THE ADVOCACY INITIATIVE:

A REVIEW OF KEY FEATURES, PLANS AND OUTPUTS

FINAL REPORT
AUGUST 2014

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1.   Introduction and Content

A survey in June 2014 of those participating in various ways in The Advocacy Initiative points to a high level of success overall in three key respects. Over three quarters feel that debate and self-reflection had been stimulated within the sector, something noticeably lacking heretofore; about the same number feel that they themselves had enhanced their understanding of social justice advocacy and of the sector; and – perhaps most significantly – about half feel that their participation had led to positive changes in their practice. These are positive results for the Initiative and comprise the backdrop to the main focus of this report, which attempts to answer the following questions. *What can we learn from the specific characteristics of the Initiative, and from the process of and manner in which it was implemented?* This report is thus an examination of the Initiative as a case study of a programme attempting to bring about change in a complex and diverse sector. It focuses on key characteristics and dynamics that shaped it and its evolution over time, contrasting the original plans against the final implementation, and attempts to draw lessons from these.

Thus this, the final one in the evaluation of the Initiative, does not comprise a definitive or even approximate verdict on the achievements or shortcomings of the Initiative. It is in any case far too early for that. The genesis of this report is found in a decision of the Advocacy Initiative Steering Committee to commission in 2014 an overall 'synthesis' analysis describing the Initiative, its work and the key learning.[1]. The approach adopted by the current report was selected by the Steering Committee as a complement to the synthesis analysis, focusing on the Initiative itself as a process and project, seeking to identify what was unique about how it worked, and how these characteristics influenced its activity.

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[1]   All reports are available on the Initiative Website: http://www.advocacyinitiative.ie/

After a brief background, Section 2 below looks first at the goals and objectives of the Initiative as they were formulated originally and refined over a period as the prospect of significant funding became a reality. The Initiative's governance structure is then described briefly. Because of its origins, it had the participation of a wide range of organisations active in different ways in social justice advocacy (SJA). These were both centrally involved in taking decisions and played a significant role in certain aspects of implementation. These objectives and governance structures stamped the Initiative with key features and a unique character that strongly influenced the manner of implementation and final outcomes.

The final part of Section 2 presents the key major interventions in the initial Implementation Plan, and how these were refined in the Theory of Change Workshop.

Section 3 moves on from goals and planning to consider actual implementation and outcomes. Under the three headings that grouped the interventions and outcomes sought, the outputs of each action is described and a brief commentary given regarding outcomes. But the main focus is on exploring how the goals and plans evolved over time, responding to internal dynamics and to the evolving wider environment.

Section 4 explicitly draws out the differences between the original plans and their eventual implementation, and explores some of the factors that influenced its evolution. The focus is on whether some lessons emerge that might be of relevance to the ongoing 'legacy' process[2] of the Initiative and more widely. Section 4 also presents in more detail the results of the online questionnaire survey, outlining overall impressions from participants in the Initiative. A final section presents conclusions.

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[2] Following their analysis of the interim evaluation report, in the final months of the Initiative the Steering Committee identified seven 'legacy partners' who agreed to take on the implementation and development of eight legacy projects. These projects were seed funded through the original budget and further information is available on www.advocacyinitiative.ie

2. The Advocacy Initiative Aims, Approach and Interventions

2.1 BACKGROUND

The Advocacy Initiative proceeded in two phases.

The first ran from the time of its initial conception in a Trinity College Dublin summer school in 2008 and the subsequent formation of a Steering Committee of 19 organisations, up to the publication –seed funded by Atlantic Philanthropies – of a research report in mid 2010. The report[3] drew on a significant research effort and consultation with stakeholders, and was designed as the culmination of a consensus development process on how to move forward. It explored and documented the rationale and overall goals, posed the questions to be addressed, and set the scene for a second study. This[4] further refined and developed the initial research to produce, in close consultation with the Steering Committee, a draft three year workplan in September 2010. While this lacked detail, it included specific headings for each area of activity.

Phase 2, supported by further funding from Atlantic Philanthropies, began in August 2011 with the launch of a three year Implementation Plan. By then a more complete governance structure was in place, and the initial goals and tasks had crystallised into a specific set of interventions. This Phase ends in August 2014 when the Initiative formally closes. It will be followed eight 'legacy' activities to be implemented by seven organisations involved in social justice advocacy (SJA) over a three year period, all members of the Steering Committee.

2.2 AI OVERALL OBJECTIVES

The report of the first Phase formulated the following goals:

a)   To advance knowledge on the current state of advocacy in Ireland;
b)   To provide a perspective on the community and voluntary sector's current challenges;
c)   To contribute to informed debate with the sector and the State.

The Implementation Plan over a year later refocused these in the context of one overall objective. The AI was to become "a catalyst for a new relationship between the community and voluntary sector and the state", grounded in a culture of social solidarity, pursuing more effective and constructive advocacy strategies, and leading to improved policy and law.

The goals were reformulated as:

1.   To contribute to the knowledge and understanding of social justice advocacy;
2.   To stimulate informed debate on social justice advocacy within the sector and with the state;
3.   To facilitate strengthened capacity of social justice advocates.

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[3] Keegan, Owen and Pat Montague (2010) *The Advocacy Initiative: Project Report*. August.
[4] Curlew Consulting (2010) *The Advocacy Initiative: Final Draft* September.

2.3   GOVERNANCE

The governance structure for Phase 2 retained a Steering Committee with 19 member organisations (later rising to 21), and added a Management Group nominated by the Committee from among its members and supplemented by one or two external experts.

Membership of both Steering Committee and Management Group formally remained largely the same during the course of the Initiative. The Steering Committee's quarterly meetings were attended on average by about half to two-thirds of its members, with a few attending sporadically. Changes were due to individual personnel leaving organisations, and while some new members were added, membership overall was very stable.

With €550,000[5] funding now available for three years, a Management Team - comprising the Director half time for the duration, Communications Officer half time for two years, and occasional administrative support - was established to implement the initiative, reporting to the Steering Committee and Management Group.

Informal Reference Groups could also be set up, as needed, comprising "those involved in the Initiative" and some external actors to advise on specific strategic actions.

With regard to wider participation, the Initiative noted that it is:

> "...open to any community and voluntary sector actor engaged in and reflecting on social justice advocacy. The Initiative welcomes the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders and seeks to create space for cross-sectorial analysis and reflection. Those interested in the work of the Initiative are invited to contact us directly." (p2)

The involvement of others was thus in principle open-ended, and in practice comprised opportunities to participate in AI sponsored actions, to respond to calls for ideas concerning specific actions, and to respond to open calls for specified tenders.

2.4   KEY CHARACTERISTICS

A number of key characteristics shaped the Initiative.

1. The approach to implementation was to contract out much of the work, very often to individuals and organisations actively involved in the sector. The Management Team, working closely with the Management Group, defined terms of reference based on the Implementation Plan, and contracted out the various actions to be supported by the Initiative. The Initiative maintained a strong design and coordination role over all actions, and implemented the Communication Strategy. Also, several actions relating to self-reflection were not contracted out, the Management Team taking direct responsibility for them sometimes with the participation of the Steering Committee.

    Of the overall €550,000 budget, about 45% was projected for contracts, and it proved to be accurate: Over the three year period a total of about 33 consultant contracts[6] for

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[5]   Atlantic Philanthropies provided €500,000, with a further €50,000 matching in-kind funding form Focus Ireland and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. This includes about €74,000 reserved for the three year 'legacy' component.

[6]   This includes eight separate contracts for the legacy, and counts the Perceptions study as eight separate contracts, one for each researcher.

amounts varying from €500 to €34,000 were approved totalling €254,000[7]. Staff costs came to about €229,000 (42%) and remainder went on rent, Website costs, publishing, administrative expense and various costs associated with organising the activities.

2. The composition of the Steering Committee is also worthy of mention. Whilst all could be regarded as national level organisations with strong advocacy functions, membership was quite diverse, encompassing many large NGOs, some membership-based; several Centres; and a few networks or federations of locally based groups. Although, no local or dedicated once-off campaigning groups were represented, members are active in a range of issues and of traditions in advocacy. The Republic of Ireland lacks an overall umbrella organisation for NGOs as a whole or for those working in social justice advocacy. There are therefore few occasions or fora for these groups to interact and learn together through collaborative effort and practical work. It is notable also that members of the Steering Committee and of the Management Group at several points played a more active role in implementing the Initiative than is usually associated with such bodies.

3. From the outset there was an understanding that advocacy would not be a core activity of the Initiative, and indeed the central resources were structured accordingly. It would act as a platform for exchange and interaction within the SJA sector, support research into the sector, facilitate interaction and debate among stakeholders and more widely, and provide means by which the sector could enhance its skills and capacities. Nor would the Initiative attempt to speak on behalf of the SJA sector more widely. Nevertheless, advocacy was not explicitly precluded and the Initiative, with strong support of the Steering Committee, did some *ad hoc* work around the issue of the regulation of lobbying, attending a conference and making a submission.

4. The Initiative was always conceived as a "time bound" project, with no aspiration to sustainability as an entity beyond the three years. During implementation the question arose several times for discussion among the Steering Committee, for instance during the Interim Evaluation, but it was clear that overall the view remained that no new entity should emerge and nor should the Initiative continue in the context of a new home.

    On the other hand, the interventions it supported were aiming for lasting outcomes. Thus a 'Legacy Plan' plan was agreed by the Steering Committee late in 2013 to run from September 2014 to August 2017. It will be implemented by various members of the Steering Committee based on proposals submitted. It comprises actions to ensure the further dissemination and sustained use of the Initiative's outputs, alongside a continuation of the Knowledge Exchange Fora, two each year, offering ongoing support to exchanges, learning and self-reflection. The possibility of a campaign on SJA emerging from the legacy process is also kept open as a possibility.

2.5   THE AI PLAN OF ACTION AND THEORY OF CHANGE

The Implementation Plan of October 2011 was largely faithful to the issues identified in the first phase report, comprising a mix of strategic actions to explore the nature of SJA; to stimulate informed debate within the sector and with others; and to facilitate skills and capacities in advocacy (Box 1 below).

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[7]   Estimated for the final three months.

The Initiative evaluator (the current author), appointed in November 2011, supported the development of a Theory of Change as a methodology for clarifying the linkages between the actions proposed and the outcomes sought, including the final Objectives. A Workshop in February 2012 with members of the Management Group and Team and a few from the Steering Committee led to some refinement of the plan, particularly in the short and medium outcomes sought for each and in the relationships between them.

Box 1: Strategic Actions for the Advocacy Initiative Phase 2.

> *Contribute to the knowledge and understanding of social justice advocacy.*
> 1. Develop a definition of social justice advocacy.
> 2. Map the practice of social justice advocacy in Ireland.
> 3. Deepen understanding of how policy makers perceive social justice advocacy.
> 4. Investigate the existence of funding vulnerability as a result of social justice advocacy.
> 5. Commission a public opinion poll on the policy contribution of the community and voluntary sector.
>
> *Stimulate informed debate on social justice advocacy within the sector and with the state.*
> 6. Facilitate an expert group of relevant stakeholders to promote deep reflection on social justice advocacy and the contribution of the initiative.[1]
> 7. Promote self-reflection amongst social justice advocates.
> 8. Develop a grassroots campaign to promote understanding of the advocacy function of the community and voluntary sector.
>
> *Facilitate strengthened capacity of social justice advocates.*
> 9. Develop a knowledge exchange forum to promote peer learning and exchange within the community and voluntary sector.[1]
> 10. Investigate training and educational support for social justice advocacy.
> 11. Develop a capacity building framework for social justice advocacy relevant for the community and voluntary sector and policy makers.
> 12. Develop an evaluation framework for social justice advocacy.
> 13. Undertake strategic initiatives aimed at strengthening capacity.
>
> The work of The Advocacy Initiative will be supported by **a communications strategy** that will promote awareness of social justice advocacy, and build public support for policy engagement by the community and voluntary sector.

Figure 1 below shows the Theory of Change Map finalised after the Workshop.[8]

The outcomes sought from specific actions pursued by the Initiative (in yellow) are all at the lower end, and are (in the Theory of Change approach) seen as preconditions to other outcomes that ultimately contribute to the objective at the top. The full Theory of Change narrative includes the rationale for claiming such actions will bring about or contribute to these changes.

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[8]   This is a slightly simplified version.

Figure 1: The Advocacy Initiate Theory of Change Map
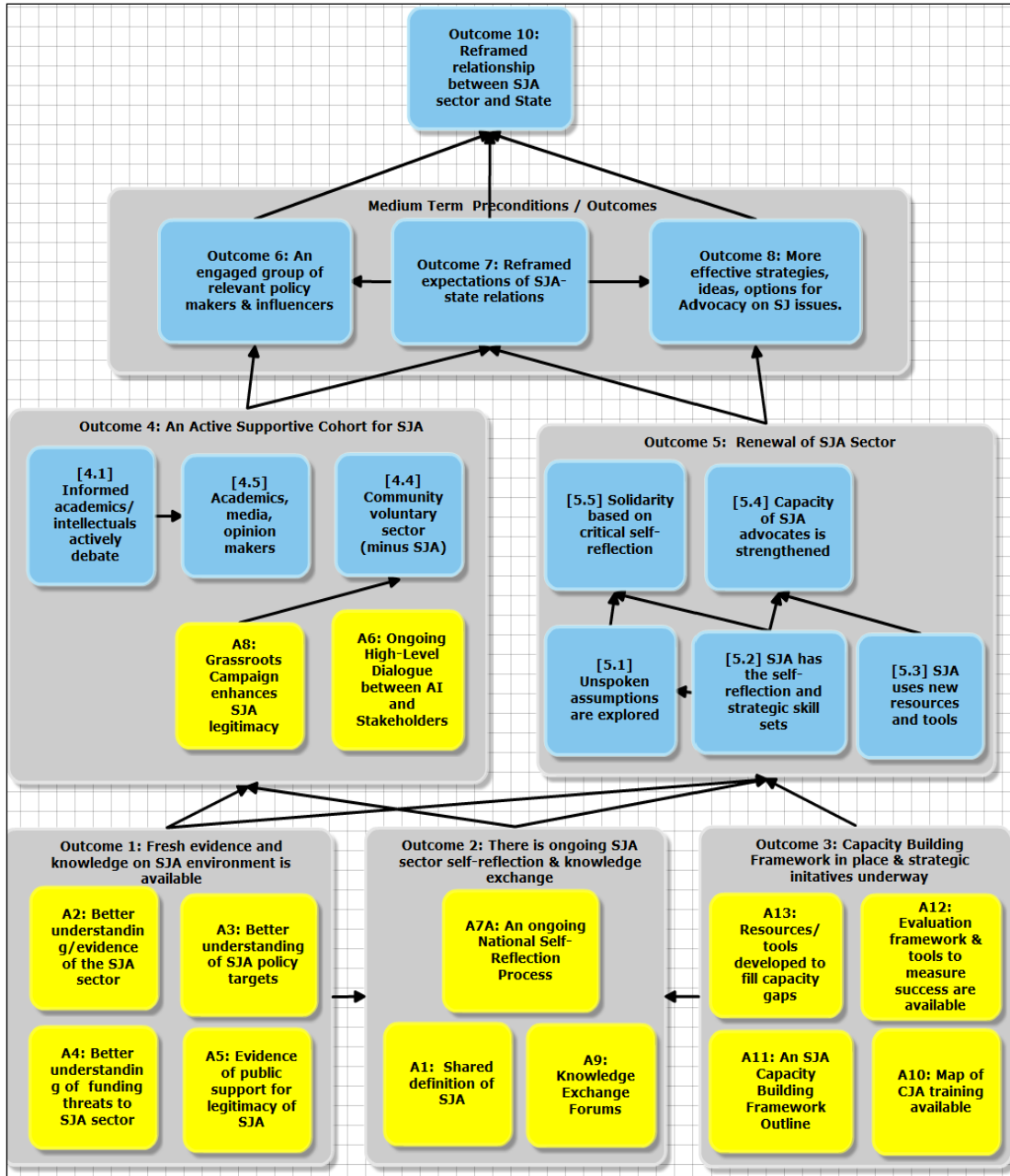
The relevant point is the ways in which this represents a reconfiguration of the original goals in Box 1. These include the following

- The grassroots campaign (A8) had been seen in the context of stimulating debate but is now regarded more as a contribution to building a supportive cohort among the community voluntary sector, intended ultimately contribute to influencing policymakers;

- Knowledge exchange activities, in particular the KEF (A9), had been associated with capacity building, but are now closer to sectoral self-reflection activities.

- The high-level dialogue with stakeholders (A6) has now to some extent become an outcome in its own right, in that it can in principle influence directly two of the three medium term outcomes sought.

Overall, these changes are not hugely significant. However, the map allows a consideration of the logic of each Action, and what it was intended to achieve. A full account of this is given in the Advocacy Initiative Evaluation Framework.

This then was the model to which the Initiative was working at the beginning of 2012. The next section considers how the actual outcomes diverged from this, and the reasons why.

3. Actual Interventions and Outcomes

Here the actual interventions and their outcomes, as far as can be determined from the limited evidence available, are described. It looks 'upwards' from the interventions, tracing follow-through to outcomes as outlined in the Theory of Change.

The contribution of the Communication Strategy is also covered under each relevant heading.

3.1 GENERATING EVIDENCE AND KNOWLEDGE OF SJA ENVIRONMENT:

The most developed of the AI activities was that of gathering evidence and knowledge on the environment for and dynamics of SJA. The research and studies undertaken covered the full territory anticipated, in some cases going further than had initially been planned. The quality overall was very high, and virtually all of it was original, based on primary data and original analysis.

The main outputs comprised[9]:

- The *SJA Mapping Study* (A2)[10] profiled the sector based on a survey of SJA entities and five case studies;
- Two *Public Opinion Polls* (A5)[11], in November 2012 and June 2013 assessed the perceptions of the public regarding SJA;

- The *Perceptions Study* (A3)[12] reviewed how policy makers perceived the SJA sector based on interviews by SJA actors of policy makers;

- The *Funding Study* (A4)[13], produced in two parts, investigated the vulnerability of funding from public sources related to the pursuit of SJA, and comprised a major piece of historically-based analysis of the relationship between the SJA sector and public bodies.

The purpose of the research was to inform debate and stimulate discussion by feeding into several contexts.

The first was the public arena, including journalists, NGOs and academics, as part of an effort to reinforce a 'supportive cohort' among public commentators that would in the medium term emerge as an independent voice favouring SJA. The first three reports were launched publicly as part of the externally-focused communication strategy. The fourth was also launched and published but without a specific media press release. National media reported on the research results and other activities of the Initiative, most of it constructive, and some debate was stimulated. This was reinforced by a number of articles written by the Initiative's Director and by some commissioned Blogs.

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[9] All the Initiatives research publications are available at: http://www.advocacyinitiative.ie/category-our-publications

[10] CMAdvice Ltd. (2012) *Mapping Study of Social Justice Advocacy,* December

[11] A summary of findings is in: *Who Cares about Social Justice Advocacy: What the Public Think.* (2013)

[12] Kathy Walsh *et al* (2013) *In Other Words: Policy Makers' Perceptions of Social Justice Advocacy´.*

[13] Brian Harvey (2013) *Funding Dissent: Research into the Impact of Advocacy on State Funding of Community & Voluntary Organisations*; Brian Harvey (2014) *Are We Paying for That: Government Funding and Social Justice Advocacy.*

The Mapping Study also contributed directly to debate within the SJA sector, as a central topic in the second Knowledge Exchange Forum, considered by the organisers to have been successful.

It is notable, however, that the final study, the two part comprehensive and insightful analysis of the relationship between public funding and the SJA sector, was – after consideration by successive Steering Committee meetings – given a low key launch, was published only in digital form, and was directed primarily towards the SJA sector itself rather than towards the media or policy makers. Nor was it, unlike the Perceptions Study (see below), a subject for direct informal interaction with policy makers.

In terms of future relevance, the research can also be seen as establishing benchmarks both quantitative (the *Mapping Study*, the *Opinion Polls*) and qualitative (the *Perceptions Study* and especially the *Funding Study*) likely to be of ongoing and future interest to the academic and research communities as well as to the SJA sector itself.

The idea of launching a *grassroots campaign* (A8) was also intended to deepen understanding of advocacy in the community and voluntary sector at local level. It was seen in the Theory of Change on the one hand as a target for and user of the research results, and on the other as building support among the community and voluntary sector for SJA that could ultimately have an influence at the level of policy makers. Always scheduled for late in the Initiative and hence only sketchily defined at the beginning, it was in effect eventually substituted for a series of local meetings on specific themes relating to SJA. The outcome sought here changed accordingly, becoming more inward looking, and relating primarily to stimulating ongoing discussion and knowledge exchange within the SJA sector rather than to building support for the sector that might eventually influence policy and other fields.

An *Ongoing high-level dialogue* (A6) between AI participants and other stakeholders represented a development of the original intention, which was to establish an expert group of relevant stakeholders to promote collective reflection on SJA and the role of the AI. By the time of the Theory of Change exercise, this had evolved and the idea of an expert group meeting regularly was dropped. The goal become more refined: the purpose of opening dialogue was to gradually enhance understanding of SJA and so pave the way, albeit to a modest degree, for improved mutual understanding and a more engaged group of policy makers, and to nurture a reframing of expectations that each had of the other.

As a first step, a series of eight informal meetings was organised between the Director, sometimes accompanied by a member of the Management Group, and senior public officials, trade unions, academics and others. The goal was to explore their perspectives of social justice advocacy and their views of the potential contribution of The Advocacy Initiative. A combined draft report was drawn up for internal use, to plan the next steps in terms of dialogue and sector self-reflection.

The *Perceptions Study* (A3) is also particularly relevant here in another way since the research methodology adopted brought it much closer to a dialogue than a conventional research exercise. The evidence gathering was organised in a manner that saw SJA activists and public policy makers interacting together in what was for them an unfamiliar context i.e. the former interviewed the latter in a series of meetings as a core part of data gathering, allowing them to engage with the latter's point of view in an innovative and revealing manner. This yielded a number of insights regarding their mutual constraints and positions, insights that enriched the final report.

The results of the *Perceptions Study* were also the subject of, or at least the pretext for, a further set of individual discussions held in November 2013 between AI staff and Management Group and civil servants in various government departments. Again a number of insights were obtained for the future course of the Initiative.

Thus, compared to the original intention, the dialogue between the SJA sector and policy makers and other key stakeholders cannot be said to have been ongoing; and was confined on the SJA side to those directly involved in or contacted by the Initiative. Overall it reached a larger number of individuals than anticipated but in an *ad hoc* manner rather than in on-going dialogue. This approach had been consciously sanctioned by the Steering Committee.

3.2   Ongoing SJA Self-Reflection and Knowledge Exchange

Ongoing self-reflection within the SJA sector and knowledge exchange within the sector and with others of relevance was the intended outcome for a second block of actions. In the bigger picture the goal was, on the one hand, to expose and debate some unexplored assumptions held by the sector around sensitive issues, and thereby hopefully to promote critical self-reflection and build solidarity; and on the other, to enhance skills and capacities and generally promote interaction within the sector.

The initial Implementation Plan had a single budget heading and action line for unspecified 'self-reflection' activities. In practice, however this area was reinforced when, as mentioned, the grass-roots campaign (which had quite a different goal) was replaced by, and the budget reallocation to, a set of local events organised by NGOs and CBOs.

The final set of actions comprised:

- Drafting of *a shared definition of SJA* (A1)[14]

- Running a series of six *Knowledge Exchange Forums* (KEFs) and a Final Conference, for debate, peer learning and exchange (A9);[15]

- Supporting a set of eleven *local events* (A7b) in different parts of the country[16].

- Initiating an exploration of the possibilities for *self-reflection* (A7a), undertaken directly by AI Steering Committee members;

- A late project (due to take place in October 2014) is the coordination of a two-day residential meeting addressing the question *How should advocacy be regulated to contribute to a better society*. A wide range of stakeholders including the new Charity Regulator have agreed to participate in this process.

This final line up, especially the KEFs and local events, included alongside self-reflection a very strong component of knowledge exchange, networking and general interaction in the SJA sector, linking it more closely to the third main set of outcomes concerned with capacity building.

The *shared definition of SJA* (A1) was produced early on, aiming to ensure that those encountering or involved in the Initiative were operating with a clear and common usage of the term SJA. Rather than imposing a particular definition, the goal was simply to ensure

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[14]   *Draft Statement on Social Justice Advocacy*. October 2011.
[15]   A further six are planned during the three year legacy period.
[16]   The last two are still being planned.

clarity, for instance differentiating the term 'advocacy' as used by the Initiative from its use in the context of organisations that pursue personal advocacy on behalf of individuals.

The draft definition was presented at the first KEF. Feedback was received over a period that further refined it in relation for instance to pursuing the general public interest (a term not included in the original definition) and in acknowledging the role of others beyond the community and voluntary sector (which had been implied as the main, if not the sole, actor). Overall it proved useful, uncontroversial and largely unremarked on, while serving also to ensure clarity in the Terms of Reference for various actions.

The *Knowledge Exchange Forums* (A9) took on greater prominence as it became clear that the level of interest was high and that they could contribute to several areas including exchanges and networking, peer learning, capacity building and self-reflection, and presentations, workshops and other activities engaging a range of invited experts.

One KEF, as mentioned earlier, focused on the Mapping Study. The next four were structured around different themes the selection of which was influenced by conclusions emerging from the evidence gathered. The themes emerging from the sector itself were around how to work collaboratively more effectively, and how to ensure that the beneficiaries of advocacy can be to the fore in the process of advocacy itself. The final KEF was on the issue on visual and artistic tools and approached to advocacy.

The *local events* (A7b) were somewhat similar, at a smaller and more local scale, having resulted from a call for ideas of relevant issues. As noted, these in effect took the place of, and to some extent obviating the need for, a grass-roots campaign, and at the same time represented a move towards internal SJA sector dialogue and away from external interaction.

While *self-reflection* (A7a) was thus a part of many of the activities undertaken by the Initiative, it was in the context of the Steering Committee that an overt attempt was made to tackle some of the more controversial issues for the sector. Two facilitated dialogue sessions were organised, and a number of more informal actions. An effort was made to expand conversations to a wider group, but succeeded in only a limited way. In the end it was agreed that promoting such a process even amongst a limited group was fraught with difficulties and that the outcomes sought were insufficiently clear.

One of the things emerging from this was some clarity, at least within the Steering Committee, regarding the issues that were particularly difficult to broach in normal dialogue situations. The main ones were:

- Competition for resources, access and profile;
- Compatibility of frameworks, value bases and approaches;
- Perceived independence including political independence of some actors;
- Perceived bad practice in the areas of lack of effectiveness, innovation and creativity and the absence of staff turnover;
- Salary and status inflation.

The Steering Committee, having recognised the difficulties, nevertheless continued to raise and identify such issues as they arose in their own deliberations and the process did result in a deeper level of interaction between them.

The communication strategy considerably strengthened these areas, in relation to disseminating event outputs including an AI Newsletter, and instigating further discussion and dialogue in the form of blogs.

3.3   CAPACITY BUILDING FRAMEWORK AND RESOURCES

The third main block of actions focused on capacity building within the sector. The ultimate goal was to enable them to produce more effective strategies and to influence the policy domain. Four main actions were undertaken:

- Compiling and publishing a *guide to training supports* for SJA (A10), drawing on another piece of work that had already been underway; [17]

- Development of an online *Advocacy Capacity Assessment Tool* (A12)[18] for use by SJA actors;

- The production of a tool to assist the *identification of evaluation indicators for SJA* as a means for groups to monitor their progress (A12);[19]

- The production of a review of the evolving *Regulatory Environment for SJA* (A13)[20].

- *Guide to the Standards in Public Office Commission* and the *implications of the Electoral Acts for advocacy* (due August 2014).

The founding work of the Initiative had identified certain capacity shortcomings. These included the ability of groups to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, and to develop and implement strategies to evaluate the effectiveness of SJA including the development of appropriate indicators of progress. These were addressed, as suggested by their titles, in two of the actions taken.

However, compared to the original expectations this, for a number of reasons, came to occupy a less prominent position in the Initiative.

First, it was realised that effective capacity building resources must be tailored to different sectors and needs and can consume a very significant amount of resources. Concerns were expressed in the Steering Committee about raising the expectations of the sector concerning how much the Initiative could actually offer. Some members of the Steering Committee also felt that the most pressing need was to analyse practices and sector self-reflection. The actions that were taken in relation to the capacity needs already identified were thus relatively generic in nature and modest in scope. They were produced primarily by the Initiative's Management Team, or through small expert contacts.

Second, the original intention was to identify, and fill, additional gaps in capacity. While potential gaps became evident during the course of various actions, most would have required a scale of funding and support well beyond the means of the Initiative, or indeed of the capacity of the Management Team. A couple of narrow areas were identified in which the Initiative felt it could contribute, filling a gap in knowledge more than in capacity. The paper on the regulatory environment would fall into that category. A roundtable discussion

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[17]   This was produced under a separate grant from Atlantic Philanthropies, but coincided with an action within the Initiative's plan. It therefore required no additional budget. ICRT & John Gallagher Consulting (2012) *Scoping Exercise on Skills Development Opportunities for Social Justice Advocacy and Related Skills.* January.

[18]   This was developed in collaboration with Bolder Advocacy in the USA.

[19]   *Are we getting there?* Advocacy Initiative 2014.

[20]   Gavin Elliot (2014) *The Regulatory Environment for Social Justice Advocacy in Ireland.* January.

was also held in March 2014 with a number of NGOs to share information on the Standards in Public Office Commission and its potential impact on the sector, and this is also likely to result in a paper. It may also lead to a common position in related advocacy on this issue.

At the same time, as noted already, the KEFs and local events were designed in response to specific demands to obtain skills and share ideas, and much of the budget in this area was in effect diverted there. These certainly can be included as capacity building exercises.

The Website has consolidated in a user friendly format all the learning material from across the Initiative's activities, including Workshop reports, videos and Case Studies, papers, research and capacity building tools. Additional external resources are also briefly reviewed, categorised and linked to, and a regularly updated section on training resources is particularly popular.

4. Findings

Overall the Initiative managed to stay on track in relation to its original overall objectives and strategy, responding to changing circumstances, to the lessons and feedback, and to opportunities emerging as it proceeded. Given the diversity of the sector and the tensions inherent to it, as well as the adverse circumstances faced, this was never a forgone conclusion. It also, as is evident below, managed to achieve a range of positive results

4.1 CONTRASTING PLANS AND REALITY

The Initiative pursued actions in all strands identified in the Implementation Plan, but with varying emphasis.

1. The research agenda was fully implemented, in some cases in more depth than originally envisaged.

    The high quality of the work, and the benchmarking nature of much of it, is likely to sustain its relevance into the future. Within the sector it seems likely that over time the various pieces of work are being, and will be, considered and debated in more depth.

    In terms of stimulating debate in the public sphere, it had some success. The promotion of the most controversial and substantive piece of work (the Funding Study) was deliberately muted, and it barely impinged, at least so far, on the media or public fora.

    The 'grass-roots campaign' in the community voluntary sector was, at one point, also intended to influence public debate and ultimately the environment for policy making. A grass-roots campaign of any significant size was never envisaged. However, certain environmental factors may also have militated against the emergence of strong demand for and successful execution of such a campaign, for instance the atmosphere generated by sustained 'austerity' policies and public cutbacks, and the strains they impose on the community and voluntary sector especially at local level.

2. The high-level dialogue between stakeholders was pursued as a wider but irregular exercise than originally envisaged; and on the SJA side participants comprised only those directly involved in or contracted by the AI. Overall, it covered a broad range of issues, but was less sustained and not as deep as had originally been hoped perhaps partly because of the political context.

    However, for many engaging in it, including members of the Steering Committee and those social justice advocates involved in the Perception Study, it had a significant impact in terms of enhancing understanding of the position of the policy makers. It seems likely that a corresponding impact, though perhaps more muted, was felt among the policy makers and stakeholders met during the process. The reports of the meetings, including the Perceptions Study itself as well as the (unpublished) consolidated meeting notes, suggest a fruitful exchange of ideas. While hardly qualifying as 'transformative' it is likely to make some difference to how the various stakeholders view and relate to each other.

3. The process of knowledge sharing, especially in the form of KEFs and of local events, was promoted vigorously and with significant participation by the wider SJA sector both nationally and locally. The large number of people attending, from all over the country and across all ages and sub-sectors, indicates that they were fulfilling a need and the

online Survey results confirm this. There was also a sense that the Initiative reached and drew in new actors to these events, facilitating new ways of dialoguing and sharing learning and expertise, and creating new networks. A sense of 'community' emerged that was identified as absent from other spaces; and a degree of sectoral self-reflection also took place there, though within relatively 'safe' boundaries. Overall, these events demonstrated a strong desire amongst individuals and organisations in the sector to improve how they do their work.

The Steering Committee did engage quite extensively in self-reflection, at times intensively, in a deliberate stratagem to use itself as a testing ground. They achieved some notable progress in this. The limits they encountered, in terms of the issues that proved most difficult to broach, may also apply at the wider level of the sector as a whole. A stable formula for achieving widespread serious and open self-critical debate was not identified for the Initiative more widely, but the issues that need to be addressed are that much clearer.

4. Capacity building activities were pursued, but efforts to produce practical tools to fill capacity gaps addressed only those areas previously identified. This was partly because no obvious new gaps were identified by the Initiative. However, significant building capacity of a sector is a resource intensive, specialist and long-term activity for which the Initiative itself was poorly equipped. The use of the KEFs and local events to impart and exchange skills and ideas was a more realistic (but also more desirable) goal in the circumstances.

These changes in emphasis suggest dynamics within the Initiative and its environment that point in particular directions.

First, overall there was a tendency, when challenges were encountered, to become more inward looking. Thus the ongoing high level interaction with stakeholders became occasional and issues discussed became more selective, and perhaps the most difficult one – state funding and its implications – was avoided. The process of self-refection occurred in several arenas and actions, but the most controversial aspects of it were confined to within the Steering Committee. The limited grass-roots campaign, which would have taken the issues directly to the community and voluntary sector and encouraged them to become active in them, was changed into a set of networking, exchange and skills development events.

Second, as the emphasis moved away somewhat from cross-sectoral self-reflection, it moved towards sectoral skills development, exchanges, networking, and 'soft' capacity-building. This shift was responding primarily to needs as they emerged from within the sector, and the shift was the subject of discussion and agreement among the Steering Committee.

Third the 'harder' aspects of capacity-building, that would require more sustained support and significant resources, were beyond the capacities and timeframes of the Initiative. Some may have expected more of this activity initially, but for others the priority was other activities. Hence capacity building was a feature but not the dominate activity.

4.2   THE WIDER CONTEXT

It seems likely that a key factor in explaining the above is that the wider social and governance context, as it evolved since 2008 when the Initiative was first conceived, was less than optimal in terms of supporting positive change. In relation to refining the strategy

and defining in detail those elements that originally had been general in nature, this context undoubtedly influenced the decisions taken by the Steering Committee, the needs and demands as they were emerging from the sector more widely, and the reception of the outputs. The Interim Evaluation in mid 2013 identified four relevant factors:

- the end of social partnership rippling through the system;

- the explicit and unusual opposition of certain government Ministers;

- the realignment at local level around local authorities impacting from the bottom up; and

- challenges faced by and disappointments with the traditional ally, the Labour party.

Since then scandals emerging from the Central Remedial Clinic and Rehab have featured strongly in the media and among the public, and have at the very least muddied the waters for those pursuing SJA. These factors would have influenced especially the prospects of stimulating debate in the media and the wider public. But they also would have affected the prospects for realigning the relationship between social justice advocates and decision makers. Though many individual policy makers showed themselves to be open to honest dialogue with the sector, the overall environment was less than conducive to it.

These factors might also partly explain why a single coherent message concerning what the Initiative was trying to achieve, that could group the somewhat disparate actions explicitly around a single coherent goal, never came firmly to the fore in the Communication Strategy. Following the interim evaluation the possibility of identifying such a message was discussed at length, but a mandate for such an approach did not emerge. Although the strategy did successfully pursue its own actions separately from but complementing the individual events – in particular with the Website and blogs – it did not appear to take on a clear identity or voice in relation to the high level objectives. The core objective was, from the beginning, to contribute to a reframing of the relationship between the social justice activists and the state. Yet most of the actions did not attain the level of interconnected and mutual reinforcement required to make it clear that this was indeed the objective.

Of course, significantly influencing the reframing of this relationship would have been a hugely ambitious objective. Realistically the aim was to raise the profile of the need for it and to equip the stakeholders, and especially the SJA sector, to influence the process in a positive direction. As the Interim Report noted, based on interviews with the Steering Committee and others:

> "...there is ... a feeling that the relationship is changing anyhow and the question we should be asking is how to influence that process of change: 'the pieces have been thrown into the air, and the issue is how to nudge them, at the right moment, to fall in the right place'". (p2)

The wider economic and social dynamic mentioned above might mean that the right moment to nudge a destabilised relationship in the right direction simply did not arrive, at least as yet.

4.3   EXTENDED GROUP OF ACTIVE AI PARTICIPANTS

It is worth considering that quite a large number of people from the sector had specific roles in the implementation process of the Initiative, beyond being involved as participants in the events and activities organised.

The core group comprised about 20 or so people sitting on the Steering Committee and Management Group. Many if not most of these reported in the Interim Evaluation Report that they gained significantly from the experience, leading to changes in how they practice social justice advocacy. This group was thus both the subject and object of the initiative, both taking decisions concerning how the Initiative related to the external environment and immersing itself as an actor and a target group.

Many others had direct involvement in the Initiative. Seven SJA activists engaged in the action research of the Perceptions Study and, according to their own account, gained significant and sometimes unexpected insights, leading many of them to reflect on their work and question the assumptions they bring to it. Furthermore about thirty people volunteered to support and guide various actions. There were ad hoc Reference Groups established for the evaluation, the mapping and funding studies, the opinion polls, some of the KEFs and the final Conference, and some of them met several times. The Indicators Report was based on a series focus groups with experiences advocates. A further set of SJA actors was involved in organising the local events, covering issues of their choice. Many if not most of these are likely to have gained specific insights from the activities in which they participated.

4.4   ISSUES NOT ON THE AGENDA

A few issues that, in part because of the specific characteristics of the Initiative outlined in Section 1, never made it onto the agenda in any significant way.

First, is the 'insider' versus 'outsider' debate. The *insider* approach emphasises engaging with the state and other stakeholders through internal structures, conventional lobbying and opportunities to debate, focusing on deepening mutual understanding and finding common ground, as well as on the need for the SJA sector to develop more effective strategies that resonate with policy makers. The *outsider* approach supports and implements actions outside of these institutional possibilities and constraints through for instance direct action and bottom-up and community mobilisation, based on the idea that changing the balance of power is an essential part of influencing policy, and that indeed without it little progress can be made.

The definition of SJA proposed at the start is broad enough to embrace that full range of social justice advocacy. Some tools and instruments presented and debates at the KEFs would also certainly support outsider approaches. But overall, the strategy adopted, including that embodied in the Theory of Change, attempts to build the capacity and context for SJA to influence the relationship with the state through persuasion and strategic interventions that can appeal to the constraints within which policy makers are perceived to operate.

This bias may derive from the origins of the Initiative in a Summer School in Trinity College and from a governance structure that comprises national organisations for whom engaging in conventional lobbying and advocacy would comprise a key activity. However, a couple of networks with local members are also involved, and many might adopt a stronger outsider approach.

A second and related question concerns whether a certain gap is emerging between national organisations and those at local level, even where the latter is represented as a member of the national level organisation. The Interim Report put it like this:

"At local level concerns range from being swallowed up within local authorities in the alignment strategy (for instance the Leader programme) and losing any advocacy capacity or opportunities; to slowly but surely being deprived of state supports and funding when the demands on them are growing, to a point where they become unable to engage in effectively advocacy or provide meaningful services. The national sector (whether those at the hub of networks or those who have solely a national role) are finding that their advocacy activities can achieve less, while resources to support the local level are getting scarcer. The gap arises where each side finds it can gain less from, and offer less to, the other. (p5)"

The significance of this is that such a divide may make it more difficult to represent SJA in a coherent manner, from local to national level. The Initiative never comprehensively addressed this question.

4.5 A FINAL OVERVIEW: THE ONLINE SURVEY

An online survey was circulated to all those involved in the various Initiative activities, and key results are presented below.

The purpose of the survey was to gain, from the full diversity of people engaging with the Initiative in various ways, some insight into their beliefs regarding the impact of the Initiative, both in terms of their own understanding and practices and more widely on the sector.

To this end, the online survey was sent to the full mailing list of the Initiative, comprising all who had participated in any way or had sought to be kept informed, a total of about 900 people. In all 92 responded to the survey between May 29th and June 24th 2014, representing about a 10 per cent response rate. Given the number responding and the direct nature of the questions, the results may be regarded as reasonably accurate.

Three statements were presented in the survey, about which participants were invited to express their level of agreement or disagreement.[21] The following shows the results.

Table 1: Level of Agreement with Statement regarding the Initiative

Statement	Agree Strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
My participation in The Advocacy Initiative has *enhanced my understanding of social justice advocacy* and of the sector.	21.7%	56.5%	18.5%	2.2%	1.1%
My participation in The Advocacy Initiative has led to *positive changes in my practice at work* and/or social justice advocacy.	9.8%	38.0%	45.7%	4.3%	2.2%
The Advocacy Initiative as a whole has *contributed to debate and self-reflection* within the social justice advocacy sector.	26.7%	47.8%	24.5%	1.1%	0%
Average:	**19.4%**	**47.4%**	**29.6%**	**2.5%**	**1.1%**

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[21] The choice was: 'Agree Strongly', 'Agree', 'Neither agree nor disagree' 'disagree' or 'disagree strongly'

First it can be noted that the level of disagreement with any of the statements is very low, with just a handful dissenting to any degree.

Over three quarters (78 percent) agree, or strongly agree, that their understanding of SJA and of the sector has been enhanced as a result of their participation in the Initiative, and more than one in five agree strongly. This must be considered a significant and positive outcome.

In terms of affecting positive changes to practice, the picture is different. Whilst few disagree, the largest group of about 46 percent held no opinion. The fact that almost half (48 percent) do believe that the Initiative led to positive changes in their practices is surprisingly high. Translating enhanced understanding into changes in practice takes time, and perhaps reinforcement. One survey respondent, who felt that their understanding was enhanced but their practice had not, commented: [22]

> "My response to the first two questions is not due to a deficiency in the programme but ... because not a lot of time has passed since attending to perceive any distinct changes"

If this figure of 48 percent is extrapolated onto the full mailing list membership, it suggests that about 450 SJA activists have changed their practices in some way, and about one tenth in significant ways, as a result of their participation. This must represent an appreciable proportion of the sector itself.

About two thirds (67 percent) of those participating also believe that the Initiative contributed to debate and self-reflection within the sector, with over one quarter in strong agreement. This too would suggest that the Initiative made perceptible progress in relation to this goal.

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate which activities of the Initiative they were involved in. Responses indicate a good spread. Not surprisingly the largest number – 93 percent – had attended at least one KEF. About 46 percent used the Website, and 31 percent attended a launch. Many other activities were also engaged in, and almost all participated in more than one. However, no statistically significant differences are observed in terms of responses to the questions in Table 1 i.e. the responses broadly speaking represent participants in all activities.

Overall the survey results demonstrate a positive outcome for the Initiative.

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[22]   There was an opportunity to offer wider opinions about the Initiative, including an open question concerning which "single activity was most useful and effective for the sector".

5. Conclusions

Four key characteristics of the Initiative were identified above.

First, most of the work was contracted out, usually to individuals and organisations involved in the sector, though usually with a strong design and coordination role at the Centre.

Second, the Steering Committee membership comprised national level organisations straddling a diverse range of thematic areas and approaches to SJA, in a wider sectoral context in which few fora exist to enable opportunities for interaction and cooperation. A number of Steering Committee members, and the Management Group as whole, also adopted an unusually active role in implementation. Steering committee member have reported developing strong relationships and levels of trust that did not previously exist.

Third, the Initiative choose neither to itself pursue advocacy as a core activity nor to speak on behalf of the sector, but rather to constitute a platform or forum that would support the sector in engaging in advocacy.

Fourth the Initiative, while aiming for lasting outcomes, was conceived as a "time bound" action, with no aspirations towards establishing an entity to sustain it into the future. A legacy strategy, however, was devised and implemented based on indications of demand and need within the sector.

In terms of the evolution over time of the Initiative – plans versus outcomes as outlined above – most changes can be accounted for by the ordinary activities of a Steering Committee and Management Group responding to evolving circumstances and to feedback obtained from activities pursued. Nevertheless, these characteristics did leave a mark.

In practice contracting out the work offered a means to enable the direct participation of social justice activists and organisations. This was particularly beneficial in the case of the Perceptions study, which evolved more towards a dialogue with policy makers than a research exercise. That dialogue was deepened, however, through the willingness of Steering Committee members to become directly involved in follow-up discussions.

Although there was strong central coordination, the subject matter and organisation of the local events, in particular, were left to the tendering organisations. While this allowed issues and opportunities of local relevance to be addressed, it had shifted from the original intention of developing a 'grass-roots' campaign that would link to and mutually reinforce other areas of the initiative. While this shift was sanctioned by the Steering Committee based on evolving developments, there may have been ways in which these events could have reinforced other Initiative activities, or pursued follow-up locally, that was not possible due to the complete devolution in the tendering process. Had a central team been in place to implement them, the outcome might have been different. The Initiative's management team, on the other hand, kept a firmer hand on KEFs, and thus could ensure that they related more closely to other interventions and that some follow-through activities could be supported.

It is also possible that a Committee comprising national organisations, and the absence of those working at local and community level or as independent activist groups, led to a more conservative stance, in the sense of being more accommodating of an 'insider' approach, than would have been the case had more local and activist groups been involved. This may also have influenced the decision to refrain from more vigorous advocacy or commentary on

behalf of the sector (though that was intention from the earliest point) and to underplay the funding study.

It is also not clear whether the strong involvement of national organisations led to a greater 'filter-down' effect member or filial organisations at local level within the structures of these organisations themselves. But the participation of such a significant number did lead, according to those involved, to a greater degree of mutual understanding. As noted, these would not ordinarily have many opportunities to meet and collaborate, and to develop a common understanding (or even agree to differ) in areas on which the Initiative was active. This must be considered as a beneficial outcome of this feature.

The fact that the initiative from the outset had a relatively short and finite lifetime also influenced its actions. Longer term objectives could be considered only in a relatively abstract way i.e. interventions could not be sustained for long-periods or scheduled to commence long into the future. In this sense the Theory of Change map went far beyond any potential time-frame of influence, even had circumstances been favourable. But the finite lifetime created an environment in which trust and engagement of partners could be built quickly. It also freed the team to focus firmly on the more immediate outcomes sought and avoided potentially extended and divisive discussion of the 'positioning' of such an entity within the sector. The idea of creating of a more permanent entity, a body or network, was mooted, and the option was always present, but any attempt at it would certainly have consumed significant energies of the team and possibly led to difficulties within the group and in relation to addressing the wider sector. Furthermore, the original remit and objectives for the Initiative offered no rationale for constituting a permanent entity.

As it was, the decision to continue with certain interventions that were seen to be addressing sectoral needs was considered adequate and reaching agreement on them, including on implementation, proved unproblematic. Overall the strong commitment to the legacy actions, an unusual feature in itself, demonstrates that a high level of ownership had been achieved.

This report has not explored the alternatives that might have been available to those launching the Initiative, in terms of governance, focus and implementation. Overall, however, the features identified, while closing off certain options, served the Initiative well in terms of pursuing it stated goals. Despite significant challenges to establishing the Initiative, both internal to the sector and in the external environment, overall it stayed on course and managed to adapt its plans in a manner that was flexible and responsive to these challenges as well as emerging opportunities. Furthermore, the survey results would strongly indicate that the Initiative succeeded in stimulating widespread debate within the sector as a whole, and enhanced the understanding of social justice advocacy for a large majority of those who participated resulting, for most of them, in positive changes in how they go about their work.