidly. In July 2012, for instance, an incisive "roadblock" by the United States on the final day of negotiations caught CAA unprepared and stalled the process for nine months. After being "outclassed in Washington," however, the combination of another unforeseeable event, the Newtown massacre in December 2012, and the relaxation of election-year pressures on the Obama administration, "changed the gun control conversation in the US," strengthening the delegation's support. Working within this dynamic global network, PlanPP needed to design an evaluation which would rapidly take stock of the nested contributions of MSA and CAA to political outcomes, a task which required a methodology capable of filtering and highlighting key events, salient dimensions, and relevant actors, while leaving room for unexpected results.

## Section II: Evaluation Methodology

### *Data Collection*

Two key factors enabled the PlanPP team to couple the subtle, complex demands of the evaluation with the tight restraints on the time and budget. First, early on the PlanPP team jointly established appropriate expectations for the project outcomes with MSA's receptive and flexible leadership. As such, both parties clearly understood that no impacts or causal relationships would be empirically measured. Instead, the goal would be to provide a descriptive

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Disponível em: <<http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/cmp/home/about/pid/22302>>. Acesso em: 21 ago. 2013.

<sup>11</sup> AFFAIRS, United Nations Office for Disarmament. **The Arms Trade Treaty**. Disponível em: <<http://www.un.org/disarmament/ATT/>>. Acesso em: 2 Aug. 2013.

assessment of civil society's contributions to the UN processes and MSA's contributions to the civil society effort as a way of independently verifying or denying previously-sensed trends.

Second, several members of MSA's staff participated extensively in the design of the data collection instruments. The close involvement of these individuals permitted the questionnaires to cull the universe of possibilities for those pieces of the system and trends of greatest interest to MSA. With few exceptions, the data collection was fairly conventional, employing an email questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed to capture perceptions of the influence of civil society and MSA. Six versions (depending on the sector and preferred contact language of the respondent) were distributed to 208 colleagues and associates of MSA, which resulted in the return of 79 questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to deepen and detail the broad-but-shallow information captured by the questionnaire. 51 individuals were contacted for interview. 32 people were interviewed during 30 interviews.<sup>12</sup>

### Data Analysis

The process of data analysis took on a less conventional form. Much has been written in the field of evaluation lamenting the haphazard and premature application of novel technological tools without the proper grounding in theory – social, mathematical, or otherwise. Perhaps because evaluation is by default an applied field, however, few authors exhaust much effort considering the other side of the coin. Novel theories and fields of evaluation often require tools to reach their full potential in application or sometimes to be applied at all. To construct an analysis based on the still embryonic theory briefly outlined in the previous section, the PlanPP team made use of several crucial tools, only two of which will be discussed here:

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<sup>12</sup> Scheduling interviews was greatly facilitated by being located in São Paulo in January, which lies centrally between European and North American time zones during the southern-hemisphere summer.

**Sankey Diagrams:** Aware that advocacy is a multifaceted activity composed of various interlocking components, both PlanPP and MSA considered asking about universally ‘effective’ strategies a banal exercise. Instead, we searched for a way of displaying information which could link strategies to the specific outcomes. MSA staff added organizational qualities as crucial contextualizing factors which could influence the effectiveness of strategies. Several questions on the questionnaire were therefore designed to elicit responses amenable to visualization in Sankey diagrams, which seemed the most viable and intuitive format to display these types of connections.<sup>13</sup>

Sankeys are a special type of [flow diagram](#). In the format utilized for this evaluation, each column is simply a [stacked bar graph](#), the full height of which represents 100% of responses. The relative sizes of each section represents the percentage of respondents that chose each option. Sankeys overlay this information with connecting bars, the widths of which correspond to the percentage of respondents who paired the options in different columns (see Figure 5).

**PersonalBrain:** Another challenge the PlanPP team faced was how to synthesize qualitative information from 30+ interviews into useful and pertinent analysis while allowing for novel, unexpected categories and results. Personalbrain, a mind-mapping software, includes several features which allowed the team to at least partially accomplish the type of emergent, ‘bottom-up’ organization of 1,456 citations, (see Figure 3) using the following procedure:

- Transcribe citations directly into ‘thoughts’ (nodes), translated into English when necessary.
- Connect as sibling nodes to the speaker
- Color-code according to whether the speaker belonged to government or civil society

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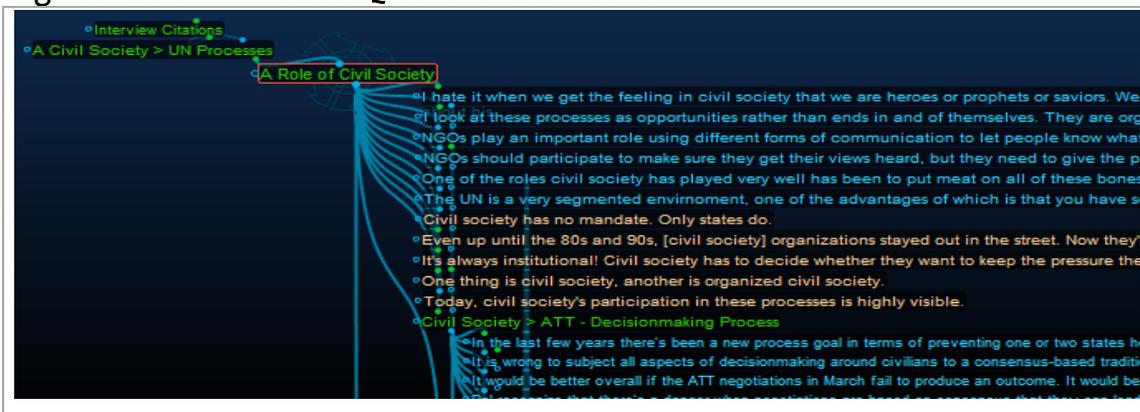
<sup>13</sup> The PlanPP team thanks Mauro Zackewicz for first suggesting the Sankey as an appropriate data visualization format.

- Once all interviews have been transcribed, go through node-by-node and attach each as a child to relevant (sub)categories.

The advantages of employing this tool/method are:

- Most importantly, citations can be attached to many relevant parent categories, without copy/pasting, a feature which allows the later analysis to rest on a larger and more diverse body of statements.
- Personalbrain permits the visualization of many-level hierarchies, allowing the user to quickly expand/collapse different levels.
- During analysis, the speaker's identity is not immediately visible to the user, reducing the potential bias of prestige and other personal factors. When desired, however the identity is easily accessible by clicking on individual nodes.

Figure 3: Visualization of Quotations Database



Some accompanying disadvantages are:

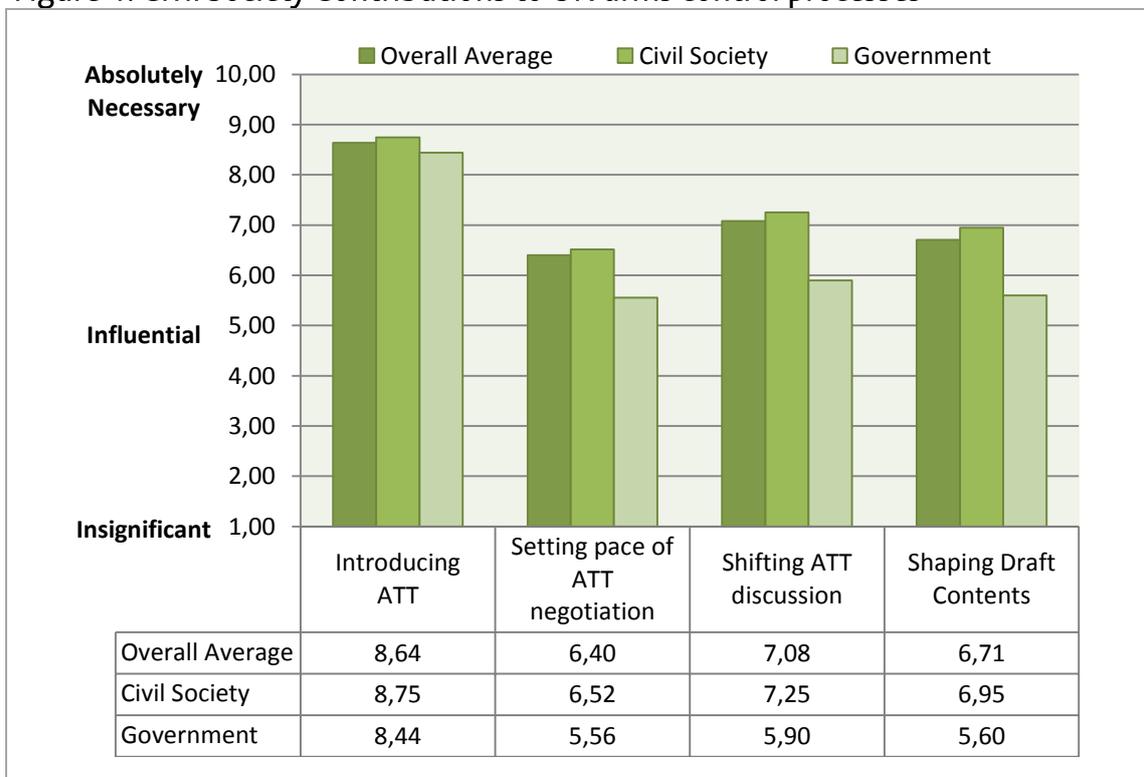
- The transcription and categorization process is undoubtedly labor-intensive (but not significantly more than regular transcription).
- The categorization process is highly subjective and the choice of relevant topics could be vulnerable to both different interpretations and to the limited recall power of the categorizer.

### Section III: Evaluation Results

To demonstrate how the utilization of these tools fleshed out in practice, this section will highlight a few of the evaluation results and explain the process of their derivation. PlanPP chose to structure the final report by claim → evidence, with only a loose overall structure according to the previously defined areas of interest. The justification of this structure was that there was no ‘main finding’ of the evaluation, but instead a network of independent results only loosely linked because the system of interest was simply too big, diverse and rapidly evolving to classify or analyze as a whole. In such large, complex environments, the useful products of an advocacy evaluation pertain to pieces which, when locally isolated, allow reasonably coherent analyses with relatively certain conclusions.

**Claim: Civil society thinks more of its influence than do governmental actors.**

**Figure 4: Civil Society Contributions to UN arms control processes**



**Evidence:**

Questionnaire responses (visualized in Figure 4) reveal that civil society actors estimated their level of influence higher than government respondents across all categories. As one interviewee detailed:

“I hate it when we get the feeling in civil society that we are heroes or prophets or saviors. We have to be careful to not think that things would not move without us, and we aren't always.”

**Claim:** The evidence indicates that **direct advocacy at UN meetings is a relatively new, prestigious opportunity for civil society, but one that has yet to be efficiently exploited.** Civil society seems to have succeeded in shifting their old mass campaigning and awareness activities into this new venue, but only clumsily in translating their direct lobbying capacity.

**Evidence:** Despite the lack of clear hierarchy in Figure 5, by a slight margin ‘direct advocacy at UN meetings’ ranks the most effective of civil society strategies according to questionnaire responses. Interviewees discussed direct advocacy at UN meetings extensively, but mostly in critical terms. First, interviewees from both civil society (first quote below) and government (second quote) were keen to emphasize that **more civil society presence is not necessarily better:**

“My personal position is that it's good when NGOs don't participate all the time. Diplomats need their space and their privacy. You have to make sure to find a balance.”

“I think the NGO presence almost became too much at a certain point in terms of the campaigning and lobbying. It's like, ‘You have 8-10 central messages but 100-150 NGO reps present!’”

Second, interviewees commented on the **superficiality of the majority of civil society representatives’ participation:**

“Maybe at some point it was good to have those huge NGO delegations going to all the meetings because it simply showed the diversity of actors involved. Nowadays I think not.”

By far the most common, and often most vehement criticism of direct advocacy work in New York targeted its **opportunity costs**:

“[Face to face lobbying] can be very effective but it doesn’t address the problem that these are diplomats in the conferences who get their instructions from people in the capital who often aren’t being lobbied in the same way.”

“A huge problem of the ATT has been taking funds away from the work of groups that are actually going to make a difference in their countries..”

**Claim:** Since the ATT became a formal UN Process in-capital work has been more **effective** than direct advocacy in New York, **but underappreciated and under-utilized** by civil society.

**Evidence:** ‘Communication with officials in-capital’ ranks second in terms of effective strategies in Figure 5 but many interviewees, particularly those in government, explicitly ranked its effectiveness above the direct advocacy work in New York. For example:

“I always say that working with delegates is not the best way to influence. The diplomat has his orders, even if he doesn’t like them...The biggest area where civil society could have more influence is by finding those people that are giving diplomats their instructions.”

Taken together, the previous two claims paint temporally-dependent picture whereby direct advocacy served a specific purpose closer to the beginning of the formal process, but was later surpassed in importance and effectiveness by in-capital work, a fact to which CAC's strategy has yet to adapt.

**Claim: Providing research and expertise has been one of the most effective strategies for civil society, especially in supporting the voice of countries with small delegations.**

**Evidence:** The thickest vein running through Figure 5 connects 'publishing reports, policy papers' with 'extent of background knowledge/research' with 'influenced substance of policy agreements.' Interviewees also underscored the crucial role of civil society's ability to communicate expert knowledge, most often as a tool to support and elevate the voices of delegations hailing from countries most affected by armed violence but that might not have expertise in arms control.

"First of all, [civil society provides] expert information. I normally take a large delegation with good expertise, but in Latin America and Africa most delegations are one person. They don't have the expert knowledge."

"The NGOs have been really good at supporting certain countries so that their delegates arrive to the negotiations knowing more, even about their own countries."

## Conclusion

On the whole, the results of the evaluation revealed a strong, positive external image of MSA's advocacy efforts, but one whose effectiveness has been stifled by the structural factors in the UN context and the inertia of some larger facets of the larger civil society machine. For the PlanPP team, the MSA evaluation

case study supplied a number of interesting lessons on several levels. Advocacy evaluation is an emerging field, particularly outside of the Global North, and one with unique challenges which require creative solutions to both theoretical and practical challenges. PlanPP hopes that recording and sharing these experiences may benefit future advocacy evaluations both within Brazil and globally.

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Figure 5: Which combinations of Civil Society's strategies and qualities influenced the UN processes MOST?

