

ARTICLE

Between the Cross and the Cartel: Assessing the Effectiveness of an Advocacy Strategy on Religious Violence in Mexico

Entre la cruz y el cártel: Evaluación de la eficacia de una estrategia de sensibilización sobre la violencia religiosa en México

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Abstract

Priests in Mexico face significant risks of violence from organized crime due to their prominent roles within local communities. This study evaluates the effectiveness of advocacy strategies designed to improve the safety and conditions of priests subjected to such violence. Key actors identified include the Centro Católico Multimedial (CCM), the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE), Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), and Dennis Petri in his capacity with various organizations. The research employed desk analysis, media review, and semi-structured interviews with representatives from these organizations. Findings indicate that, to date, the advocacy strategy has had limited impact, with no substantial improvements in the security or well-being of priests. While the strategy has contributed to increased awareness among advocacy targets and the general public, the extent of this awareness remains unclear. The limited effectiveness of the advocacy efforts is attributed to incomplete or inaccurate documentation of incidents, a lack of political will among Mexican authorities, and insufficient understanding of religious freedom among policymakers. These constraints highlight the need for more robust documentation, greater

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governmental engagement, and enhanced advocacy approaches to address the ongoing risks faced by priests in Mexico.

Keywords:

Priests, organized crime, advocacy strategy, Mexico, religious freedom

Resumen

Los sacerdotes en México enfrentan riesgos significativos de violencia por parte del crimen organizado debido a su papel destacado dentro de las comunidades locales. Este estudio evalúa la eficacia de las estrategias de incidencia diseñadas para mejorar la seguridad y las condiciones de los sacerdotes sometidos a dicha violencia. Los actores clave identificados incluyen el Centro Católico Multimedial (CCM), el Observatorio de Libertad Religiosa en América Latina (OLIRE), Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) y Dennis Petri en su calidad de representante de diversas organizaciones. La investigación empleó análisis documental, revisión de medios y entrevistas semiestructuradas con representantes de estas organizaciones. Los hallazgos indican que, hasta la fecha, la estrategia de incidencia ha tenido un impacto limitado, sin mejoras sustanciales en la seguridad o el bienestar de los sacerdotes. Si bien la estrategia ha contribuido a aumentar la concienciación entre los destinatarios de la incidencia y el público en general, el alcance de esta concienciación sigue siendo incierto. La efectividad limitada de los esfuerzos de incidencia se atribuye a la documentación incompleta o inexacta de los incidentes, la falta de voluntad política de las autoridades mexicanas y la insuficiente comprensión de la libertad religiosa entre los responsables políticos. Estas limitaciones resaltan la necesidad de una documentación más sólida, una mayor implicación gubernamental y enfoques de incidencia mejorados para abordar los riesgos continuos que enfrentan los sacerdotes en México.

Palabras clave:

Sacerdotes, crimen organizado, estrategia de incidencia, México, libertad religiosa

Introduction

The Catholic Church in Mexico has been profoundly affected by criminal brutality. While organized crime and its associated violence have impacted Mexican society as a whole, research indicates that priests are particularly vulnerable to such violence. Indeed, Mexico is considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a priest (Petri, 2020). Between 2012 and 2018, twenty-six priests were killed as a result of violence perpetrated by criminal organizations (Sotelo Aguilar & Gazanini Espinoza, 2018). Other clergy have experienced various forms of intimidation, including kidnapping, extortion, theft, and physical harassment.

These acts of violence are not necessarily driven by religious intolerance or hatred toward the faith, but rather by the priests' religious and social behavior. Priests may become targets when their actions conflict with the interests of criminal groups. This can occur when they engage in evangelistic efforts, attempt to convert cartel members, or participate in social activities that undermine the power or influence of these organizations. When priests assume the role of human rights defenders and publicly denounce injustices committed by criminal groups, they are also at increased risk of violence (Petri, 2020). In this context, priests are often perceived as promoters of social stability. The assassination of a priest can contribute to social destabilization, instilling fear, perpetuating impunity, and fueling further violence within communities (Sotelo Aguilar & Gazanini Espinoza, 2018).

In recent years, various efforts have been undertaken to raise awareness about this issue, both nationally and internationally. Father Sergio Omar Sotelo Aguilar, director of the Catholic Multimedia Center (CCM), authored the book *Tragedy and Crucible of the Priesthood in Mexico* (2017), which documents the widespread impunity in cases involving murdered priests. Based on this book, a documentary was produced to further increase visibility of the problem (Sotelo Aguilar, 2017). The documentary premiered at the Mexican Chamber of Deputies (The Mazatlán Post, 2019). Several NGOs, including the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE) and Aid to the Church in Need, have also advocated for greater awareness and the inclusion of this issue on the public agenda. In December 2019, CCM and OLIRE jointly requested a thematic hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights regarding the protection of the fundamental rights of religious leaders operating in violent and/or conflict-affected areas in Mexico (OLIRE / CCM, 2019).

This study investigates the issue of priests in Mexico who are harassed or assassinated by organized crime groups. It focuses on the advocacy strategy implemented between 2016 and 2020, which was initiated by the Centro Católico Multimedial (CCM) and supported by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE), along with several other non-governmental organizations. The primary aim of this strategy was to bring these human rights violations to the attention of both national and international stakeholders.

This research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy by identifying both its successful elements and areas that require improvement. These insights will help clarify what worked, what didn't, and how future efforts could be strengthened. To achieve this, the following research question will be addressed:

Main research question: To what extent has the advocacy strategy implemented by the CCM between 2016 and 2020 been effective in improving the protection of priests harassed or assassinated by organized crime in Mexico?

Sub-questions:

- Who are the actors involved in the advocacy strategy?
- What was the goal of the advocacy strategy that was initiated by the CCM?
- How has the advocacy strategy been carried out?
- What have been the outcomes of the advocacy strategy?
- What could be improved to make future policy advocacy strategies more effective?

The objective of this research is to analyze the advocacy strategy aimed at improving the situation of priests in Mexico who are harassed by organized crime groups. The analysis will focus on relevant events and developments that occurred within the timeframe of 2016 to 2020. The goal is to map the strategy and identify which actors were involved and what actions were undertaken. In doing so, this study will critically assess the outcomes of the advocacy strategy at both the national and international levels, as well as within the Mexican Catholic Church. By taking these dimensions into account, the research will provide a comprehensive evaluation of the strategy's effectiveness. The findings of this study will inform a policy brief that offers recommendations, where applicable, for strengthening and improving future advocacy efforts.

Theoretical Framework

To successfully conduct this research, it is first necessary to examine the key concepts that will be employed throughout the study. This section discusses relevant theories and analytical frameworks related to the concepts of effectiveness and advocacy strategy evaluation within the field of human rights.

Advocacy

Morariu and Brennan (2009, p. 100) define advocacy as “a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at various levels.” They argue that this broad definition is deliberately inclusive, capturing the diversity of strategies and actions that contribute to effective and successful advocacy campaigns—beyond policy change alone.

Building on this definition, Arensman et al. (2015, p. 42), in the MFS II Joint Evaluation of International Lobbying and Advocacy, refine the concept further by situating it more explicitly within the field of human rights and global development. They define advocacy as “a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at different levels toward the overall aim of development interventions to combat the structural causes of poverty and injustice.” While narrowing the scope to the development and human rights context, they maintain that advocacy encompasses a broad array of strategies that go beyond mere policy influence. These include awareness raising, litigation, public education, capacity building, relationship development, and network formation.

Moreover, Arensman et al. (2015, p. 42) identify two primary methods of influencing decision makers: (1) persuasion and cooperation (lobbying), and (2) pressure and confrontation (e.g., naming and shaming). They define lobbying as “the influencing of policymakers by building relations, creating awareness, and finding connections to build enthusiasm among policymakers for the chosen aim.” Within this framework, awareness raising and the dissemination of information are seen as key strategies to reach decision makers.

For the purposes of this research, the definition proposed by Arensman et al. (2015) will be adopted, as it offers the most comprehensive and contextually relevant conceptualization of advocacy in the field of human rights.

In addition to defining advocacy, scholars such as Gormley and Cymrot (2006) and Mosley (2011) distinguish between two broad types of advocacy strategies: insider and outsider strategies. Arensman (2018), in her doctoral dissertation *Negotiating Effectiveness: The Politics of Results in Advocacy for Development and its Evaluation*, further elaborates on this distinction. According to her:

“Insider strategies are about being included and creating space for inclusiveness in decision-making and policy processes. These strategies include lobbying, playing an internal advisory role in official policy making spaces, and cooperating with targeted individuals, governments, organisations and corporations (...). Outsider strategies, in contrast, focus on putting pressure on advocacy targets (i.e., communities, publics, policymakers, decision makers, corporations or private sector stakeholders, civil society). Pressure is applied through confrontation, such as media campaigns or naming and shaming.” (Arensman, 2018)

This insider–outsider framework will be used in the present study to categorize and assess the strategies employed during the advocacy campaign. Applying this structure will help clarify how the advocacy strategy was carried out and will contribute to a more systematic and comprehensive evaluation. Figure 1, presented below, provides a visual overview of this framework.

Figure 1. What is advocacy



Note. Retrieved from *Negotiating effectiveness: The politics of results in advocacy for development and its evaluation*, by B. Arensman, 2018, p. 25.

Effectiveness

In order to determine whether an advocacy strategy has been effective, it is first necessary to define what is meant by effectiveness. While numerous studies have explored the effectiveness of advocacy strategies, few offer a concrete definition of what effectiveness precisely entails. Arensman (2018, pp. 15–19) notes that effectiveness is often understood as the extent to which predefined goals are achieved. As a result, the effectiveness of advocacy is frequently assessed based on whether policy or social change has occurred, since these are commonly the primary objectives of advocacy efforts.

However, policy and social change typically result from a combination of strategies and actions carried out by multiple actors and coalitions. This makes it difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between the advocacy activities of a single organization and broader policy or social outcomes (Miertoiu, 2018).

Moreover, this outcome-focused approach tends to view effectiveness solely in terms of end results. Brown, Ebrahim, and Batliwala (2012) offer a more nuanced perspective by proposing that advocacy effectiveness should be assessed across multiple dimensions. These include policy influence, organizational capacity building, the strengthening of coalitions and networks, and the broadening of public awareness. By considering these additional variables, a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of advocacy effectiveness can be achieved—one that goes beyond a narrow focus on final impact outcomes such as policy change.

This research adopts the multidimensional framework proposed by Brown, Ebrahim, and Batliwala (2012) and will evaluate effectiveness across these various dimensions. Nevertheless, traditional impact outcomes, such as policy or social change, will also be considered, as they may still provide valuable insight into the overall effectiveness of the advocacy strategy.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the effectiveness of an advocacy strategy is a complex process due to the wide variety of factors involved. Brennan and Morariu (2009, p. 101) identify the following six challenges to advocacy evaluation:

1. **Complexity:** Advocates are trying to advance their goals in an ever-changing environment, and the path to success is complex and iterative. Often, linear models are not very helpful for trying to understand the nonlinear nature of these systems.
2. **Role of external forces:** There are forces beyond advocates' control affecting the environment surrounding the campaign and advocates' ability to make progress. Timing can be crucial to success, and many organizations make great strides when a "window of opportunity" presents itself.
3. **Time frame:** It may take 20 years to reach an ultimate advocacy "big win," making it difficult to sustain organizational capacity, funding, issue area support, and to communicate success over the long term.
4. **Shifting strategies and milestones:** Advocates must adjust to the changing environment, which may result in modified strategies and altered ideas of campaign milestones.
5. **Attribution:** Successful campaigns are often composed of multiple players operating complementary campaigns. When a campaign is successful, there can be pressure for advocates to "own" the win. Contribution, on the other hand, acknowledges the complex, interrelated forces at work and does not alienate friendly partners and collaborators.
6. **Sustainability:** Advocacy organizations need to maintain strength throughout the life of an issue. While funding is a component of sustainability, it is not the only issue: staffing and other resources are also critical.
7. **Interim progress:** Since advocacy's long-term goals are far into the future, advocates need interim measures of success to show work is on track. Interim measures keep advocates informed about their own progress and help them share success stories on the way to the "big win."

Arensman (2018, pp. 26–27) further argues that some forms of change are neither explicit nor visible, as they occur behind closed doors or through personal interactions, making them difficult to trace. This is particularly true for interim changes, which often remain invisible. Such outcomes may include "relationships built, trust gained, space created for civil society voices, and the achievement of raised awareness."

A widely used tool for evaluating advocacy strategies is the Theory of Change (ToC). According to Arensman et al. (2015, p. 48), ToC "aims to define all of the building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal and to describe the types of interventions that will bring about the outcomes depicted in a schematic illustrating the pathway of change. Each expected outcome in the pathway of change is tied to an intervention or intervention strategy, revealing the often complex web of activity that is required to bring about change." ToC

is often referred to as a “road map” or “blueprint” for getting from “here to there” (Stein & Valters, 2012).

Despite its widespread application, critics argue that ToC predominantly functions as an outcome-based approach that relies on linear cause-effect reasoning (i.e., if we do this, then that will occur). This leads organizations to focus primarily on achieving intended outcomes while overlooking unintended or emergent effects (Arensman, van Waegeningh, & van Wessel, 2018). In this form, ToC does not adequately address the evaluation challenges outlined by Brennan and Morariu (2009, p. 101), such as complexity, attribution, and the dynamic nature of change.

To address these limitations, Arensman, van Waegeningh, and van Wessel (2018, pp. 5-12) propose an alternative approach: strategy as practice. This perspective emphasizes observing strategy as it unfolds in real time. They argue, “By looking at the processes as they happen in practice, we see strategy as something actors do while adapting to changing circumstances (...). To understand practice, we listened to and analysed verbal and reported narratives. We learned that the challenge with advocacy is understanding outcomes as occurring in practice, rather than approaching outcomes through a ToC that starts from pre-planned results and their assessment through pre-set indicators (...). To understand advocacy outcomes as they are, rather than seeking to assess outcomes against a predefined theoretical framework, evaluators must examine how strategy develops in practice.”

This approach will form the foundation of the present research. In line with this framework, Arensman, van Waegeningh, and van Wessel (2018) emphasize that advocates involved in the strategy should be placed at the center of the analysis. Rather than seeking linear cause-effect relationships, evaluators should explore how advocates act strategically by making practical judgments, navigating evolving circumstances, and interacting with organizational, environmental, and theoretical contexts. These practices must be understood and reflected upon in terms of their strategic nature, recursiveness, and relational dynamics. Only then can the broader scope of a program’s achievements be meaningfully assessed.

The authors further stress that evaluators should adopt an open, qualitative approach to data collection. They should listen attentively and without preconceived judgment, critically questioning and investigating strategic practices. Narratives that emerge around strategy as dynamic practice become essential to understanding how change processes are shaped and developed, what forms of human interaction prove meaningful, and how these relate to diverse roles, perspectives, theoretical assumptions, and outcomes.

Conceptualization and Operationalization

To evaluate the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy in a structured and transparent manner, this section provides a conceptual framework that defines and operationalizes the study's central concepts. The indicators presented in the following tables are derived from leading literature on advocacy evaluation, including the works of Arensman et al. (2015), Brown, Ebrahim, and Batliwala (2012), and Brennan and Morariu (2009). These sources were selected for their analytical relevance to the field of human rights advocacy, particularly in contexts where linear models of change and direct attribution are insufficient.

The framework distinguishes between advocacy strategies, categorized as either insider or outsider approaches, and the various dimensions of advocacy effectiveness, divided into impact and intermediate outcomes. This multidimensional approach aligns with the exploratory and qualitative nature of this study, enabling a nuanced understanding of how advocacy activities translate into observable effects. The selection of indicators was guided by their prominence in academic literature and their suitability for assessing advocacy in complex, dynamic environments such as the Mexican context described in this research.

Concept	Dimension	Sub dimension	Indicators
Advocacy	Insider strategies	Advising	Developing and sharing advise papers Developing recommendation paper with implementation plan
		Evidence based messaging	Research reports Annual reports Documenting incidents
		Lobbying	Taking part in discussions with policymakers
	Outsider strategies	Awareness raising	Issuing media campaign(s)
		Blaming and shaming	Publishing press releases that blame certain actors

Concept	Dimension	Sub dimension	Indicator
Evaluating advocacy effectiveness	Impact outcomes	Policy change	Creation or implementation of new or existing mechanisms New policies established (bills, regulations, administrative policies)
		Social change	Decrease in the amount of harassed or assassinated priests Increased amount of communities speaking out on the issue
	Intermediate outcomes	Policy influence	Change in position of policymakers Advocacy efforts are covered in political documents (e.g. speeches, reports)
		Coalition building	New or strengthened partnerships with organisations or individuals Joint initiatives or collaborative actions Collaborative actions (e.g. aligning of messages, joint policy agenda)
		Public awareness	Number of times the issue is mentioned in (international) media Advocacy efforts are covered in (international) reports
		Organisational capacity building	Increased ability to get and use data Increased knowledge about advocacy, mobilizing, or organizing tactics Improved media skills and contacts

Research Scope

This research is dedicated to analyzing the advocacy strategy carried out between 2016 and 2020, initiated by the Centro Católico Multimedial (CCM), which aimed to improve the situation of Catholic priests in Mexico who are harassed by organized crime groups. The study will identify the key actors involved in the strategy and assess their respective contributions. This will allow for a critical examination of the outcomes achieved at the national and international levels, as well as within the Mexican Catholic Church.

Importantly, this research does not seek to assess the current or historical state of violence faced by priests in Mexico. Instead, the focus is placed solely on the advocacy process itself—specifically, the strategies and actions aimed at improving the priests' situation.

The scope of this study is further defined by its focus on the advocates themselves. It will not analyze how the advocacy strategy was received, interpreted, or acted upon by policy-makers or other target audiences. Rather, the advocates will be positioned at the center of this study, and their experiences and narratives will serve as the primary lens through which the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy is analyzed. Additionally, this research will include only those actors and advocates who have been deeply engaged in the strategy. While it is acknowledged that other entities have contributed to the broader advocacy efforts, their roles are considered relatively minor and are unlikely to provide new or additional insights beyond those offered by the primary actors involved.

Research Approach

To successfully evaluate the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy implemented between 2016 and 2020, the main research question and its sub-questions must be addressed. To achieve this, the study will employ two primary methods: desk research (secondary research) and qualitative research, supplemented by a media tracking analysis.

Desk research will provide an overview of all public documents and audiovisual materials used by the actors involved in the advocacy strategy to place the issue on the public agenda. In addition, it will offer insights into the outcomes of the strategy—such as news coverage, legal documents, and other public records—which will contribute to evaluating its effectiveness. Based on these sources, desk research will help answer questions related to which actors were involved, how the strategy was implemented, and what outcomes it produced.

To complement the desk research and allow for a more in-depth analysis, the study will incorporate qualitative research techniques. Specifically, it will include semi-structured interviews with the designers and implementers of the advocacy strategy. Semi-structured interviews are chosen for their flexibility, which is essential given the limited public information available about the strategy's internal content and rationale. While the outputs of the strategy—such as books, documentaries, reports, press releases, and journal articles—are publicly accessible, they do not reveal the underlying goals, assumptions, or strategic decisions. The interviews will offer critical insights into the intentions behind the strategy, the manner in which it was executed, and the outcomes it generated.

To further support the findings from both desk research and interviews, a media tracking analysis will be conducted. This analysis will provide additional insights that may not emerge from the other two methods. By examining how media coverage of the issue evolved over time, the study will assess the extent to which the advocacy strategy succeeded in raising public awareness—an important indicator of effectiveness.

As outlined in the theoretical framework, evaluating advocacy effectiveness solely based on anticipated outcomes results in a narrow and potentially incomplete understanding. Such an approach risks overlooking unintended or emergent effects. Therefore, this research adopts the strategy-as-practice approach proposed by Arensman, van Waegeningh, and van Wessel (2018). In line with this perspective, the strategy is viewed as something advocates actively shape through practical judgment, adaptation to changing circumstances, and interaction with both context and theory. Accordingly, the advocates behind the strategy will be placed at the center of this research, and their experiences will form the basis for evaluating the advocacy strategy's effectiveness.

It is important to emphasize that the study is exploratory in nature and is not designed to produce generalizable findings or to test statistical correlations between indicators. The aim is to provide insight into lived experiences and advocacy practices within a bounded case.

Limitations of Research

This research is subject to several limitations, primarily due to the inherently complex nature of advocacy, which unfolds within dynamic and constantly evolving environments. It is often difficult to attribute specific changes to a single advocacy strategy, as multiple actors typically contribute to shaping outcomes. Moreover, a wide range of external factors—beyond the control of the advocates or the strategy itself—can significantly influence whether change occurs. These contextual variables may limit the extent to which this study can definitively assess the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy in question.

Additionally, this research is limited by its exclusive focus on the perspective of the advocates. In terms of data collection, the advocates will serve as the primary source of input. How the advocacy strategy has been received or acted upon by policymakers and other target audiences will not be directly assessed and will only be considered insofar as it is described by the advocates themselves. This approach introduces a potential bias, as advocates

may interpret activities and outcomes through the lens of their personal involvement. They may also be less likely to critically evaluate their own contributions and more inclined to attribute perceived ineffectiveness to external factors beyond their control.

Furthermore, this research focuses solely on a specific case: the advocacy strategy implemented between 2016 and 2020 concerning the protection of Catholic priests in Mexico. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to other geographic regions, religious groups, or advocacy contexts. The case-specific nature of the research limits its external validity.

The retrospective design of the study presents another limitation. Since the events under investigation occurred between 2016 and 2020, the research relies on participants' recollections. This raises the possibility of recall bias, selective memory, or reinterpretation of past events with the benefit of hindsight.

Access to key informants may also shape the scope of the findings. While the study will focus on actors who were deeply involved in the strategy, it may exclude peripheral stakeholders or dissenting voices whose insights could offer valuable alternative perspectives. Similarly, the desk research is limited to publicly available documents, reports, and media outputs. These sources may not fully reflect internal deliberations or undocumented outcomes.

Another limitation relates to the timeframe of the study. Advocacy processes often produce results over extended periods. By limiting the analysis to the years 2016–2020, the research may overlook delayed or long-term outcomes that only become visible after the advocacy strategy has concluded.

Finally, if data are collected or analyzed in a language other than English (e.g., Spanish), issues of translation and interpretation may arise. Subtle nuances or culturally embedded meanings may be lost, potentially affecting the depth and accuracy of the findings.

Implications of Research

Evaluations of human rights advocacy strategies outside large, well-resourced human rights organizations remain limited. This is primarily due to the fact that smaller organizations often lack the necessary resources—both in terms of staffing and financial capacity—to carry out such evaluations. Many are understaffed and operate with constrained budgets, which hinders their ability to systematically assess the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts.

This research seeks to contribute to the field of human rights advocacy in several important ways. First, by evaluating the strategy employed to improve the situation of Catholic priests in Mexico, this study will provide the advocates involved with valuable insights into what aspects of the strategy were effective and which areas may require improvement. These findings can directly inform ongoing advocacy efforts and support the refinement of current strategies.

Moreover, the insights gained from this evaluation will be relevant not only to the Centro Católico Multimedial (CCM), but also to the other actors engaged in this advocacy initiative. It will offer them new perspectives and practical knowledge that can assist in designing more effective and efficient human rights advocacy strategies in the future.

Beyond the immediate context, the results of this study may also be of interest to other NGOs operating in Mexico. While the findings are not directly generalizable to other organizations or settings, they can nonetheless offer a broader understanding of advocacy effectiveness and illuminate common challenges faced when working in complex and often volatile environments like Mexico. The study may further inform broader discussions on how to protect religious actors and civil society leaders from violence and impunity.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the academic field by applying and operationalizing the strategy-as-practice framework (Arensman et al., 2018) within the context of human rights advocacy. By doing so, it offers an example of how advocacy can be studied as a dynamic and socially constructed process, rather than a linear input-output mechanism.

In addition, the study contributes to the discourse on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of advocacy by highlighting the feasibility of qualitative, narrative-based approaches for smaller organizations, which often lack the capacity for indicator-heavy, donor-driven evaluation frameworks.

Finally, this research aims to demonstrate that meaningful advocacy evaluations are indeed possible, even with limited resources. By presenting an example of a comprehensive evaluation conducted with modest means, this study seeks to encourage and empower smaller human rights organizations to undertake similar assessments of their own strategies.

Defining the Overall Advocacy Strategy

The interviews conducted for this research indicate that the advocating organizations and individuals involved did not operate on the basis of a predetermined plan or a formal Theory of Change (ToC) to address the issue. As a result, the advocates themselves embodied the advocacy strategy, in line with the strategy-as-practice approach, which views advocacy as something actors do while making practical judgments, adapting to changing circumstances, and interacting with both context and theory (Arensman, van Waegeningh, & van Wessel, 2018). Due to the absence of an explicit or coordinated ToC, this research can only assess the advocacy strategy by observing the actions and decisions of the advocates involved.

The use of the term “overall advocacy strategy” may imply a unified, coordinated effort among the various actors. However, this does not reflect the reality of the advocacy process. Although the advocates have maintained communication and share similar concerns, each organization and individual independently decided how to address the issue. Their choice of advocacy activities was shaped by a range of factors, including institutional capacity, available resources, and strategic priorities. Moreover, their approaches were tailored to the specific target audiences they had access to or could effectively engage.

Insider and Outsider Strategies

The overall advocacy strategy can best be described as a hybrid strategy, incorporating elements of both insider and outsider approaches. Insider strategies aim to create inclusion and access to decision-making and policy processes. Typical activities include advising policymakers, delivering evidence-based messaging, and lobbying. Outsider strategies, by contrast, focus on applying pressure to advocacy targets through tactics such as media campaigns and naming and shaming (Arensman, 2018).

It can be observed that actors such as the Centro Católico Multimedial (CCM), Dennis Petri (in collaboration with various organizations), and, to a lesser extent, OLIRE, primarily engage in insider strategies. These actors systematically document incidents, which are presented in annual and research reports. Such documentation serves as the basis for evidence-based messaging. From these findings, they develop policy recommendations and advisory papers, which are shared with policymakers and institutional stakeholders at various levels. Their activities frequently involve direct meetings with policymakers, a hallmark of insider strate-

gies. Through these forms of communication, they aim to raise awareness within different advocacy arenas.

OLIRE has contributed to insider strategies, such as international policy engagement and the joint request for a thematic hearing, but their involvement in direct national-level lobbying and advisory roles appears less pronounced compared to CCM and Dennis Petri. Their efforts focus more strongly on international visibility and framing through documentation and media.

Furthermore, the documentation and research findings produced by the CCM and Dennis Petri have served as essential input for the advocacy efforts of other actors, including OLIRE, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), and Artículo 18. While most of their actions can be categorized under insider strategies, this does not mean their efforts lacked pressure-building elements.

For instance, the CCM has actively used its media platforms to raise awareness among the general public and religious communities, as they are those most directly affected by the violence. By publicizing the issue through media channels, they also exert indirect pressure on Mexican authorities, a characteristic of outsider strategies.

Similarly, OLIRE and Dennis Petri have addressed the issue through advocacy at international institutions, aiming to generate international political pressure on the Mexican government. Although these actions fall within the scope of insider strategies, the strategic use of international platforms to influence national policy aligns with outsider goals. As stated in OLIRE's interview:

With our advocacy efforts, we target international institutions and platforms because we believe that international political pressure might have some impact on the Mexican government. By addressing it there, we hope it gets on their national agenda. (Interview OLIRE, 2021)

CSW also employs a dual approach. While the issue of violence against priests is only one component of their broader religious freedom agenda in Mexico—which includes indigenous community cases—they have actively used outsider strategies to place pressure on the Mexican government. According to their interview:

For each of the countries we work in, we look at how they react to different types of pressure. We have found that for particularly Mexico, their image is very important. So awareness raising is an essential part of our strategy because the issues that we raise are affecting their image. (Interview CSW, 2021)

This form of pressure-building is a core characteristic of outsider strategies. CSW has included the issue in multiple press releases and reports to hold Mexican authorities accountable for their lack of effective action (Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2021). However, CSW does not rely solely on outsider strategies. They have also attempted insider approaches, such as engaging with policymakers at the state level. Nevertheless, according to their interview, these meetings have not resulted in substantive change. CSW appears to be most active in international policy arenas such as the European Union and the United Nations, where they advise institutional actors, an activity aligned with insider strategies.

It should be noted that the distinction between insider and outsider strategies is not always clear-cut in practice. While this study categorizes activities along this spectrum for analytical purposes, most advocacy actors, including CCM, OLIRE, and CSW, combine elements of both approaches depending on the audience, context, and available resources. Therefore, the classification provided here is indicative rather than absolute.

In conclusion, the overall strategy is best characterized as a hybrid approach that addresses the issue through a broad range of activities aimed at a variety of targets. Although the lack of a formal plan or Theory of Change has blurred the distinction between insider and outsider strategies, both approaches are clearly present. While many of the observed advocacy activities exhibit the characteristics of insider strategies, they are often driven by goals traditionally associated with outsider strategies—namely, raising awareness and applying pressure on the Mexican authorities.

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Advocacy Strategy

This section evaluates the effectiveness of the overall advocacy strategy. In line with the theoretical framework and operationalization, the assessment goes beyond examining only impact outcomes. It also considers intermediate outcomes, as defined in academic literature (Brennan & Morariu, 2009; Arensman et al., 2015; Arensman, 2018).

Intermediate Outcomes

Public Awareness

The first intermediate outcome relevant to evaluating effectiveness is the extent to which the advocacy strategy succeeded in raising public awareness. Raising awareness was a central component of the overall strategy. As the primary source of documentation and reporting on assassinated priests, the Centro Católico Multimedial (CCM) played a crucial role in shaping media narratives. Media outlets frequently referenced the CCM's work when covering the issue.

To assess the effectiveness of these awareness-raising efforts over time, this research included a media tracking analysis. Using the LexisNexis database, the analysis recorded the number of instances in which the issue appeared in Mexican and international media in connection with CCM's documentation. The results of this analysis are presented below:

Times covered in English written international media (LexisNexis, 2021)

Year	Times covered
2016	32
2017	12
2018	26
2019	4
Total	74

Times covered in Spanish written international media (Mexico excluded) (LexisNexis, 2021)

Year	Times covered
2016	48
2017	32
2018	44
2019	3
Total	127

Times covered in Mexican media (LexisNexis, 2021)

Year	Times covered
2016	18
2017	26
2018	66
2019	7
Total	117

Number of assassinated priests 2016-2020 (Sotelo Aguilar & Gazanini Espinoza, 2018) (Centro Católico Multimedial, 2019)

Year	Number of assassinated priests
2016	3
2017	4
2018	7
2019	1

The media tracking analysis indicates that the issue has received coverage in both national and international media. However, the data does not suggest a consistent increase in media coverage over time. In the case of Mexico, the findings appear to point to a possible correlation between the number of assassinated priests and the extent to which the CCM is referenced in media reports concerning their documentation and research.

With regard to international media—both English and Spanish language sources—it is more difficult to establish any clear pattern. For example, in 2019, when the number of assassinated priests was relatively low, coverage of the issue was also limited. However, this trend does not hold consistently across other years, making it difficult to interpret the data conclusively.

Moreover, the media tracking data does not provide information on how many people actually read the articles or how the content was received by the audience. As a result, the analysis is limited in its ability to determine whether the advocacy strategy has been effective in creating widespread public awareness. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that the advocacy strategy has generated media coverage, which is a necessary condition for raising awareness.

All interview participants indicated that they perceive an increase in public awareness of the issue as a result of advocacy efforts in recent years. However, this perception cannot be substantiated with empirical evidence. Therefore, the extent to which public awareness has actually increased remains unclear, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy in this regard.

I think the issue and the topic are more visible today than it used to be, which is a major step forward. The problem is known in Mexican society and politics, so that's a positive development. How visible exactly, is very difficult to measure. There are 120 million Mexicans, it's not like everyone is talking about it all the time, but there is certainly more awareness. (Interview Dennis Petri, 2021)

Policy Influence

Another dimension in which intermediate outcomes of the advocacy strategy can be identified is policy influence among advocacy targets. Policy influence can be observed through changes in the actions or behaviour of these targets.

One of the primary targets of this advocacy strategy was the Mexican Catholic Church. According to the CCM, their advocacy efforts have led to increased awareness of the issue within this community. Prior to their involvement, the Church regarded the issue of assassinated priests as either irrelevant or taboo. When the CCM began documenting such cases, Father Sotelo Aguilar initially faced significant resistance. At the time, there was reluctance within the Church to publicly address or acknowledge the problem. However, during the interview with the CCM, it was noted that the mentality within dioceses and archdioceses is gradually shifting. There is now greater openness to engaging with the issue. It has become more widely understood that the problem is not limited to religious persecution but concerns the broader destabilization of peace and order in communities, where priests serve as key stabilizing figures.

As part of their advocacy efforts, the CCM has also provided the Catholic Church with a set of recommendations aimed at improving the security and support systems for priests. Nevertheless, according to the interviews, these recommendations have not yet been fully implemented.

Policy influence can also be observed at the international level. The U.S. Department of State has begun to include the issue in its annual Report on International Religious Freedom (U.S. Department of State, 2019). The fact that the State Department is now independently monitoring the situation indicates a behavioural shift. Although its mandate traditionally focuses on state violations of religious freedom, CSW reported that its engagement with the Department has contributed to a broader understanding that non-state actors can also pose significant threats.

Another example of limited but tangible policy influence can be found within the United Nations system. During Mexico's Universal Periodic Review (UPR), CSW participated in a pre-session and recommended that religious leaders be recognized as human rights defenders. They advised that references to this issue be included in recommendations to address impunity in Mexico. This advice was subsequently integrated into the official recommendations submitted by Canada and Poland, which is an indication of modest but meaningful policy influence.

In conclusion, the advocacy strategy has resulted in some degree of policy influence. Within the Mexican Catholic Church, this influence has led to a gradual shift in discourse and limited changes in practice. On the international stage, there is emerging engagement from institutions such as the U.S. State Department and the United Nations, though the extent of influence remains limited. Still, the growing involvement of international actors suggests that the strategy may continue to generate broader policy impact over time. Given the role that documentation has played in these developments, it may be worthwhile for other churches or religious institutions to consider adopting similar approaches, as structured documentation can contribute to a more informed and consistent advocacy response.

Coalition Building

The effectiveness of an advocacy strategy can also be measured by the extent to which it has succeeded in fostering new coalitions and partnerships. Collaborative activities such as the alignment of policy agendas, coordinated public messaging, or joint initiatives can serve as indicators of strategic cooperation.

Based on the interviews conducted for this research, the organizations and individuals involved indicated that no formal coalitions have been established to address the issue. While

there is some level of contact between the advocates, this interaction is primarily limited to the exchange of information. Nevertheless, there are indications of early efforts toward coalition building. One example is the joint initiative by the CCM and OLIRE to request a thematic hearing at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (OLIRE / CCM, 2019).

Some new partnerships have emerged in support of the issue. At the level of internationally operating NGOs, several organizations have started to dedicate attention to the topic. Aid to the Church in Need is one such organization, having included the issue in its annual reports. Front Line Defenders have also become increasingly involved. Although its primary focus is on supporting human rights defenders, it has taken an interest in this issue, since priests often act as human rights defenders in their local communities (Petri, 2020). While other international NGOs have expressed concern as well, they tend to address the issue independently within their own institutional frameworks, without establishing joint initiatives. According to interview data, there is little evidence of collaboration or coordinated action between these actors.

At the local civil society level in Mexico, coalition building also appears to be limited. Aside from the CCM and, to a lesser extent, Artículo 18, few organizations are actively engaged in this advocacy strategy. Artículo 18 mainly supports the efforts of the CCM by disseminating information through its own channels. This represents one example of cooperation at the national level, but no other collaborative efforts were identified. Moreover, partnerships between Mexican NGOs and international organizations remain rare. Most international actors collaborate with the CCM and, to a lesser extent, with Artículo 18, but these relationships rarely extend further. The advocacy strategy has not resulted in new partnerships or sustained collaboration with other local Mexican NGOs.

This lack of engagement was noted in the interview with OLIRE:

In Mexico, we didn't have any success by engaging with NGOs other than the CCM and Artículo 18. Other organisations simply acknowledge the situation. Sometimes they say, yes, this is something we should be worried about, but they don't respond in a proactive way about that with us. (Interview OLIRE, 2021)

In conclusion, the advocacy strategy has been largely ineffective in creating coalitions to address the issue. While there are a small number of partnerships at both the local and international levels, joint initiatives are infrequent. New organizations that have begun to ad-

dress the issue tend to do so independently, without engaging in meaningful collaboration. Although there is communication between advocates, it is mostly limited to the exchange of information.

All interview participants emphasized that their organizations, and therefore their advocacy efforts, face significant limitations in terms of resources and capacity. This suggests that the strategy would likely have benefited from more deliberate efforts to build coalitions.

Capacity Building

Capacity building represents another dimension of intermediate outcomes within an advocacy strategy. It refers to the extent to which an organization has developed or enhanced its abilities as a result of the advocacy process. This may include improvements in the capacity to gather and utilize data, increased knowledge of advocacy tactics, enhanced skills or networks, or other organizational and individual competencies gained through experience.

Given that all individuals and organizations interviewed for this research have a long-standing history of advocacy work in Latin America, it was initially expected that there would be little to no evidence of capacity building. Nevertheless, the research did reveal some degree of learning and development among the participating actors.

Among internationally operating NGOs, many of which have a religious background, the issue was initially framed primarily as one of religious freedom. However, in interviews with OLIRE and Dennis Petri, it became evident that this framing had limited effectiveness. The interviewees noted a widespread lack of understanding of what constitutes a religious freedom violation, a gap they encountered among multiple advocacy targets at various institutional levels. As a result, both OLIRE and Dennis Petri concluded that the issue should instead be framed as one of human security and organized crime, which is more broadly understood and better received by policymakers and other stakeholders. This shift in framing reflects a key lesson learned during the advocacy process and thus constitutes a form of capacity building.

Another area where capacity building was observed is in the documentation of incidents. Advocates involved in tracking cases of assassinated priests initially encountered problems with incomplete, inaccurate, or entirely absent documentation. As a result of this advocacy

strategy, several organizations—namely the CCM, OLIRE (initiated by Dennis Petri), and CSW—invested in improving both the quantity and the quality of their documentation practices. Interviews indicated that these efforts have led to more systematic and reliable documentation. This improvement in data collection and incident reporting represents a concrete example of organizational capacity building, as these actors have developed new or strengthened existing mechanisms for documenting religiously motivated violence in Mexico.

Impact Outcomes

The effectiveness of an advocacy strategy is often evaluated based on the extent to which it has resulted in tangible impact, specifically in the form of meaningful change that directly addresses the issue at hand. As previously stated, this research aims to move beyond impact outcomes as the sole indicator of advocacy effectiveness. Nonetheless, impact outcomes remain a critical component in assessing overall effectiveness.

This section will therefore evaluate the degree to which the advocacy strategy has led to measurable impact. In accordance with the theoretical framework and the operationalization outlined earlier, the discussion will focus on two key dimensions of impact outcomes: policy change and social change.

Policy Change

One of the main goals of the overall advocacy strategy was to encourage the Mexican authorities to address the issue and improve the situation faced by priests. According to Dennis Petri and CSW, the problem does not stem from the absence of relevant laws, but rather from the lack of implementation of existing legal frameworks. As part of the strategy, several advocates engaged in lobbying activities with Mexican authorities. However, all interviewees reported that these efforts have not led to any concrete changes in the implementation of policies or the introduction of effective mechanisms to address the problem.

The same conclusion applies to international policymakers. Advocates stated that although they lobbied with various international actors to raise awareness of the issue, these efforts have not resulted in actual policy change. Some countries, such as Canada and Poland, expressed interest in the matter by including related recommendations in international forums.

However, these actions fall under the category of policy influence rather than policy change, as they have not resulted in binding measures or reforms.

Nevertheless, the advocacy strategy has not been entirely ineffective in bringing about policy change. According to the CCM, OLIRE, and Dennis Petri, the Episcopal Conference of Mexico, which serves as the leading body within the Mexican Catholic Church, has issued security protocols aimed at protecting churches from threats posed by organized crime groups. These protocols include practical recommendations such as closing churches at specific times, installing security cameras, hiring private security, and providing guidance on what to do in the event of abduction. Although these measures were not enacted by state authorities, they can still be considered a form of policy change within the institutional framework of the Catholic Church. As the Episcopal Conference holds decision-making authority over internal church policy, the formal adoption of such protocols represents an organizational response that mirrors the characteristics of policy development, including norm-setting, implementation guidance, and institutional commitment.

This research was not able to determine the extent to which these protocols have been implemented across dioceses. However, the mere issuance of these guidelines can be considered a form of policy change. While it is not possible to establish a direct causal link between this development and the advocacy strategy, it is likely that the advocacy efforts contributed to this outcome. This assumption is supported by the fact that Father Sotelo Aguilar, a key advocate within the CCM, is a former member of the Episcopal Conference and has explicitly advocated for the introduction of such protocols.

While the issuance of security protocols by the Episcopal Conference of Mexico represents a notable institutional response to violence against priests, no direct causal relationship between the advocacy strategy and this development can be confirmed based on the available data. Although these protocols may reflect an internal policy change within the Catholic Church, it remains unclear to what extent advocacy efforts influenced their adoption. The measures identified, such as the introduction of security guidelines, could be regarded as potential indicators for future research to explore possible links between advocacy and institutional policy responses, rather than as conclusive evidence of impact within the scope of this study.

Social Change

The second dimension through which impact outcomes can be assessed is social change. Measuring social change is inherently challenging, as it involves shifts in human behaviour that are not easily linked to specific causes or interventions. For this reason, this section focuses exclusively on changes reported by interviewed advocates that may be related to the advocacy strategy.

According to the CCM, the number of assassinated priests has declined in recent years, while the number of robberies, threats, and attacks on churches and places of worship has increased. CSW reported a similar trend. They found this development noteworthy, as the overall level of violence has remained constant or even increased, yet the specific number of murdered priests has declined. They suggested that the advocacy strategy has drawn attention to the actions of organized crime groups and, in some cases, made it possible to trace incidents back to specific perpetrators. CSW also noted that such exposure is often unwelcome by these groups and may prompt them to alter their tactics.

Although this is an interesting observation, it is not possible to assert that the advocacy strategy directly caused this shift. Numerous other factors could contribute to a reduction in the number of assassinated priests. Nevertheless, it remains a development worth acknowledging.

Beyond this trend, the research did not identify any other forms of social change that could be directly linked to the advocacy strategy. This does not necessarily imply that no social change has occurred. It is possible that changes have taken place outside the scope of this research or in ways that are not visibly connected to the strategy. Based on the available data, no causal relationship between the advocacy strategy and measurable social change can be confirmed. The trends observed, such as the decline in assassinated priests, may serve as potential indicators for future research, but should not be interpreted as evidence of impact within the scope of this study.

Factors that Affect the Effectiveness of the Advocacy Strategy

In the previous sections, this research paper has examined the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy in terms of both impact outcomes and intermediate outcomes. To fully understand

these outcomes within their broader context, it is essential to explore the challenges faced by the advocates throughout the implementation of the strategy. These challenges represent key factors that have limited the overall effectiveness of the advocacy efforts. This section will categorize the main challenges identified by the advocates during the interviews and analyze the extent to which these obstacles have influenced the strategy's ability to achieve its goals.

Lack of Proper Documentation

A common challenge highlighted by the advocates is the lack of proper documentation of incidents. Because many incidents go unreported, it becomes difficult to convey the full scale of the problem to advocacy targets. While cases involving the assassination of priests are generally reported due to their severity and visibility, CSW noted that they have only been able to document cases of extortion and threats to a very limited extent. The ability to document these lesser-known forms of violence would provide a more comprehensive picture of the issue. Although improved documentation may not directly lead to more successful advocacy outcomes, it does enhance the credibility of the claims made during advocacy efforts.

According to the interviewed advocates, the primary reason for this lack of documentation is the high level of fear within the affected communities. Individuals who report such incidents risk becoming targets of organized crime themselves. In addition, CSW noted that Mexico's long history of violence has contributed to a culture of normalization, which also hinders documentation:

It is something we also see in other countries. These communities have been experiencing violence for many generations. Because of this long history, violence has become normalised. And so to be extorted is just something that happens, to be threatened is just something that happens. So besides the fear, people also don't recognise it as serious violations. (Interview CSW, 2021)

Furthermore, Dennis Petri pointed out that the documentation of such incidents is a complex task for victims and witnesses. Most individuals who experience this type of violence are not trained in data collection or reporting, and therefore lack the necessary knowledge and skills to document incidents effectively.

Lack of Political Will

In addition to the issue of insufficient documentation, a significant barrier to the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy at the national level is the lack of political will to address the problem. Advocates reported that policymakers in Mexico frequently fail to acknowledge the existence and seriousness of the issue. When cases involving assassinated priests are reported, authorities often attempt to portray the victims as being involved in criminal activity. In cases where this narrative could not be supported by evidence, officials instead framed the incidents as isolated cases with no broader implications.

According to CSW, this denial is closely linked to concerns about national image. The Mexican government is reportedly reluctant to draw attention to the issue out of fear that it may harm the country's international reputation. Policymakers aim to present Mexico as a democratic and functioning nation that is safe for tourism and foreign investment. This resistance to publicly acknowledging the problem severely limits the effectiveness of advocacy efforts.

Ultimately, the Mexican authorities are responsible for ensuring law and order. When they fail to recognize the existence of a systemic problem, meaningful solutions become unattainable. The absence of political will is, according to multiple advocates, the main reason why the advocacy strategy has not resulted in effective policy change within Mexico.

Lack of Understanding of Religious Freedom

At the international level, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the legal body of the Organization of American States (OAS), is one of the institutions responsible for addressing issues related to religious freedom. Both Dennis Petri and OLIRE have made sustained efforts to place the issue on the IACHR's agenda, but without success. Multiple requests for thematic hearings were submitted, all of which were ultimately denied.

Dennis Petri reflected on these rejections during his interview:

It seemed that the OAS had other priorities. They don't seem to look at cases that involve religion. I guess they were also more interested in other subjects. I mean, the hearings that did get accepted really are on other subjects. They are

on indigenous rights, they are on sexual minorities and environmental issues. Those are the priorities. But religious issues aren't really considered. You can also see that in the jurisprudence of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. They don't really look at cases that are related to religion. I would say they lack the literacy to fully understand what religious freedom is and all of its dimensions. Because religious freedom is very quickly just understood as freedom of worship. But there's so much more to it in all those dimensions. (Interview Dennis Petri, 2021)

A related experience was shared by Teresa Flores, director of OLIRE, in her engagement with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Nations:

It's very difficult to make people understand the relationship between criminal groups and hostilities against religious freedom and why these priests form a vulnerable group. I think that has been the main challenge, to explain this relationship. Last year, we engaged with one person that worked as an advisor for the Foreign Office of the UN. So, the feedback that we received from her when we addressed this issue was: This is a criminal organization issue. This is not a religious freedom issue. So why are you focusing on this? We tried to explain to her more than once why it has a connection with religious freedom, but she didn't seem to understand. (Interview Teresa Flores, 2021)

Flores further noted in her interview that there is a general lack of literacy among policy-makers regarding the concept of religious freedom. She explained that many do not fully grasp the complexity and multidimensional nature of the right. This concern was echoed by CSW, who stated that it is often difficult to convince advocacy targets that religious freedom violations occur in Latin America. They pointed to the common misconception that, because Latin America is predominantly Roman Catholic, the right to religious freedom is not under threat in the region.

These interviews indicate that this lack of understanding significantly undermines the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy. The message that advocates aim to communicate is often not fully understood by advocacy targets, who may not recognize the nuanced dimensions of religious freedom or its intersection with issues such as organized crime.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the advocacy strategy initiated by the Centro Católico Multi-medial (CCM), which aimed to improve the situation of priests in Mexico who face harassment and violence from organized crime groups. The goal was to assess the effectiveness of this strategy over the period 2016–2020, using desk research, interviews with key advocates, and a media tracking analysis.

The primary actors identified in the strategy were the CCM, the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE), Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), and Dennis Petri, who contributed through various organizations, including Open Doors International, OLIRE, and the International Institute for Religious Freedom. Other organizations, such as Artículo 18, Aid to the Church in Need, and Front Line Defenders, also engaged with the issue, but in more limited, supportive roles.

Although each actor formulated specific goals, the overall aim of the advocacy strategy can be described as researching, documenting, and raising awareness of the issue among a range of advocacy targets. These targets included the Mexican authorities, religious communities, international institutions such as the OAS, UN, and EU, Mexican civil society organizations, and internationally operating NGOs.

Contrary to what the term “strategy” might suggest, there was no formal or pre-established plan guiding the advocacy efforts. Rather, each actor operated independently, making strategic decisions based on their resources, capacities, and access to specific target audiences. The strategy thus evolved organically, shaped by the context in which advocates operated.

The approach can best be described as a hybrid strategy, combining insider and outsider tactics. Insider activities included the development of policy recommendations, research-based reporting, and direct lobbying at both national and international levels. Outsider strategies primarily involved public pressure through press releases and public messaging, holding the Mexican government accountable for inaction.

The outcomes of the strategy were limited, particularly in terms of impact. This research did not identify any examples of policy change at the national or international level, with the exception of the Episcopal Conference of Mexico, which issued security protocols for churches. This was the only policy change plausibly linked to the advocacy efforts. In terms

of social change, no developments could be conclusively attributed to the strategy, although some trends—such as a reduction in assassinations—were noted.

Despite the limited impact outcomes, the strategy has shown some effectiveness when assessed through intermediate outcomes. While public awareness is difficult to measure, media tracking showed that CCM's work received coverage both nationally and internationally. Interviewed advocates also reported a perceived increase in awareness, although this could not be substantiated with quantitative data. In terms of policy influence, some progress was observed within the Mexican Catholic Church and in international institutions where the issue has gained limited attention. Coalition building, however, remained minimal. Although more organizations are engaging with the topic, joint initiatives and formal partnerships remain scarce. This is especially significant given that most advocates reported limited resources and capacity, suggesting that more robust coalitions could enhance effectiveness. In terms of capacity building, the strategy contributed to improved understanding of how to frame the issue and strengthened documentation practices among key actors.

Several challenges have hindered the strategy's effectiveness. One of the most significant is the lack of systematic documentation of incidents, which impairs the ability to present a comprehensive picture of the problem. While assassinations are usually reported, threats, extortion, and harassment often go undocumented due to fear and the normalization of violence within communities. Another key limitation is the lack of political will among Mexican authorities. Even when confronted with credible evidence, officials often deny or downplay the problem. This has been a major barrier to achieving policy change. A further issue is the lack of understanding among policymakers, both nationally and internationally, regarding the nature of religious freedom and its relevance to the violence faced by priests. Misconceptions about what constitutes a violation of religious freedom continue to undermine advocacy efforts.

In conclusion, the advocacy strategy initiated by the CCM has not yet been effective in achieving its ultimate goal of improving the situation for priests in Mexico. While little to no impact outcomes were identified, the strategy has produced some intermediate results, particularly in terms of awareness raising and limited policy influence. The effectiveness of the strategy is constrained by external factors beyond the control of the advocates, such as political resistance and conceptual misunderstandings. Nevertheless, these limitations also point to areas of opportunity. Enhancing documentation efforts, building stronger coalitions, and improving the framing of the issue may all contribute to a more effective advocacy approach in the future.

These opportunities will be explored further in the recommendations and advisory report that follows.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations can be made to improve the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy aimed at addressing the situation of priests in Mexico who are harassed or assassinated by organized crime groups. These recommendations are directly linked to the challenges and limitations identified during the research process.

1. **Strengthen documentation through the empowerment of religious communities**
One of the main challenges affecting the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy is the lack of proper documentation of incidents. Many cases go unreported, making it difficult for advocates to demonstrate the full scale of the problem. While assassinations often receive attention, threats, extortion, and other forms of harassment are underreported. To address this, it is recommended to empower local religious communities by providing them with tools to document incidents themselves. This could be done through the creation of simple instructional videos explaining the documentation process and outlining what information is needed for a complete and reliable report. By doing so, religious communities can contribute more directly to the advocacy process, and the credibility of advocates' statements can be strengthened.
2. **Build stronger coalitions between international NGOs**
Although more international organizations are starting to address the issue, collaboration remains very limited. The organizations involved often work in isolation, and joint initiatives or shared strategies are rare. It is recommended to actively seek ways to bring relevant actors together. One approach is to organize a roundtable discussion focused specifically on this issue, where international NGOs can share knowledge, align messaging, and explore possibilities for joint action. Increased cooperation can lead to more effective advocacy activities, especially considering that most organizations are limited in resources and capacity. A stronger coalition could help reach more advocacy targets and increase overall impact.
3. **Improve understanding of religious freedom among policymakers**
Another factor limiting the effectiveness of the advocacy strategy is the lack of understanding among policymakers—both national and international—about what religious freedom entails. Many advocacy targets do not recognize the situation of priests in Mexico as a

violation of religious freedom, making it harder for advocates to get the issue on the agenda. To improve this, it is recommended to develop an online training program for policymakers. The goal should be to explain the different dimensions of religious freedom and provide examples of the types of incidents that can occur. This could help policymakers better understand the issue and recognize violations when they occur, even if committed by non-state actors. A better understanding of religious freedom could improve the response from advocacy targets and increase the overall effectiveness of the strategy.

4. Invest in long-term and sustained lobbying at the national level

Lobbying efforts directed at the Mexican government have so far not resulted in effective policy change. Policymakers often deny the problem or dismiss it as isolated or unrelated to organized crime, reflecting a lack of political will to acknowledge or prioritize the issue. To address this, it is recommended to invest in more sustained and long-term lobbying efforts within Mexico. Rather than relying on one-time meetings or reports, the advocacy strategy could benefit from building lasting relationships with key actors in government, civil society, and the Catholic Church. These efforts could be strengthened through collaboration with national partners who are better positioned to maintain continuous dialogue with policymakers. Where possible, public advocacy campaigns and international pressure could be used to support national-level lobbying, increasing visibility and urgency around the issue.

5. Establish regular evaluation and monitoring mechanisms

The absence of a predefined advocacy plan or Theory of Change has made it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the strategy over time or to reflect on what works and what does not. Without structured evaluation, lessons from the advocacy process may be lost, and future efforts may repeat past mistakes. It is recommended to introduce a basic and manageable system for monitoring and evaluating the advocacy strategy. This could involve internal reflection sessions between involved organizations, the use of tracking tools to monitor media attention or institutional responses, and the collection of feedback from target audiences. Even small-scale evaluation practices can provide important insights and help advocates adapt their activities to changing contexts and new opportunities.

6. (Re)frame the issue using human rights and security language

Limited understanding among policymakers—particularly at the international level—of what constitutes a religious freedom violation has hampered advocacy efforts. Several advocates indicated that when they try to raise the issue with international institutions, the response is often that the problem relates to criminal activity rather than religious freedom. It is therefore recommended to reframe the issue not only as a violation of religious freedom,

but also as a matter of human rights and public security. By highlighting the role of priests as actors who promote social stability and, in many cases, function as human rights defenders, the problem becomes more relatable and easier to recognize within existing international frameworks. This reframing could help position the issue higher on institutional agendas and lead to more constructive engagement from international advocacy targets.

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