

# 63

## participatory learning and action

How wide are the ripples? From local participation to international organisational learning



*Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)* – formerly *PLA Notes* and *RRA Notes* – is published twice a year. Established in 1987, it enables practitioners of participatory methodologies from around the world to share their field experiences, conceptual reflections, and methodological innovations. The series is informal and seeks to publish frank accounts, address issues of practical and immediate value, encourage innovation, and act as a ‘voice from the field’.

We are grateful to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), Irish Aid, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (Danida) for their financial support of *PLA*.

This special issue of *PLA* was produced in collaboration with the IKM Emergent Programme (see: <http://ikmemergent.net>). IKM Emergent is a five-year programme which started in 2007, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was developed under the auspices of the Information Management Working Group of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI) and is administered by the EADI Secretariat, Bonn.

*Participatory Learning and Action 63*

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Order no: 14606IIED

Cover illustration: Regina Faul-Doyle

Design and layout: Smith+Bell Design

Printed by: Park Communications Ltd, London

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Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) is an umbrella term for a wide range of approaches and methodologies, including Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Learning Methods (PALM), Participatory Action Research (PAR), Farming Systems Research (FSR), and Méthode Active de Recherche et de Planification Participative (MARPP). The common theme is the full participation of people in the processes of learning about their needs and opportunities, and in the action required to address them.

In recent years, there has been a number of shifts in the scope and focus of participation: emphasis on sub-national, national and international decision-making, not just local decision-making; move from projects to policy processes and institutionalisation; greater recognition of issues of difference and power; and, emphasis on assessing the quality and understanding the impact of participation, rather than simply promoting participation. *Participatory Learning and Action* reflects these developments and recognises the importance of analysing and overcoming power differentials which work to exclude the already poor and marginalised.

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# Editorial

Welcome to issue 63 of *Participatory Learning and Action*.

Participatory processes at the grassroots can have a powerful impact. But what happens afterwards to the learning and knowledge generated? Are these experiences translated into wider organisational learning, and if so how – or why not? And what impact do they have on decision-making or strategic planning within international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)? This special issue explores how widely the impacts – or ‘ripples’ – created from participatory processes spread from their original source.

This issue has been produced in collaboration with the IKM Emergent Programme.<sup>1</sup> *PLA* 63 is the result of various stages of reflection, research and analysis by a range of people in different combinations. The articles were developed from a workshop held in London on 18th and 19th

March 2010 and later refined at an ‘edit-shop’ held at IIED 30th September – 1st October 2010. The initial workshop was part of a larger process of reflection and research, supported by IKM Emergent and called ‘How wide are the ripples?’. The process explored how international development NGOs use and manage the information, knowledge and perspectives generated through the participatory processes they initiate or fund.

## Guest editors

**Kate Newman** is an independent consultant with a background in participatory development and adult education. She worked as part of ActionAid’s Reflect team for 10 years, supporting the evolution of the Reflect approach as it moved from a participatory approach to adult literacy and social change, to one that understood the importance of a broader recognition of

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<sup>1</sup> IKM Emergent is a five-year research and communication programme which started in 2007. IKM Emergent is founded on a critical analysis of current practice in the use of all forms of knowledge, including formal research, within the international development sector. See: <http://ikmemergent.net>

Photo: Louise Clark



During the March 2010 Ripples workshop, author and participant Jo Lyon explains how Oxfam’s KARL online platform facilitates knowledge-sharing.

communication in development. More recently she has been involved in various consultancies including NGO programme evaluations and producing learning and training materials to support participatory and rights-based development. She is an associate lecturer at the Open University and draws on her experience with participatory approaches within this academic setting. She is currently completing a PhD which explores the tensions, challenges and opportunities presented when an INGO works with a global human rights-based vision and organisational strategy, while also having a commitment to bottom-up participatory development processes.

**Hannah Beardon** is a consultant, and has worked with a variety of organisations to explore and strengthen the role of information and communication in international development. Recent work has included evaluations of development projects and processes using participatory approaches, design of knowledge management and shared learning tools and strategies, and the facilitation of multidisciplinary research

teams. With over a decade of experience working on (and with) participatory methodologies, she has developed an understanding of how facilitated processes of reflection can transform development organisations and the power relationships which underpin social change processes. The ‘How wide are the ripples?’ research and reflection process documented here has also had a profound impact on how Hannah understands and approaches her work, relationships and analysis. This includes a greater awareness of the power involved in attributing meaning to (or making sense of) information, data and perspectives collected in any evaluation or communications process.

**Structure of the special issue**

The special issue is divided into five sections:

- **Overview** to theme section.
- **Part I:** Participatory communication practices: how is the information generated? Includes articles from Andrew Chetley, Siobhan Warrington, Kate Carroll,

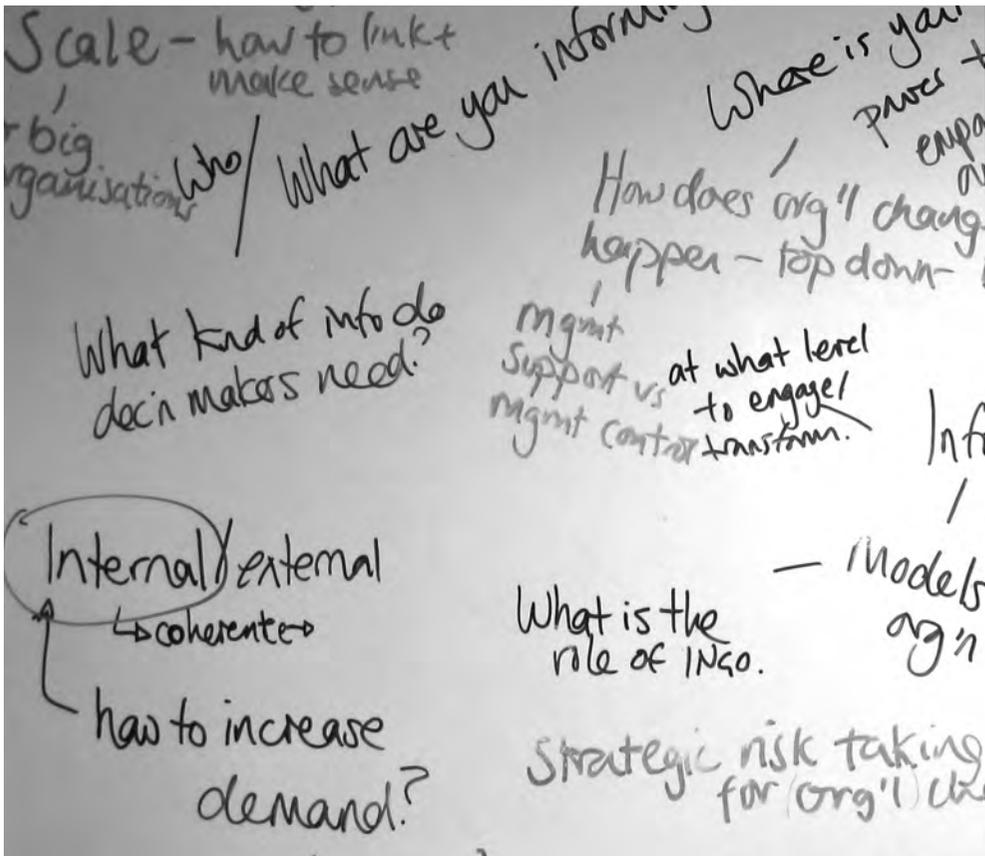


Photo: Louise Clark

Notes taken at the Ripples workshop reflecting on the challenges of linking participatory processes and organisational decision-making.

Alice Klein, Rose McCausland, Tessa Lewin and Cynthia Kurtz and Stephen Shimshock.

- **Part II:** Making sense: the dynamics of interpretation and use of participatory outputs. Contributions come from Cathy Shutt, Hannah Beardon, Jasber Singh, Rose McCausland, Cynthia Kurtz and Clodagh Miskelly, Nathan Horst and Soledad Muñiz.

- **Part III:** Learning in organisations: this section includes contributions from Ashley Raeside, Eliud Wakwabubi, Sofia Angidou and Daniel Guijarro.

- **Part IV:** Structures, mechanisms and spaces: includes articles by Jonathan Dudding, Soledad Muñiz, Jo Lyon, Angela Milligan and Emma Wilson, Kate Newman and Helen Baños Smith, Kate Newman

with David Archer and Michel Pimbert.

- **Tips for trainers:** includes contributions from Cynthia Kurtz as well as Hannah Beardon and Kate Newman.

### Acknowledgements

Firstly, the *PLA* team would like to express our gratitude to guest editors Hannah and Kate for their tremendous energy and dedication in producing this special issue. As their article 'Making sense together: the Ripples editshop' (this issue) demonstrates, the process of producing *PLA* 63 has been an example in practice 'that participatory or collective processes of reflection, interpretation and sense-making can produce rich and unexpected learning'. Their expertise and excellent facilitation of the whole process, in particular the two work-

shops in 2010, have been an inspiration. We would also like to thank the IKM Emergent Programme for its financial support and in particular Mike Powell for his continued goodwill, understanding and support – and especially as this issue has been published in 2011 instead of December 2010 as originally intended. Thanks also to our authors and editshop participants and all the participants at the ‘How wide are the ripples?’ workshop in March 2010, for their contributions and sense-making which have been invaluable to the overall process. And, finally, as ever, our warm thanks to our International Editorial Board for their feedback, insights and reflections.

### In Touch

Our regular readers will see that this issue follows closely behind the last issue, *PLA 62 Wagging the dragon's tail: emerging practices in participatory poverty reduction in China*. As such, our In Touch pages are somewhat shorter than usual and include a list of resources related to the theme for this issue.

### Next issue

In case you have not read about it in the current issue already, *PLA 64 Youth and participatory governance in Africa* will be published in December 2011. The guest editors are **Rosemary McGee** and **Jessica Greenhalf**. In March this year IIED, Plan UK and the Institute of Development Studies brought together a group of adults and young people involved in youth and governance initiatives across Africa to take part in a writeshop in Nairobi, Kenya. The idea behind the week-long meeting was to share learning and experiences, build writing skills, form new relationships and develop a set of articles for this forthcoming special issue.

Participating in governance and policy processes is re-shaping the way that young

people perceive and exercise citizenship in powerful ways. Young people can also drive change in creative and unexpected ways – a particularly promising characteristic for governance work. We hope the forthcoming issue of *PLA* will highlight how young Africans are doing this: addressing the documentation gap that surrounds youth and governance in Africa and enabling other participatory practitioners – young and old – to learn from their experiences.

### Final thoughts...

For the *PLA* team, working on this special issue and being involved in the Ripples process has been challenging, thought-provoking and inspiring. For me personally, it has been something of a revelation. In the lead up to the *PLA 64* writeshop in Kenya in March 2010, I spent some weeks working on a handbook for participants, called ‘Kindling your spark: an editor’s practical advice for writers.’ It provides tips and guidance on writing an article for the *PLA* series and includes many practical examples from *PLA* back issues.<sup>2</sup>

Since I wrote that first draft, I have been reading, copy editing and proof reading the articles for *PLA 63*. And it has been fascinating. I have been busy compiling a file of extracts from the articles in this special issue, which will eventually be woven into the *PLA* writer’s handbook. These include for example an adaptation of Cathy Shutt’s tips on writing in a more participatory style and Siobhan Warrington’s discussion on the power of first-hand accounts to engage readers.

What matters to us at *Participatory Learning and Action* is that we are able to share stories, critical reflections and learning by our readers, with our readers – and by doing so we hope that we are helping to improve each other’s participatory learning and practice at all levels, both as individuals and within our own organisations.

<sup>2</sup> The first draft of the handbook is now free to download on the IIED website. If you are considering writing an article for the *PLA* series, I hope that you will find it useful. See: <http://pubs.iied.org/G03143.html>

So I would like to end with a quote from Kate Carroll:

*... writing and distributing stories is seen as an end in itself rather than the start of a change process. We need to recognise the role of reflection and the resulting stories in changing practice and opening up spaces for more honest communication of our work.*

To me, this quote sums up the ethos of the *PLA* series, and reinforces what we are

trying to achieve. We aim to support authors to engage in an ongoing process of critical reflection in their writing and explore the deeper impacts of participatory practice. I hope that you find this special issue as challenging, thought-provoking and inspiring as I have: and that it will inspire you to share with us your own reflections on how widely the ripples of your own participatory practice flow. Please write to us!

**Holly Ashley, co-Editor, *Participatory Learning and Action***

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#### REFERENCES

- Ashley, H. (2011) 'Kindling your spark: an editor's practical advice to writers.' *Participatory Learning and Action* series online handbook (unpublished): <http://pubs.iied.org/G03143.html>

# THEME SECTION

How wide are the ripples? From local participation to international organisational learning



# Overview: How wide are the ripples? From local participation to international organisational learning



by KATE NEWMAN and HANNAH BEARDON

*Do you facilitate participatory processes at the grassroots? Do you ever wonder how wide an impact the process might have? Do you think the perspectives generated have relevance beyond local development processes, in national or international decision-making and analysis?*

*Do you work in an international or northern office of an international non-governmental organisation (INGO)? When you are deciding your priorities what information do you draw on? Whose knowledge and opinions feed into your sense of what an effective process or desirable outcome would be? Do you make adequate use of information in your organisation which represents the voices and views of diverse stakeholders in development processes?*

## **Why this special issue?**

When a pebble is thrown in the water it has

a very visible impact – or splash – and then the ripples spread out, getting weaker and less defined as they lose momentum. In the same way, a good quality participatory grassroots process can have a strong local impact – for example more representative prioritisation of local spending, more equal power relations within the family or more focused collective action – but the influence and impact naturally dissipates the further away from the original context you get. And yet, the insight and analysis, evidence and stories generated and documented during participatory processes are just the kinds of information which good development policy and planning should be based on.

With that problem in mind, the IKM Emergent research programme commissioned a process to explore ‘How wide are the ripples?’ of participatory processes.<sup>1</sup> It aimed to look at how we can better support

<sup>1</sup> IKM Emergent is a five-year research programme exploring how knowledge is selected, used and managed in the development sector, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. More information is available from [www.ikmemergent.net](http://www.ikmemergent.net). The programme commissioned the guest editors, both freelance consultants working on the link between communication and social change, to facilitate the ‘How wide are the ripples?’ reflection and research process with people in different INGOs.



Photo: Louise Clark

**Discussions during the Ripples workshop include how to inspire other empowered activists working with INGOs to be a conscious and active part of change.**

this type of information to reach other parts of the INGOs who facilitate or commission such processes. This issue of *PLA* is the culmination of a two-year process exploring that question.<sup>2</sup> We, the guest editors, chose to work with people working in the northern offices and headquarters of INGOs. Together, we looked at their experiences of receiving, finding or using information on the one hand – and on the other, the challenges and possibilities for using the information that comes out of participatory processes carried out in other parts of the organisation. We wanted to avoid focusing on the quality of participatory processes or on what other people (those working in the field, for example) could do better.

We began exploring the question as a knowledge management problem. We looked at the practical issues involved in getting this information flowing to northern offices, and well used. Important insights emerged from the reflections: about the difficulty of moving information across national and cultural borders and of interpreting and using it outside of its orig-

inal context. The further we engaged and reflected, the deeper and more political the issues and insights became. It became evident that this is more than a practical issue: it is also one of culture, accountability and power. It is not just a question of whose voices can be heard, but of whose knowledge and opinion counts.

In this issue of *PLA*, various authors (most of whom have been involved in the Ripples process) share their experiences and reflections of bringing grassroots knowledge and information to bear at international level, and some strategies for strengthening practice. We recognise that change, whether personal or organisational, is never easy and that the context in which we operate constrains the ability of INGOs to listen and respond to the grassroots. However, between us we share a range of initiatives that are possible. We emphasise the importance of acting as empowered individuals to be a conscious and active part of change. With this issue of *PLA* we hope to inspire other empowered activists working with INGOs to bring

<sup>2</sup> The process included a literature review; reflections or case studies on relevant work with five international NGOs and a resulting working paper (available at <http://tinyurl.com/rippleswp>); a follow-up workshop including about 30 people who have been trying to promote bottom-up information flows (report available at <http://tinyurl.com/ripples-workshop>); and, from that, this special issue of *PLA*.

about more accountable, equitable and participatory development.

### Participation and voice: the role of INGOs

The use of participatory approaches and methods has become ever more widespread in development organisations of all types and sizes, as they seek to transform their relationships, and contextualise their programmes and priorities with strong local input. There is a growing body of literature exploring the quality, effectiveness and scope of such approaches. The research critiques simplistic notions of community which hide unequal power relations, raises concerns that participatory techniques are applied as technical projects rather than empowering political processes and that analysis is limited to the micro level. It stresses that ‘voice’ is not just dependent on spaces for participation but also on the response of institutions. It tends to focus on the quality of participatory development as facilitated at local level.

The aim of participatory approaches is to develop people’s analysis, capacity and power to create personal and social change. In some cases the focus may be to engage with local authorities or powers, including the INGO itself, or to feed into wider policy advocacy work. Some of the articles here explore the tension between facilitating quality, empowering participatory processes and directing these processes to develop outputs which might influence policy makers. But as we explored the work of our own organisations, we realised that participatory processes may have a local focus, even an external one, but rarely, if ever, a direct or intentional link to organisational learning. The INGOs may be the sponsors, or the facilitators, but never the intended audience.

Yet INGOs have become increasingly prominent players in development over the last decades. They implement and fund programmes of work and are key partners for many local development organisations and in some cases even national govern-

ments. Through their advocacy work, and their close working relationships with major official donors, they have developed a strong voice in policies which determine how development money is spent. Many (the authors included) expect INGOs to use these connections, their close links with the grassroots and deep understanding of poverty, to challenge and transform mainstream development practice.

Power *et al.* (2003) argue that bottom-up learning commits organisations to:

*...work for the liberation of those at the bottom by drawing its own sense of direction and priorities from this group... to adapt their internal structure, systems and culture to the complex and evolving struggles of those in poverty... to let go of the controls in community development.*

Quality participatory processes support people to develop and articulate their own analysis of poverty and social change. It is important that INGOs find ways to incorporate that analysis into their organisational learning processes, and the body of knowledge on which they draw to understand – and plan their response to – development issues.

### Is there room to listen in the current operating context?

We believe that most international development NGOs **do** want to hear and respond to the voices of the poorest and most marginalised. They **do** understand the value of local knowledge and capacity and **don’t** want to reproduce and strengthen existing power relations. But even as a technical knowledge management issue, there are **practical challenges** to systematic sharing of learning and knowledge from local to national and international levels. The logistical and ethical issues in making such information available and letting people know that it is there are great. What is more, much of the information is individual opinion, heavily embedded in local



Photo: Louise Clark

Participants at the Ripples workshop reflecting on the challenges of linking participatory processes and organisational learning.

context and in local languages. Working out how it can be interpreted and used is a further complication.

But beyond these practical issues there are also questions of accountability and identity. Large INGOs may want to ask people on the ground what they think, what they want. But to listen and respond to those inputs is not simple. They have to balance this with their own strategy and mission, as well as their relationships with and accountability to their donors and sponsors. Discussing our experiences of this and the limitations of the operating context at the Ripples workshop, we identified two clear trends in the development sector, which effectively create divided loyalties and accountability for INGOs.

The first is the trend towards stronger top-down management and greater professionalisation of the sector, where staff are recruited and valued for their technical management abilities more than their personal commitment to social justice. Development is increasingly seen as a technical, rather than political, process with

specific inputs expected to lead to pre-defined outputs. The Millennium Development Goals represent a high level consensus on the aims and objectives of development. INGOs are part of this 'aid chain': organising their work and setting their priorities in line with this consensus and donor interests (Wallace *et al.*, 2006). This culture avoids discussion of the politics of poverty or power and powerlessness and presents development as straightforward, linear and predictable.

This trend can affect the relationship between northern (international) and southern (country) offices of INGOs. The international office(s) tends to set overarching priorities and directions, albeit informed by country offices. It requires specific types of information for accountability and reporting to their own donors and sponsors. This allows field staff limited opportunity to feed their learning from working with communities into the wider organisation, restricting the flow of information and perspectives and opportunities for developing shared meaning and knowl-

<sup>3</sup> ActionAid International, Concern, Healthlink Worldwide, Panos, Plan International.

edge. This linear approach ultimately limits the potential of local relationships, expertise or perspectives to influence **global** visions of what development is trying to achieve.

The other, apparently contradictory, trend is characterised by a rights-based approach – an attempt to deal with the root causes of poverty, embedded in unequal economic, political and social power. While many INGOs may continue their traditional role of delivering services to ameliorate or overcome the **symptoms** of poverty, they increasingly focus their attention on addressing the root **causes**. At community level, participatory approaches and processes help to develop an understanding of the complex relationships and processes underpinning persistent inequality and poverty. And at national and international levels, INGOs are conducting policy advocacy to challenge or change the relationships and policies underpinning global inequality.

The two sides of rights-based development work – grassroots participation and policy advocacy – make sense together. They are very complementary and both centred in analysis of the distribution, use and impact of power. But they are notoriously difficult for large international organisations to link together. While participatory processes require slow and long-term relationship and capacity building on the ground, policy advocacy tends to be carried out using complex, technical language, focusing on fast-moving and highly technical policy processes in Brussels or Washington. This creates an increasingly exclusive debate between INGO policy staff and policy makers (Batliwala and Brown, 2006). It influences the kinds of skills and behaviour that INGOs are looking for in their staff – and the type of communication and learning they prioritise. Especially in large INGOs, where these two areas of work may be carried out by different teams in different countries, listening to the grassroots – from where

INGOs derive their legitimacy as the ‘voice’ of civil society – and engaging in the global development dialogue can be difficult to balance or coordinate.

### How are INGOs trying to resolve this tension?

The initial Ripples reflection explored the flows of information from grassroots participatory processes into different parts of the international offices of five INGOs.<sup>3</sup> We found a distinct lack of policies and procedures aimed at strengthening and broadening the use of such information and found that even basic questions were not being asked, let alone answered:

- What could this type of information be used for?
- Who should be using it?
- How could it be stored, packaged or disseminated in order to have more influence?

The follow-up two-day workshop brought together a wider range of people, including INGO staff, academics and independent consultants, to share and look more deeply at what is happening inside INGOs in relation to the issue. What emerged was a much richer picture of the possibilities and challenges in supporting these processes.

We found that learning does happen informally, through exposure and personal relationships and commitment, and that there are many ways to support and strengthen this tacit knowledge-sharing. There are also techniques and processes being used to strengthen grassroots voices in policy-making, which could be adapted for organisational learning. We talked about different structures which promote sharing and influence, including those which instead of seeking to push grassroots information up, attempt to place decision-making power nearer to the grassroots. And we explored the links between individual and organisational learning, and whether extending reflective and participatory approaches into northern offices

could facilitate greater flow and understanding. Many of these experiences are shared in the articles here.

The participants – and their articles – highlight some different approaches that can be used to package, interpret and share grassroots perspectives with others in the development process, or ‘aid chain’. But they tend to be one-off processes with communication as an aim. In fact, the more we shared and discussed the issues, the more we realised that the participatory nature of the process underlies not only effective creation of the material, but also meaningful interpretation. When you listen to a story or read a case study with a specific intention or filter, for example to find evidence of the need to support girls’ education, you are more likely to find the evidence you seek – and miss many other important aspects of the communication. So in fact the principles and methods which underpin participatory approaches need to be embedded throughout the culture and structure of an organisation, in order for information, ideas and insights to flow effectively and meaningfully. And this suggests a very different way of working and relating within international organisations.

One-off participatory communications approaches are important, but we need to learn from what works and fight to get the underlying principles that they embody – equality, respect and listening for example – mainstreamed into our organisations. Many INGOs have made efforts to mainstream participatory processes through their accountability and planning systems, such as the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) in ActionAid or Plan’s Programme Accountability and Learning Systems (PALS) (see Box 1). These are an important step to including stakeholders’ views on what the organisation is doing and how they are doing it. But in practice they are not operating as spaces for the co-construction of knowledge and understanding the role of INGOs in development. Poor and marginalised stakehold-



Photo: Louise Clark

**Participants in the Ripples workshop position themselves in relation to how personally empowered they felt able to ‘widen the ripples’ in their own organisations.**

ers are consulted and listened to, but the ripples of their interventions – their influence on decision-making and action – are constrained by complex power relations and conflicting priorities within these organisations. If their voices are to ripple more effectively throughout the organisations and reach the central decision makers, much more attention needs to be paid to organisational relationships and cultures. Organisations need to invest to broaden out participatory spaces and processes to all levels of engagement and organisation, to allow people throughout the development process to reflect and plan for their engagement with awareness and consideration. These spaces would enable information to flow and meaning to be constructed from many perspectives, challenging the tendency for western or northern world views to dominate development thinking (see Box 1).

### **What is in this issue?**

From the workshop discussions and analysis, different themes and issues began to coalesce. Some of us shared examples of different participatory communications tools and techniques, considered how they might be adapted or extended and how a focus on organisational learning might influence or change the process itself. Others grappled with the ethical issues of

**Box 1: Participatory organisational learning, planning and accountability systems**

During the first phase of research we had the opportunity to interview and reflect with staff from ActionAid, Plan and Concern Worldwide on their organisational learning, planning and accountability systems. All three organisations have invested heavily in developing processes to enable them to involve people at the grassroots in programme development and priority setting. Each has set up annual review and reflection processes to ensure that community members have the opportunity to share their experiences, reflect on learning and plan for the coming year. The quality of these processes depends, to a large extent, on the commitment and interest of individual staff members and their line managers. But the signal sent by the wider organisation is also important. By committing resources to such processes these organisations are demonstrating that they value local knowledge, information and perspectives. Staff we spoke to discussed how important these processes had been in strengthening programme design at local and national levels.

For example, the Plan team reflected on how they had worked with many different stakeholder groups including government, service providers, children in and out of school, parents and carers, teachers, community leaders and local decision makers in the Philippines, to collect data on the situation regarding child rights. This helped to build a picture of how child rights are lived and felt on the ground. However, in reflecting on these organisational wide systems, staff from all three organisations also felt that there was a gap between how well these processes developed within national programmes and the way the information generated was used and valued internationally. For example, the Plan team reflected that 'the value given to personal knowledge, and the tyranny of deadlines, can affect how well information from communities is managed and used.' To make sense of it all requires time – and people with the skills and awareness to consolidate and present diverse opinions. Such capacity needs to be intentionally built and valued. The issue of using such information effectively is more sharply felt at national level, but Plan staff recognised that linkages to international decisions and policies were not so clear.

taking rich and complex information that concerns real people and real lives and using it as 'evidence' out of context. Some were thinking about the way information and learning flows through organisations and how that is helped or hindered by different types of structures, policies and relationships. And others were thinking about personal attitudes and skills, behaviours which enable real dialogue and debate, listening and sharing of ideas and perspectives, across cultural and institutional boundaries. In the end, as the articles were developed, we identified four overarching themes.

The articles in Part I look at processes designed specifically to support **participatory communication**. The authors share tools and processes which have enabled local analysis, perspectives, information and knowledge to be captured and used in a variety of ways beyond the local community. These articles look at some of the ethical issues and tensions involved as people's knowledge and perspectives, generated through a participatory process, are used in alternative fora for different purposes.

The articles in Part II take these ethical debates further, looking at the issue of subjectivity and interpretation and the role of technology and participatory approaches in **aggregating, transferring and sharing knowledge from the grassroots**. The authors explore the real dilemmas and challenges in bringing together rich, complex, rooted knowledge from diverse contexts while keeping the values of downward accountability foremost.

Part III moves from tools and processes to look at the organisations themselves. Building on the significant literature available on bottom-up learning and what it means to be a **learning organisation**, the authors look at the role of individuals in shifting organisational practice. They explore whether there are clearly identifiable principles, values and processes which could strengthen the potential of an organisation to listen to, learn from and respond to the knowledge generated by participatory processes at the grassroots.

Finally, Part IV looks at the **spaces, mechanisms and structures** which facilitate the transfer of knowledge from the grassroots. This encompasses organisa-

tional structure, online spaces and central processes such as the development of an organisational strategy. While acknowledging that each space offers potential, the authors also note the trade-offs involved. They recognise the range of context-specific factors which impact on how any structure or process works in practice.

Taken together these articles provide a good range of ideas of different ways to engage with the task of 'widening the ripples'. However we do not pretend to have all the answers. For as well as suggestions for practice, the articles clearly show

the structural challenges of widening the ripples – and the radical shift it creates in the development arena. It turns the 'subjects' of development into equal actors and allows autonomous visions of 'development' to move beyond local spheres and into wider debates and processes. It requires a development process which changes the relationship between INGOs and poor and marginalised communities from one of consultation and implementation, to dialogue and negotiation of plans and activities – and ultimately of the kind of world we want to live in.

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# Making sense together: the Ripples editshop

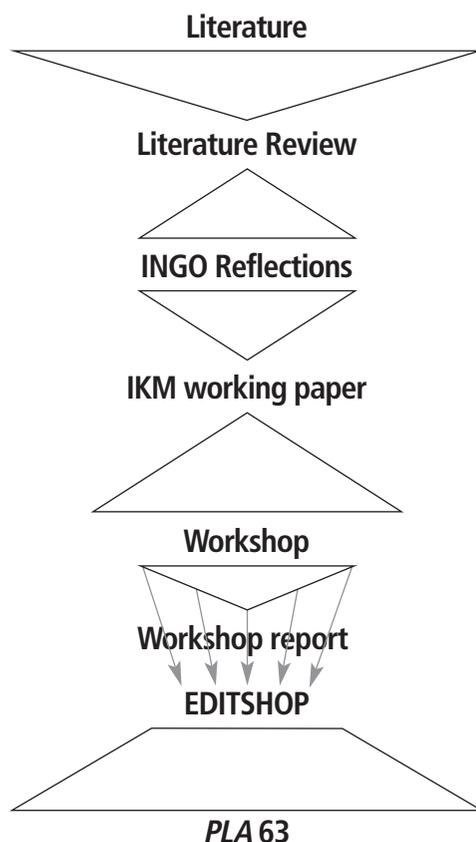
# 2

by HANNAH BEARDON and KATE NEWMAN

## Introduction

This issue of *PLA* is the result of various stages of reflection, research and analysis by a range of people in different combinations. At the same time as we have been identifying tensions and dynamics in the co-construction of knowledge, we have been dealing with them – albeit in a fairly small and homogeneous group. As such, the evolution of this work, our thinking and the group dynamics and relationships provides an interesting case study in itself.

As noted in the overview article to this special issue, Kate and I (the guest editors and facilitators of the process) started by conducting a literature review. We identified key issues and questions for reflection. We opened the process out for people working in northern offices of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to undertake such reflection. We then drew it back in to consolidate and construct a narrative from those different reflections. Based on this report we held a workshop in



London, March 2010.<sup>1</sup> Here we began to sketch out different areas or themes, such as organisational learning and development, participatory communications, aggregation of qualitative data and (organisational and personal) change. We identified different tensions present – between personal and organisational change, for example, or between shifting power down and information up. And we developed ideas for articles for the *PLA* issue. We produced a workshop report and at the same time worked with individuals to develop clearer ideas about their articles. Once the draft articles were all written we held a writeshop – which in the end was more of an editshop – at the IIED offices in London, September 2010.

### The Ripples writeshop – or editshop

*It was a great opportunity to consolidate learning and aggregate perspectives into the bigger themes.*

Soledad Muñiz

When we started planning our writeshop, we really didn't know what it was supposed to be. Neither of us had ever been to one, let alone organised one before. But we were confident that the two days together would be useful for the authors and editors. So we developed an agenda which enabled people to get back in touch with the wider issues, and feedback on each others' work.

Rather than put aside much time for writing and rewriting we prioritised giving and internalising feedback – and linking the articles to each other and to the wider themes. Although of course, in the end, the themes evolved as much as the individual articles. Feedback from the authors showed that, although they had expected to come away with a more finished version of their articles, they had valued the time to connect with others and receive feedback,

and that this was a good use of the time and space available. Alice Klein said:

*I expected to come away with a clearer structure or a new draft of my article, but I prefer working alone so it was more useful to have the discussion and analysis, focus on the bigger stuff you can't do at home, and take those notes away.*

Jonathan Dudding felt that:

*I am in a position to go away and come up with something which makes more sense.*

One of the main aims was to allow a wider group to be involved in giving feedback to authors, to include more visions than just our two of the focus and themes of articles. To do this, we began by revisiting the themes coming out of the previous workshop, and constructing a list of critical questions to use when reading each others' work. These included:

- Is it reflective/practical/engaging/analytical enough?
- What is the focus?
- What does it tell us about the wider issues?
- How does it link to other articles in the group?
- What structural changes would you suggest?

We had already grouped articles into four different themes. Within those themes, the authors worked in pairs to read and discuss each others' articles, and then in the wider sub-group to think about how they fitted together. Authors were all happy with the process and found the feedback valuable:

*It is so useful to see how my words are understood.*

Daniel Guijarro

<sup>1</sup> The process began with a literature review, reflections or case studies on relevant work with five international NGOs and a resulting working paper (available at <http://tinyurl.com/rippleswp>). The follow-up workshop included about 30 people who have been trying to promote bottom-up information flows. The report is available here: <http://tinyurl.com/ripples-workshop>.

*I had found it difficult to see how my article could fit. The feedback was invaluable; I am clearer what I need to do.*

Jo Lyon

*It made a big difference to interpret my analysis in relation to others.*

Soledad Muñiz

As well as enabling people to get individual feedback, the writeshop also gave us an opportunity to reinterpret the wider themes: to think about how we wanted to categorise the articles, as well as the wider vision we are presenting, and who we are speaking with through the journal. We could not have anticipated the value of the space for this. Before we started, Kate and I had a good idea of the wider message or theme, and could judge the extent to which each article spoke to that. At the writeshop not only did we share our vision more clearly with the authors, but they made their own contributions and we reinterpreted and clarified together. As Ashley Raeside explained:

*Kate and Hannah work together and on these themes a lot, so it is good to shake that up a bit.*

So in the end I don't think we did run a very good writeshop. People had no time to write, and many said they think that a longer time should be given to do that. What we ran instead was a very good editshop! And an example in practice of participatory editing and sense-making. We discussed our common themes and message – the bigger points we are trying to make or vision we are trying to set out. We critically read and discussed each others' work and developed shared meaning, categories and narratives which could make sense of them in a wider context. And as well as helping us in our work as editors, and creating a richer journal, it was a useful space in itself, as Daniel Guijarro explained:

*These spaces create reflection... it is a shame they can't be more routine – spaces for us to make sense together of ideas in development and how they relate to us.*

## The editing process

*Not only you have interpreted very well my thoughts but you also have helped me to better understand the context.*

Daniel Guijarro

*It was an incredibly useful process – really appreciated.*

Tessa Lewin

After the editshop the authors prepared new drafts of their articles, and sent them to us to edit. We were now all on more of a wavelength about the bigger issues and themes that the articles were speaking to, and this was reflected in the quality and focus of the new versions. We each proceeded to edit the articles in our sections, cutting and streamlining and asking for further information and clarification as necessary. But despite the themes of this issue of *PLA*, and the reflections on accountability and interpretation in particular, we easily strayed into directive and interventionist ways of editing. When people are working so hard to produce something which is quite personal, it is difficult to know whether you are being constructive or risk upsetting or undermining the author.

In the end, it was our communication with each other and the authors which carried us through: some authors were happy for us to direct them and their work. Others were keen to keep control of their articles and challenged some of our suggestions or interventions. We changed some articles for length or focus in traditional editing style. Other articles transformed in ways that neither the author nor editors could have anticipated.

We found that the trust relationships and shared understanding of the issues

that we had developed through the Ripples process helped the editing process significantly, whereas work with authors new to the process required more time and joint effort to communicate well our ideas to each other. It was a process sometimes frustrating, but always productive. People valued the chance to reflect on their experiences, and often found our comments useful not only to their articles but to the work itself. Describing the editing process, Nathan Horst (who did not participate in any of the Ripples process) wrote:

*The feedback has really helped me focus*

*my thoughts and get more clarity on what it is I really want to say about my experience... I feel a renewed sense of urgency about attending to process issues, after having focused a good bit of my energy on developing this tool in 2010... It takes a good editor to inspire action through critique!*

In the end, the editing process has confirmed for us the message of the articles and reflections contained here: that participatory or collective processes of reflection, interpretation and sense-making can produce rich and unexpected learning.

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# PART I

Participatory  
communication  
practices: how is  
the information  
generated?

This section looks at the (potential) role of participatory communication approaches in international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). There are many methods that INGOs and their partners can use to create space for people at the grassroots to analyse and articulate their priorities and perspectives. Some develop long-term engagement to systematically tap into those voices. Others create concrete or one-off spaces with the goal of strengthening communication on particular issues or within particular relationships. **Andrew Chetley's** article explains why Healthlink decided to make participatory communication central to its work, what they learnt about the impact of the approach – and organisational structures needed to support it. The other articles share experiences and reflections from using specific approaches and techniques.

Many participants in the Ripples process shared examples of participatory communication techniques, and the impact they can have on both the participants and (where appropriate) the intended audience. However, we began to realise that while INGOs may initiate and support the use of such techniques to diversify voices in the media, policy advocacy or local governance, they rarely consider themselves an audience for the outputs. Many INGOs have organisational learning systems which build on spaces for grassroots participation and feedback (see Part III). But the type of participatory

communication work described here is not usually linked to organisational learning in any formal way. Some of the articles in Part I (**Siobhan Warrington** looking at oral testimony, **Kate Carroll** looking at critical stories of change and **Alice Klein** looking at key correspondents, or citizen journalism) share experiences of using participatory communication approaches and consider the potential – and implications – of linking them more closely to organisational learning goals and systems.

Finally, we recognised during the Ripples discussions that while capturing and sharing the voices of marginalised people was an important aspect of participatory communications work, there is an inherent tension between a focus on the process or the product. Participatory methods aim to strengthen voice, yes, but by focusing on the audience rather than the speakers this voice can be distorted. This tension, and the implications for a focus on organisational learning, is explored in the articles by **Rose McCausland** (looking at participatory video) and **Tessa Lewin** (looking at Digital Storytelling). And the final article in Part I, by **Cynthia Kurtz** and **Stephen Shimshock**, looks at the potential of participatory communications methodologies – in this case Participatory Narrative Inquiry – from the side of the community, with interesting reflections for people working in their own communities – and by implication in the INGOs wanting to engage them.

# Where do we drop the pebble? Using participatory communication for social change

# 3

by ANDREW CHETLEY

## Introduction

Stimulating effective and powerful ripples of change in society through communication and knowledge processes involves knowing where to ‘drop the pebble’ and who is best placed to drop it. In other words, it demands local knowledge and understanding of local cultures and systems. In this article, Andrew Chetley, Executive Director of Healthlink Worldwide, explains how the organisation worked with a diverse group of partner organisations to use participatory communication processes to share knowledge, increase empowerment to bring about lasting social change, and learn from and apply the lessons.

In the health sector, there has long been a debate about how to use communication effectively to improve people’s health. For many years, a key driver in that debate has been the powerful experience of marketing, public relations and mass communication that has so successfully sold a myriad of brand named goods to an often uncritical set of audiences. Selling

the benefits was seen as the way to encourage change. And underpinning much of that approach was the belief that change was not happening because there was a lack of information and knowledge. If only we can get the information and knowledge in people’s hands, they will change.

Indeed, more than 30 years ago, this was one of the fundamental drivers for the establishment of Healthlink Worldwide – then known as the Appropriate Health Resources and Technologies Action Group (AHRTAG). It emerged from a health technical working group of the Intermediate Technology for Development Group, now known as Practical Action. The fundamental premise was that health and development workers, particularly those in remote, resource-poor and hard to reach settings in developing countries, lacked up-to-date and practical knowledge around life-saving techniques and practices. Improving their access to that knowledge was seen as essential to improving health.

If only life was that simple. There is no

question that better access to knowledge and information is an essential ingredient (Godlee *et al.*, 2004). There is no question that Healthlink's early publications and other efforts made a huge contribution to improving health and in some cases have been linked directly with saving lives. However, information and knowledge alone – although necessary – is not sufficient.

Around the same time as Healthlink Worldwide was finding its feet, a Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire was beginning to unpack the concept of participatory communication (Freire, 1973). Drawing largely on experience in sharing knowledge in agrarian reform activities, he made the point that dialogue was the critical driver for real social change and for the exchange of knowledge. Through that dialogue comes a blending of local, culturally specific knowledge, understanding and practice, with some of the more technical, abstract, analytical knowledge that inhabits most of our text books. Through dialogue, learning becomes a liberation process, an empowerment process and a real driver for change.

According to Freire, the goal of communication should be 'conscientization', or free dialogue that prioritises cultural identity, trust and commitment. Communication should provide a sense of ownership to participants through sharing and reconstructing experiences, and through this, evolving new knowledge. Freire's model proposed human-centred approaches that value the importance of interpersonal communication channels in decision-making processes at the community level.

This approach resonated with much of the feedback that Healthlink was receiving from partners with whom it worked in the field. A nurse or a doctor with a Healthlink publication in their hand could lecture women in Bangladesh day in and day out about the importance of using oral rehydration to deal with their children's

diarrhoea with little visible change in practice. But when one of the village women started to tell their compelling, dramatic and very emotional story about how using this magic solution had rescued their young baby from an early grave (and when the baby punctuated the story with happy laughter), change began to happen.

Both participatory communication and participatory development processes attempt to recognise, value, elevate and prioritise local forms of knowledge. They allow people to tell their stories and ultimately to determine their own development (Mutonono-Watkiss, 2006). How to do this effectively is a huge challenge and one that Healthlink Worldwide has been grappling with for much of its existence.

Table 1 summarises what was one of the 'pebbles' used (catalyst), who dropped it (facilitator) and what ripple (effect) resulted in the four examples that this article describes in more detail.

### **Guatemala: clowns act as intermediaries**

In Guatemala, we have worked with Prodesca Atz'anem k'oj – a troupe of clown-educators who have developed a lively, cost-effective and culturally relevant way to widely share information around HIV and AIDS. Street theatre, drama workshops and the efforts of youth peer educators combine with the engaging nature of clowning that uses local languages and culturally appropriate techniques. The Ministry of Health of Guatemala now listens to staff from Prodesca Atz'anem k'oj in developing new policy and programmes because the clowns are able to represent the experiences of the audiences they reach. The clowns are true intermediaries: using their communication processes to bridge the divide – whether real or perceived – between local, marginalised, often indigenous populations and public health planners and practitioners so that under-

**Table 1: Case study examples: catalysts, facilitators and effects**

| Example        | What's the pebble? (Catalyst) | Who drops it? (Facilitator)                           | What's the ripple? (Effect)                          |
|----------------|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Guatemala      | Humour and fun                | Clowns  | Understanding (two-way)                              |
| India          | Reflective questions          | Skilled facilitators (then local trainers/mobilisers) | Uptake of services and greater community involvement |
| S. Asia        | Leadership training           | Women with disabilities                               | Empowerment  |
| E. & S. Africa | Community/family dialogue     | Community organisers                                  | Less stigma, more uptake of services                 |
| Healthlink     | Reflective questions          | Team leader/team member                               | Improved learning, appreciation of process           |

standing and knowledge will flow in both directions (Savdie and Chetley, 2009).

**India: being listened to**

In India, Healthlink Worldwide was asked by USAID to support a large coalition of organisations working on polio eradication. Despite an excellent communication strategy and considerable social mobilisation activities throughout the country, there were pockets of resistance to polio immunisation in two states – Uttar Pradesh and Bihar – that were threatening the success of the overall programme. USAID wanted to know whether there were any participatory communication processes that could improve the uptake of immunisation. We worked for several months with the coalition partners and in particular with the social mobilisation teams – generally local residents who had been trained in the main issues of the campaign. Their task was to knock on doors and encourage local people to bring their children along for immunisation (or allow a technician to give the children the vaccine at home). As we worked with them, we asked them what happened on the doorstep. They described a series of unpleasant, sometimes threatening, interactions. We asked how they felt about this, and the almost universal answer was: ‘bad’. We took them through a set of processes to encourage participatory and inter-

personal communication practices. We helped them to find answers to some of the questions that they were regularly asked and to develop some locally appropriate materials to support their work. After each session, they would go back to the community and then come back for a further refresher session. Over a four-month period, the mobilisers all were able to identify key changes in the way they were able to communicate, improved confidence in being able to deal with difficult questions and more capacity to find acceptable solutions. And more children were being immunised – a remarkable turnaround in areas where there was strong resistance (Obregon and Waisbord, 2010). A key factor in this change was that both the people in the communities and the mobilisers were being listened to: their concerns, their issues and their problems were being heard, understood and responded to, even if not everything could be addressed immediately. As a result, they saw real benefit in being involved in the programme.

**South Asia: encouraging empowerment**

Across South Asia, women with disabilities tend to be invisible in society, excluded from education, health services, family and community life and employment. An innovative, dynamic and participatory programme led by women with disabilities

across South Asia has made a real difference in the lives of some 300 women it has worked with and in the societies in which they live (Kleeman, 2010). This was an advocacy project with a difference: the advocacy was done by the women most affected. Healthlink worked with them to strengthen their communication and leadership skills. They now take a lead in discussions relating to the decision-making processes that affect them, in facilitating and raising meaningful dialogue on issues which affect women with disabilities in South Asian society – and in engaging key government agencies and civil society organisations in meaningful discussion on issues that affect the advancement of women with disabilities. This has meant that now, real dialogue is happening among different stakeholder groups. Originally intended to work with organisations in just three countries, it was extended to work with groups in eight countries and is described in its evaluation as ‘a genuine example of South-to-South learning and skills transference’. The project has put the issue on the agenda for governments in the region and a South Asian network has been developed to keep the work going. A key lesson from the project was that it was not just at the policy level where change had to occur. Some of the barriers to change were embedded in the very fabric of the society in which these women with disabilities lived. For them, it was necessary to drop the pebble and create the ripples that would stimulate change among civil society, community, within families and peers.

### **East and Southern Africa: developing dialogue**

In East and Southern Africa, stigma and discrimination among people living with HIV has been a major concern. Healthlink has been working for nearly 10 years with a group of partners around child-centred, community-focused responses to the epidemic. Central to the work has been the issues of increasing family and community

dialogue around the issue. A significant outcome of this effort has been that communication about HIV at family and community level greatly increases or introduces opportunities to increase uptake and adherence to anti-retroviral treatment. It has helped people living with or affected by HIV to take control over their lives, and has proved to be a powerful tool in reducing stigma and discrimination (Dunn and Hammond Ward, 2009). We were then able to take some of the key lessons from this work and adapt the processes and approaches for use with a partner in India, where the programme is now into a second phase. As a multi-partner and multi-country programme that has been financed by a number of different funding sources over time, it has been a complex exercise. Something that emerged early on was the importance of face-to-face communication for the development of good relationships among the partners and to strengthen the sharing and learning among them. As a result, we looked for every opportunity to introduce exchange visits, partner meetings, learning forums and workshops to encourage regular exchanges and interaction.

But how does this varied collection of local learning – valuable as it might be in its immediate environment – translate into improved knowledge and practice within Healthlink Worldwide – and beyond?

### **Final reflections**

All this engagement and hearing from the marginalised improves our learning about grounded realities, and about what people really think and feel. Our experiences in one setting are adapted and applied to others. We deliberately design projects with multiple partners, sometimes in the same country, often in different countries, to encourage, enable and enhance opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-contextual learning. This sharing of different local knowledges spreads learning, encourages

analysis and stimulates thinking, innovation and adaptation among partners. And makes their learning fun!

Processes of reflection and learning have been built into Healthlink's regular internal routines. A quarterly in-week, for example, provides opportunities for all staff to hear about, engage with and challenge stories of practice from the field. During this quarterly event, staff have an opportunity to reflect on a particular project experience, to share training experience, to explore good practice in developing a new piece of work, or to conduct an after-action review of something that has already taken place to distil lessons and practical learning. This then feeds back into planning, into the design of new work, and into the overall organisational knowledge base.

Some of this is documented, analysed and synthesised and finds its way into donor reports, web articles, case studies for publications and articles and as examples for presentations, talks and dialogues. Some of it is not documented, other than by individual staff taking notes. It passes into the collective tacit history of the organisation, usually with little more than a memory tag that one or more staff members, partners or consultants know something significant about a particular topic, methodology or tool. When that knowledge is needed to be applied in a new situation, they know where to turn for support.

More of the latter is the case than the former. Why is that? Healthlink is a knowledge broker, a committed learning organisation, a promoter of reflection, learning, exchange and dialogue processes. It values the power of good access to information and knowledge. So why isn't Healthlink more rigorous in documenting what happens? A simple answer is that no one pays for the expense of doing that – and it is time-consuming, labour-intensive and therefore expensive. We may value it. But we work among a donor community

that does not value it sufficiently to resource this work so that it can be done properly and effectively. A more complex answer is that, even if every scrap of knowledge was carefully extracted and documented, it would only be useful when the right circumstances of culture, context and content come together to turn some particular nuggets from dust collectors into shining examples of golden wisdom. And it would take dialogue for that particular alchemy to happen. Our experience shows that the dialogue usually suffices to surface the necessary knowledge, which might only then be formally documented for a particular use.

Overall, we have been able to determine a set of eight principles that guide our approach to participatory communication – derived from our own experience and from the experience of many other practitioners working in the health and other development sectors. These are:

- Paying careful attention to the existing knowledge of beneficiaries and any immediate information gaps they might have.
- Using multiple approaches and channels for communication.
- Stimulating community dialogue and exchange.
- Using appropriate language and communication style to fit in with the cultural context.
- Being responsive, timely and relevant.
- Building on, supporting and helping to sustain existing communication processes.
- Taking the time to build trust and ownership.
- Reflecting on what they are doing, learning from the experience and feeding the learning back into the communication process as quickly as possible.

Knowing where and when to drop the pebble is never easy. Sometimes it takes several different pebbles to generate ripples of change. But when it happens, watching the ripples flow gives us a little more insight into some improved likelihoods for the next time.

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**NOTES**

In October 2010, the global economic downturn caught up with Healthlink Worldwide. Earlier in the year, the unexpected loss of a significant income stream from a contract that was terminated led to a severe financial shortfall for the organisation's running costs. Despite rapid efforts to cut costs and generate new income with a revised business plan, there simply was not enough time to put the organisation onto a secure financial footing and it was forced to cease trading. A set of Healthlink Worldwide's publications that are available electronically can be found on the Source database: [www.asksource.info](http://www.asksource.info) (use the search function and put Healthlink Worldwide into the publisher field). A set of resource lists on participatory communication developed by Healthlink and its partners over the years is also available: [www.asksource.info/res\\_library/participatory.htm](http://www.asksource.info/res_library/participatory.htm)

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# Voices, voices everywhere, but how much learning is going on?

# 4

by SIOBHAN WARRINGTON

## Introduction

In 1988 when I was 15, growing up in the north east of England, I did a local history project for school. I was expected to complete a project about a local building or place, but I wanted to do it on my Nana (grandmother). She was local history as far as I was concerned. A compromise was reached. The title of the project was 'Life in Burnhope in the 1920s' and my research consisted of tape-recording my Nana and her sister talking about their childhood in Burnhope, a mining village in the north east of England. I was pleased with the project, thoroughly enjoyed it in fact. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this experience shaped my career. It signalled an early interest in people's stories and experiences and a belief that we have a lot to learn from them. Plus Nana's stories helped me get an A in my history GCSE (a UK secondary school examination).

In 1995, after listening to and record-

ing women in northern Pakistan talk about tourism and culture, I got a degree in Social Anthropology. I returned to Pakistan for my first job facilitating Participatory Rural Appraisal for a large non-governmental organisation (NGO). After a couple of years I had an idea for a collaborative oral history project, entitled 'Women on the Highway'. I wanted to work with a woman from northern Pakistan and together interview, record and publish the stories of women of different ages and backgrounds living along the Karakoram Highway. We shared the idea with some donors. There was a flicker of interest from one, but nothing happened. It was the first proposal I'd ever written, and unsuccessful.

In 1998 I was back in sunny Middlesbrough, UK, doing market research on conference centres (help!) and looking for another job. Eventually an advert appeared for an Oral Testimony Programme Officer at Panos London.<sup>1</sup> 'Wow' I thought, 'you

<sup>1</sup> Panos London is part of the worldwide Panos Network of independent institutes working to ensure that information is used effectively to foster debate, pluralism and democracy. It works with media and other information actors to enable poor and marginalised people in developing countries to shape and communicate their own development agendas.



Photos: Panos London

Practice oral testimony interviews during workshops in Choma, Zambia (above) and Karachi, Pakistan (opposite page).

can get a job doing this? Community-based oral history in the context of international development: a dream job?’ I applied, providing details of the fantasy ‘Women on the Highway’ project and here I am still, 12 years later.

I am convinced of the value and importance of recording and sharing the stories, feelings and experiences of people who experience development issues, first-hand on a daily basis. For me, they are the ‘real experts of development’ and so if that’s true, how do we bring that expertise into our learning?

### What is oral testimony?

I guess you know what I’m talking about, but just to be sure. Oral testimonies are the result of audio-recorded, one-to-one, in-depth interviews drawing on personal memory and experience. The one-to-one nature of the interview and the use of local interviewers enable ‘quieter’ members of communities to participate – those who do not speak national languages or who feel

uncomfortable participating in group discussions.

Panos London’s approach to oral testimony involves community members, or sometimes local/national NGO workers and journalists, designing and implementing oral testimony projects. Projects involve a five- to seven-day participatory workshop, regular review meetings for interviewers and support for local and national dissemination in ways that are meaningful and useful for communities and partner organisations. Usually interviewers produce word-for-word transcriptions of interviews, which are translated into English by a translator familiar with the context of the testimonies.

### Voices, voices everywhere...

Panos, like many NGOs is increasingly using voices and first-hand accounts. Extracts from oral testimonies can be found in our Annual Review and other publications. The word ‘Voices’ has become part of our logo and a blog called *Voices from the Ground*



communicates the stories of individual activists who are trying to overcome the development problems highlighted by the Millennium Development Goals. This increase of voices in journalistic outputs is not confined to Panos London. First-hand accounts are commonly used in mainstream newspapers and broadcast journalism.

There is widespread acceptance that the increased use of direct voices brings publications, presentations and websites ‘alive’. First-hand accounts also have a degree of immediacy and authenticity that is engaging. They can be inspiring or motivating, generating an emotional connection in the reader. Tony Long, trustee of our partner in an oral testimony project in southern Madagascar the Andrew Lees Trust, shares this view:

*There is a raw energy that comes off the pages of the oral testimonies. Letting people tell their own stories in their own words surely is the most powerful communications tool you can imagine. The words stand as a brutally honest and uncluttered statement of the way things are.*

Another two things that strike me about oral testimonies are **detail** and **reflection**. The detail of circumstance, place or person that is only possible from someone who has experienced it first-hand. A testimony from Mileinis, a Colombian girl, contains an incredible cinematic-like description of the

moment she stood on a landmine while holding a box of eggs.

*I grabbed the basket of eggs and was looking for a place to go to the bathroom when I heard a car. I crossed over... the road, climbed over the separating wires, put the eggs to one side and... squatted down to urinate. When the car had passed, I turned around, Uf, an explosion! What had happened? Was this a dream? I looked at myself and I'm wounded, I touch my face and it's bloody, and I say to myself 'Oh, my feet'... And when I looked down... I saw that I was missing the toes on my right foot. I was in the hole, all rigid, and I didn't feel anything... I looked at the foot that was missing its toes and then I looked at the eggs - I wasn't afraid or anything - and I began to laugh because not a single egg had cracked.<sup>2</sup>*

Many testimonies also contain **reflection** and analysis of a situation or challenge, and knowing that this analysis is based on first-hand experience makes it all the more important. For example Ismael Maestre, also from Colombia, explains:

*I don't think people get displaced out of fear, but out of concern that they might die for something that they didn't want... some say that we're cowards because we fled. I say that we're not... by fleeing we're trying to preserve life... People are displaced simply so they can protect their families.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> To read or listen to all of Mileinis story: [www.idpvoices.org](http://www.idpvoices.org)

<sup>3</sup> To read or listen to all of Ismael's story: [www.idpvoices.org](http://www.idpvoices.org)



Photos: Panos London

Practice oral testimony interviews during a workshop in Shimshal, Pakistan.

### Oral testimonies: a serious source of knowledge?

In the 12 years that I've been at Panos London, first-hand accounts and direct voices have gone from being fairly marginal in development information and projects, to being much more central to many organisations' advocacy, fundraising and research activities – and to some extent their programming. It seems a good time to question whether that increase in the communication of first-hand accounts has been accompanied by an incorporation of such sources into development knowledge and organisational learning.

Between 2000 and 2003 I worked with the community of Shimshal from northern Pakistan on an oral testimony project, as part of the wider international Panos Mountain Voices project. While preparing



the testimonies for publication, Muzafferud-Din, a Shimshali involved in the project asked me, 'Will anyone take this kind of material seriously?' In some ways, that question frames this article.<sup>4</sup>

I will reflect on the value of oral testimonies as a 'serious' source of knowledge and consider if and how they contribute to organisational learning. I draw on my own experience and ideas, and those of my colleagues in Panos London and various partner organisations.

<sup>4</sup> Our evaluation of Mountain Voices proved that the Shimshal testimonies and those from nine other mountain communities were taken seriously by development practitioners, researchers and journalists. And in February 2011 Muzaffer's testimony, along with others from Shimshal, are the subject of an article in the Mountain Research and Development (MRD) journal, 'Narratives of accessibility and social change in Shimshal, Northern Pakistan' (Cook and Butz, 2011). See also: [www.mountainvoices.org](http://www.mountainvoices.org).

## Where does the learning take place?

I can see three main ways in which oral testimony does and can influence learning processes.

Firstly, the overall approach, methods and process of a participatory communication project can inform an organisation's culture and practice. For Sahar Ali, country director of Panos Pakistan, it is the process and method of oral testimony which has contributed to the learning of an organisation which traditionally had a more journalistic focus.

*Individual voice methodologies remind us of the biases that creep into reportage, of the arrogance of journalism, of its selectivity in reporting facts and opinions, of media's patronising attitudes and of its urban bias. Oral testimony helps us realise how we can build the capacity of journalists to be more representative of the views and voices of those who are seldom given the chance to speak out and be heard. Since my own experience of oral testimony, I have sought to incorporate individual voice methodologies in all Panos Pakistan's projects and programmes.*

Three colleagues in Panos London, when asked about oral testimony and organisational learning, suggested its potential as a tool for monitoring and evaluation or needs analysis – both of which could be considered institutionalised processes of learning in an organisation.

Secondly, the processes to collect oral testimonies are participatory and dynamic learning experiences in themselves. Interviewers set the themes for interview at a workshop and throughout the project review and analyse these. And the open-ended nature of oral testimonies allows the narrator to guide the interview which can result in content that may be outside the frames of reference of national partner organisations or INGOs.

At a workshop in Colombia for an oral testimony project with the internally displaced, the youngest participant, Melkin, moved and informed everyone with his insights into the different physical and psychological impacts of displacement.<sup>5</sup> Workshops become sites of learning for everyone: trainers and potential interviewers alike. But there is more to learn from the interviews themselves. Anne-Sophie Lois, coordinator of the project explains:

*...the oral testimonies helped us understand the full extent of the impact of displacement on people's lives... although I was aware of multiple displacement, it wasn't until reading the testimonies that I really understood the repetition of trauma and loss experienced by such internally displaced persons who receive little or no protection... the testimonies deepened the Internal Displacement's Monitoring Centre's (IDMC) understanding of this huge humanitarian crisis. We also used some of the testimonies as evidence at the UN Congress to demonstrate the linkages between palm oil plantations and internal displacement in the Choco region of Colombia.*

We were recently commissioned by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to coordinate and edit a set of testimonies of rural poor men and women from six different countries. The testimonies with accompanying photographs became central to the Rural Poverty Report 2011.<sup>6</sup> The sheer volume of testimony material throughout the publication demonstrates that IFAD do consider this a serious contribution to their and their audience's knowledge on rural poverty.

Finally, oral testimonies provide an increased awareness of – and sensitivity to – the integrated nature of development issues. This is different to an in-depth knowledge of a particular issue. It is an

<sup>5</sup> See: [www.idpvoices.org](http://www.idpvoices.org)

<sup>6</sup> See: [www.ifad.org/rpr2011](http://www.ifad.org/rpr2011)



Presenting life stories of those displaced by conflict in Georgia at the 2008 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs in Geneva.

understanding of how development problems and opportunities are interrelated, as lived through the life of one individual. I can think of no better way to gain this understanding than through reading or listening to an individual life story. Yvonne Orengo, former director of the Andrew Lees Trust agrees:

*The testimonies from southern Madagascar provide an insightful view of the complexity of life in fragile environments. They give dimension to our understanding of how a person's life is weaved in and around the resources and external factors in their environment, as well as the twists and turns of 'fate' in that mix. As development practitioners this can help us understand the balances that have to be considered when we make decisions, and to acknowledge how everything we do will have unexpected impacts that we need to better anticipate.*

### Still further to go

There is definitely a good deal of enthusiasm and support for oral testimonies. However I do not think this enthusiasm always translates into the same level of organisational learning. I think the problem is that **we still need to learn how to learn from these stories**. It is not easy. These detailed, awkward, at times conflict-

ing, expressive first-hand accounts are very different to our usual professional reading material.

Many colleagues at Panos London agree that testimonies can contribute to our learning and inform our programming – and are personally inspired and motivated by testimonies gathered. However, the challenge is that we are an organisation specialising in communication for development, as opposed to a particular issue such as internal displacement. Logically, therefore, it would be an oral testimony project on people's perspectives and experiences of communication that could contribute most to our learning. However our projects do have a thematic focus so there's definitely scope for more integration. In discussion with Anne-Sophie Lois (now working for Plan International) she suggested:

*A project needs another stage of work to internalise the testimonies into the organisation. Many NGO managers are really administrators, focusing on targets, impacts, results and fundraising; they won't go to this kind of material... But we should be able to use oral testimonies to improve our programming. The fact it doesn't happen is about lack of time, other priorities and a lack of understanding, and so the testimonies are not used to their full potential.*

Olivia Bennett, founder of the Oral Testimony Programme at Panos London, made a related point:

*There is definitely a bias towards using academic literature to inform programming and strategy, whereas people turn to oral testimonies for quotes and to add 'colour' to their writing.*

In addition to this bias, the usual planning processes and cycles of development work do not make it easy to access and use this kind of material in programming.

Photo: Jenny Mathews



Practicing listening skills during an oral testimony workshop in Ethiopia.

**Summary: a daily dose of oral testimony?**

I think there's more to oral testimonies than illustration, fresh breath and inspiration. I (and many of my colleagues) do believe we can learn from them. But it is a challenge, even within an organisation that actively promotes voices. The question that troubles me is a practical one. How can I help to increase the use of oral testimonies in learning processes at Panos London?

Firstly, I'm going to prescribe myself and at least one colleague a daily dose of oral testimony and then make sure we talk about what we've gained from that. Maybe this is the embryo of an idea for a regular blog to introduce and share a different testimony each day with a wider audience. And I will also take the small-scale, old-fashioned approach and leave a different

testimony on the kitchen table every day that I'm in the office, providing some different reading material for my colleagues eating their lunch.

At a more institutional or programmatic level I can think of two solutions.

- Firstly, to design, fundraise and implement an oral testimony project which aims to get people telling stories about their communication lives and landscapes. The resulting testimonies would undoubtedly inform Panos' knowledge and challenge our assumptions and meanings of communication in the development context.
- Secondly, to ensure that reflection and learning events for local, national and international partner organisations and Panos London are built into all future oral testimony projects, and that these are properly budgeted and planned for.

Now that I have written that down it seems painfully obvious, so obvious that I have evidently just assumed that learning and reflection will magically happen without any deliberate intervention! Being part of the Ripples project has resulted in a good deal of thinking and reflection about development knowl-

edge, oral testimony and organisational learning. I hope I can now put some of that into practice, with the ideas outlined above, and the results of those endeavours can be the subject of another article in a year so. In the meantime if anyone else has any other ideas, do get in touch!

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#### NOTES

For further reading and resources on oral testimonies, please see In Touch, pp. 181 and 184, this issue.

# Opportunities and challenges of participatory processes: the case of Key Correspondents

# 5

by ALICE KLEIN

## Introduction

Citizen journalism or ‘grassroots journalism’ is participatory in its very nature. It involves individual members of the public playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information (Bowman and Willis, 2003). Its objective is to give a voice to citizens and often provides a perspective that mainstream media omits. It often utilises blogs, social networks and audiovisual media taken with mobile phones.

When citizen journalism is integrated into development programming, it has the potential to expose the experiences of the marginalised communities with whom non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are working. At the same time, it builds the capacity and potential of those communities to engage with national policy dialogue and advocate for policy changes which will benefit them.

Key Correspondents is an innovative citizen journalism programme, managed by the International HIV/AIDS Alliance (‘the Alliance’) which is an international

network of some 40 national NGOs with secretariats in the UK and India. The programme aims to build writing skills amongst people affected by HIV, and provide them with the tools to publish their work to international audiences via the Internet. Through policy briefings, reporting from national and international conferences and sharing experience the Key Correspondents team inform their own communities and input into national strategies and policy processes.

In this article I reflect on my experiences of working with the Key Correspondents programme: the strengths and challenges of the approach and the extent to which it represents an opportunity for international NGOs (INGOs) to incorporate grassroots perspectives into their organisational learning.

## The Key Correspondents team

Key Correspondents (KCs) are community-based writers, reporting on the health and development issues that affect them and their communities. With unique access to

their subjects and knowledge of the marginalised groups they are writing about, such as sex workers or people who inject drugs, they can generate richer content for the audience. And as they often channel the experiences and stories of those community members with low literacy levels or with limited computer/Internet access, they can be seen to act as a mouthpiece for members of their community.

The KC team is comprised of approximately 250 people in 50 countries, of whom a large number represent people affected by and living with HIV. As the programme is voluntary, the KCs' motivations for participating are not financial. The majority say they participate owing to their passion for advocacy and their hopes that raising awareness of local issues will inform national AIDS policy. For example, in 2010's annual survey of Key Correspondents a Zambian KC stated:

*My role is to bring to light the nitty-gritty issues affecting people living with HIV in Western Province to the attention of power-holders and stakeholders.*

The survey revealed that many KCs view themselves as a representative voice for particular groups in society. The definition of representation was loose, including both being from a particular group and working with them or on their behalf. KCs stated that they represent people living with HIV (69%), women (59.5%), children and youth (54.8%), sex workers (26.2%), injecting drug users (16.7%) and men who have sex with men (11.9%). Although provision of personal and sensitive information is voluntary, we know that many of them work in the fields of HIV, sexual and reproductive health rights, as well as other social and health fields. Many are engaged

in the HIV sector through working in non-governmental and community-based organisations, the media and HIV positive networks – which are national or regional support groups for and by people living with HIV that advocate to improve the quality of their members' lives.

### The KC process

The Alliance's organisational model emphasises the grassroots by forging relationships with 'linking organisations' in different countries, who themselves link with community-based organisations which act as implementing partners. The Key Correspondents programme's participatory nature reflects and reinforces this organisational emphasis on the grassroots. The programme provides KCs with initial training to build writing skills, distance mentoring and editing and monthly briefings to provide them with the resources they need in order to write about topical issues or events. For example, in response to a briefing about maternal health in advance of the Women Deliver conference in 2010, an HIV positive woman from Namibia wrote about her own experience of forced sterilisation.<sup>1,2</sup> This in turn contributed to her selection for a scholarship to attend and report from the conference in Washington DC.

The process of KCs producing stories – from researching to interviewing to writing – is as important as the 'finished product' of the final article, if not more so. For example, one teenage girl who took part in a training workshop in Uganda lacked confidence in her writing skills and had only ever written at school. But she was incredibly passionate about HIV issues which she observed within her own community. After the training, she was mentored for six months and gained the confidence and skills to write in-depth

<sup>1</sup> Women Deliver is a global advocacy organisation bringing together voices from around the world to call for action against maternal death. Their first conference was held in Washington 7th–9th June 2010. See: [www.womendeliver.org](http://www.womendeliver.org)

<sup>2</sup> Forced sterilisation is when people are sterilised without their informed consent after being diagnosed as HIV positive and often while they are in surgery for other conditions such as caesareans: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/10202429](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10202429)

Photo: Alice Klein



**Key Correspondent Diana Kintu of Uganda writes up a story during a training session.**

features exploring themes such as vulnerable children, rape and stigma.

KCs who are interested in policy advocacy and want their stories to be useful for their communities often link with policy partnerships called National Partnership Platforms (NPPs). Based on the concept of strength in numbers, NPPs allow NGOs to work together to agree on a shared policy priority and create space for dialogue between civil society (including KCs) and decision makers such as parliamentarians. The model sees KCs capturing community experiences and feeding these to the NPPs which then take this information and insert it into national policy dialogue. NPPs exist in several countries throughout Africa and Asia. The largest and most active groups of KCs exist where there are NPPs to strengthen their policy advocacy influence.

KCs are also supported to approach external media, such as local and national newspapers, to place their stories. While this is a departure from conventional 'citizen journalism', in so far as it is commissioned

and edited by professional media houses, it can be seen as a form of awareness-raising and advocacy. In some circumstances, KCs can be paid for their stories.

### **Making a difference to wider information**

The KC programme could be considered more credible than mainstream media because unlike conventional journalists who simply step in, extract information and then leave, this process empowers individuals to communicate their truth directly to the outside world and this is an ongoing rather than one-off process.

In his book on citizen journalism in Africa, Banda (2010) states:

*By suggesting that conventional journalism is undemocratic, citizen journalism seeks to open it up to the participation of ordinary people.*

In the KC context, community members have the opportunity to contribute to the news agenda and even help shape it.



Photo: Hoang Hai Vuong

**Key Correspondents Ishdeep Kohli of India and Suksma Ratri of Indonesia Tweet updates during the International AIDS Conference 2010.**

KCs can highlight some of the most important yet neglected issues in the AIDS response. In Zimbabwe, for example, a small group of KCs were trained in documentation skills and then researched home-based care of people living with HIV. A publication entitled *Caring from Within* was then produced outlining key policy recommendations which was endorsed by Zimbabwe's Ministry of Health in 2008.<sup>3</sup> The goal of the publication was to guide the design and prioritisation of home-based care programmes, policies and funding to make a real difference to people's lives at the local level.

Like independent media, KC stories can help to hold politicians and decision makers to account by reporting on whether they are delivering what they promised. As one KC put it in the 2010 Annual Key Correspondents Survey:

*I have to write on policy issues when governments say they will change. It is a way to make them accountable to the people they claim to represent, as most of the time they never change anything once they are in office.*

Another KC wrote about the then new website of the UN Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa and how it was not appropriate for most Africans living with HIV. The Special Envoy, Elizabeth Mataka, signed up to the KC website and responded to the KC's concerns thus opening up a direct dialogue between the grassroots and UN-level decision makers.

### **Managing tensions**

When you encourage people to speak, you will inevitably receive a wide range of opinions which may be contradictory, or in some cases may not fit in with what the

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://tinyurl.com/caring-within>. Full URL: [www.nac.org.zw/sites/default/files/Caring-from-within-Zimbabwe%28HBC-findings-and-policy-recommendations.pdf](http://www.nac.org.zw/sites/default/files/Caring-from-within-Zimbabwe%28HBC-findings-and-policy-recommendations.pdf)

Photo: Alice Klein



**Key Correspondents discuss how to structure a news story during a training in Kampala, Uganda.**

Alliance considers to be good practice. For example, the Alliance works with most-at-risk-populations including men who have sex with men, transgender and sex workers. So when the Ugandan government proposed anti-homosexuality legislation, there was deep concern at the prospect of the country's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community being further stigmatised and even criminalised. However a number of KCs agreed with the proposed bill and one used the website to air their personal homophobic opinions on the matter, which were in direct conflict with the Alliance's view.

In this kind of situation, we aim to balance agendas and encourage more objective, evidence-based reporting. In this specific case, Alliance staff and other KCs

suggested sources of alternative information and the author was receptive to this feedback and changed the story so it was less likely to present a conflict of opinion. It enabled us to engage on and debate the issues in a way that simply repressing differences of opinion never could.

In other cases, KCs present alternative theories which – while in conflict with Alliance views – stimulate Alliance staff to consider different arguments. For example, while the Alliance's policy department was busy working on the UK Robin Hood Tax campaign, demanding more money be spent on HIV treatment, a KC in Zambia wrote that too much money has been spent on HIV at the expense of other infectious diseases such as malaria.<sup>4</sup> By presenting alternative viewpoints, KCs give Alliance

<sup>4</sup> The idea behind the Robin Hood Tax campaign is to generate billions of pounds by fairer taxation of the financial sector. That money would help to fight poverty in the UK and overseas and help tackle climate change. The Alliance has been campaigning to ensure increased financing for development, and health and HIV in particular, through a levy on currency transactions. See: <http://robinhoodtax.org>

staff an opportunity to learn about different cultures and political contexts. So while there are occasional differences between the opinions of some of the KCs and those of the host organisations, these are infrequent and manageable. More importantly, they allow for an exchange of ideas, often sparking internal debate and discussion which can include organisational decision makers.

### Conclusion

The programme has enjoyed a range of successes including a steadily increasing number of articles produced and the quality of their content. Importantly, the programme empowers KCs to speak for themselves and expose the issues experienced by people living with or affected by HIV. It can therefore highlight the gaps between reality and policy and act as an effective policy advocacy tool. As one KC stated in the 2010 Annual Survey:

*Being a KC is important as it has allowed me to highlight issues which are affecting the people who are voiceless, whose plight would not have otherwise been heard had I not written about it.*

The Alliance supports the KC programme in order to diversify the voices informing debates and decisions around people living with HIV. Fundamentally, the KC programme engages the very people who are affected by something, yet not normally able to access the discussions and decisions about it. The model could just as well be applied to other contexts where a marginalised group seeks to develop a voice and/or influence decision-making.

It could also be adapted for internal processes in other organisations and contexts. So the model of KCs capturing community level information and feeding this up into decision-making processes could be transferred from an external policy to an internal knowledge-sharing context. This may involve training frontline or partner organisations' staff – in order to widen the pool of KCs – and getting them to report on the issues and experiences arising from field programmes. Then INGO senior management would be able to listen and learn directly from the communities they purport to serve and involve them more directly in decision-making processes.

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### NOTES

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# Stories, critical analysis and learning in ActionAid

# 6

by KATE CARROLL

## Introduction

As an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) ActionAid works with a broad spectrum of development actors – from community groups and public campaigners to trade unions, corporations and government. Much valuable knowledge and information is generated and shared through these interactions. This puts ActionAid in a strong position to support knowledge flows between stakeholders in development, and with the appropriate spaces for learning and reflection, it gives rich material for organisational learning and using learning to strengthen practice.

ActionAid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) guides staff at each level of the organisation to undertake regular reflection and learning – and suggests methodologies for doing so. ActionAid has developed various methods to encourage the documenting and sharing of its work (as well as development issues) from different perspectives. Several methodologies use stories, or narrative, to illustrate key issues and approaches in their context. Some of

these stories are developed by staff working directly with communities, others by consultants or staff from headquarters. In this article, I explore why and how ActionAid gathers and shares stories of practice – and how much they feed into organisational learning and decision-making.

## Sharing and learning through stories

ActionAid uses different methodologies for developing stories, each involving different people and perspectives and each designed for a different audience or objective. Some prioritise stakeholder learning and reflection. Others aim more at informing the reader.

## Frontline Stories: reflection, writing and critical analysis

Frontline Stories of Change are written by the staff most intimately connected to ActionAid's work in the field to examine and document ActionAid's human rights-based work (see Box 1). They highlight successes but also raise critical questions and suggestions for how ActionAid might deepen its work and achieve greater impact.

**Box 1: ActionAid's human rights-based approach (HRBA)**

ActionAid's emphasis on **human** rights aims to highlight how rights legitimately belong to every person by virtue of their being born. These rights are independent of a person's sex, religion, race, sexual orientation, where they live or any other status. They cannot be given or taken away. All human beings are equally entitled to human rights without discrimination.

ActionAid believes that:

- poverty is a violation of human rights;
- poverty arises principally because human rights have been denied; and
- if we are to end poverty then we must protect, promote and fulfill the human rights of poor and excluded people.

There is no 'one size fits all' recipe for HRBA. ActionAid's main strategies are to empower poor people (rights holders) to claim their rights and to hold accountable those people and institutions (duty bearers) meant to deliver those rights.

ActionAid achieves this through:

- empowerment activities
- solidarity activities
- advocacy and campaigning activities

Throughout its work ActionAid has an explicit focus on women's rights.

**Source: *Action on rights: human rights based resource book* (ActionAid, 2010).**

The process aims to empower staff with confidence to write powerfully, think critically and work creatively, as much as document and share their story. The stories are produced through critical writing retreats and mentoring and peer support. These stories do not directly involve communities, rather they are field staff reflections on their own interactions. Although the main aim is field worker self reflection and empowerment, reflections and learnings are also shared widely with other staff at the national level and with international colleagues to ensure wider awareness of ActionAid's work.

If approached with awareness, writing can deepen reflection and analysis. It can help both the reader and writer to understand the complex contexts in which we operate. It can link our experiences and discussions to learning and planning. ActionAid's Impact Assessment and Shared

Learning team (IASL) support staff to build their writing skills, deepen analytical thinking and document their experiences of implementing a human rights-based approach. As they write, staff are supported to ask new questions about their work, and receive new ideas and new tools for analysing and reflecting on practice. The Frontline Stories of Change initiative has taken place through a series of retreats, firstly at sub-regional level and then nationally. Most recently an international training of facilitators of critical writing has taken place, aimed to support future processes.

Participants choose a change in which they've been involved to write about. Although many choose to base their stories on 'successes' the process brings in critical analysis to support participants to step back from their work and adopt a more critical eye. Writers are mentored by a 'content person' and later by a content and copy editor who accompanies the writing. Mentors pose critical questions, help sharpen analysis and lead the writer to relevant resource materials. Stories are stored publically with suggestions for use, for example for advocacy or training, to provoke debate or support fundraising.

### Critical Stories of Change: acting on reflection

Critical Stories of Change are written and facilitated by consultants or staff on secondment, for in-depth critical analysis of how change happens. It is important that the person writing is removed from the work and so able to ask critical questions. They explore changes in a particular context and look at ActionAid's role within that. The Critical Stories of Change methodology is a useful learning tool, bringing to the debate a critical analysis of how human rights-based change takes place and the challenges, as well as facilitating reflection. The published stories are used for internal sharing, and also for advocacy, communication and evaluation processes.

To develop a critical story, the writer spends time with key stakeholders in the

Photo: ActionAid



ActionAid fellows in Myanmar, from the Critical Story of Change 'Let's do it together for our village'.

different contexts related to the project, facilitating discussions to uncover the key drivers of change, and at the same time challenging stakeholders to analyse the change more deeply. This in itself brings about change. In Uganda for example, participants appreciated this chance to stop and reflect:

*We were challenged to think ... to trace our footsteps and think 'who is it that we are?' Our eyes were sharply opened, a very important learning experience... In Uganda, [it is] rare to reflect on practice and offer it up to others...*

But it is not only the process which is important to embed the learning. The narrative of a story product is memorable and engaging, as well as thought-provoking. Not only do critical stories show the critical change, but they also show **how** the change is happening. This is important for readers in other parts of ActionAid who have to try to understand, and explain, the

changes in which ActionAid is involved from a distance. The Uganda participants reflected that the story of their work was: 'a very good product to challenge the NGOs on the course they are taking...' In an evaluation of ActionAid's critical stories, readers suggested that the style of stories of change 'allows for a much more in-depth analysis of the problem' which captures people's attitudes.<sup>1</sup> The story format was described as 'powerful', 'honest', 'innovative', 'engaging' and 'reflective'. These descriptions differentiate Critical Stories of Change from more mainstream reports which tend to be more dry. The fact that Critical Stories are easier to read means that they are more effective organisational learning tools. The stories are distributed internally over the intranet and externally via distribution lists. Whilst they are not part of a formal organisational learning and change process, they are read by individuals who then use the messages and lessons from the stories in their own planning processes.

<sup>1</sup> For more knowledge and guidance materials around how to manage a Critical Story of Change process email: [kate.carroll@actionaid.org](mailto:kate.carroll@actionaid.org)

### Case studies: illustrating the work we do

Case studies are true stories with quotes about a real individual linked to an ActionAid programme or area of work. They include a detailed description of their situation, challenges and problems and how these are – or could be – tackled. They are usually written by ActionAid's communications staff for campaign and media work, and are drawn on by staff for their reports. They are less used for in-depth organisational learning than stories since they do not explore the challenges and complexities of change. However, they do offer an insight into ActionAid's work and so are useful as illustrative examples, particularly for fundraising.

Case studies are less reflective than stories and tend to outline the 'what' of change rather than the 'how'. Their value is as a product and tends not to challenge the reader nor the participants critically, or provoke reflections on the wider context for the change process. ActionAid tends to use stories more for knowledge building internally and externally, whereas case studies are more used for communications and media for information sharing.<sup>2</sup>

### Challenges in developing and learning from stories

The potential for learning in ActionAid is present – and curiosity is supported. This is in part **personal**: people are passionate about the work they do and interested in knotty questions, even when they are not directly related to their work. It also relates to **organisational structure**, which is relatively loose and allows people to pioneer work they believe in, and our **processes for learning and reflection**, as set out in ALPS. But there are challenges to sharing learning, not least due to the wide range of work and contexts and large numbers of people involved.

We have reflected on some of the challenges we encountered in developing stories and linking them to organisational learn-

ing, and came up with some pointers to strengthening that link.

### Building an effective team for Critical Stories of Change

There can be tensions in the process of defining and documenting a story, because everyone involved will have a different political perspective and emotional involvement regarding how a change happened. Potential tensions are best resolved through good communication and collaboration. For example, in Myanmar, the critical story process involved the whole staff team in reflection, and the subsequent review and editing of the story. They reported that their own understanding of the issue (the fellowship process) expanded as a result of their involvement.

### Support the space for ongoing reflection for all stories

The space created by a story process – the meetings and dialogues leading up to, during and following the writing and participatory research – allows people with different experiences of development to share their perceptions. This generates new knowledge as people question each others' experience. In an organisation with a relatively flat structure, and where decision makers are involved in such spaces, the knowledge generated can influence decision-making and organisational working. The challenge however, is to create space for reflection and discussion beyond the story research and writing process.

### Valuing internal learning generally

If ActionAid is to seriously value the potential of reading and writing for reflection and learning, then these skills and activities have to be supported, developed and valued. Staff often feel too busy for reflection and writing, or unable to prioritise it as they move from one activity to the next. But hiring a consultant to develop a process, without the strong involvement of staff members, can under-

<sup>2</sup> For more information see: 'What is the difference between a case study and a Critical Story of Change?' (ActionAid, 2008) or email: kate.carroll@actionaid.org for this note.

mine links to local learning and make it difficult to ensure that learning feeds into organisational decision-making. A good compromise in this case can be bringing in a consultant linked to a national research institute or learning centre who will work with ActionAid in the long term. This should help learning to be developed together for the benefit of both organisations. More generally, it would be helpful if story gathering were more central to organisational planning and reflection processes. Currently it is a requirement to gather stories to illustrate the organisational annual report but it would be good to see this annual process take place at different times throughout the year.

#### Valuing more in-depth change processes

The demand from our international secretariat tends to be for case studies, which are considered less of a burden on country programme staff and simpler for communicating our work. But as they are less analytical and participatory, they are less likely to feed into organisational learning or influence change. We have to advocate for the use of more reflective methods of understanding and communicating our work, providing examples of their effective use.

#### Creating evidence of the impact of stories

Related to the last point, despite the potential of stories to influence learning, we don't have any clear evidence of them changing practice. The evidence is not available because it has not been collected, and this is, in large part, because writing and distrib-

uting stories is seen as an end in itself, rather than the start of a change process. We need to recognise the role of reflection and the resulting stories in changing practice and opening up spaces for more honest communication of our work. This could be created through the setting up of informal learning and reflection spaces for all staff. For example, ActionAid UK hold regular 'learning circles' to share examples of good practice and thinking. In addition, we need to better monitor the impact of our stories. This might require not only recording who reads the stories, but also following up with these readers to ask what they have learnt and how they have used their learning.

#### Sharing stories widely and strategically

The stories ActionAid produces are shared and read through websites and its internal intranet. People use them to learn about, and explain, ActionAid's work. Fundraisers use them to communicate work to donors, to show how ActionAid works and makes a difference. Of Critical Stories of Change they report that donors 'think it's a great initiative and really useful'. The readers will get a nuanced understanding of our work, and this may influence the way they think or plan. However, the formal links between the stories and our organisational learning could be stronger. For example, if stories were integrated into our routine processes of reflection, review and planning. Stories should be distributed more widely and strategically, and linked more closely to other learning processes.

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# 7 Who's leading who? The power of partnerships

by ROSE McCAUSLAND

I sometimes wonder how the police woman we met to discuss our idea for a participatory video project sold it to her boss...

'Living Lens want to produce a training video for us on trafficking.'<sup>1</sup>

*'Oh yes, what will it be about?'*

'Well I'm not really sure, but it will involve women who've been trafficked, they'll make it.'

*'The women will make the film?'*

'Yes!'

*'Are they film makers?'*

'No!'

*'Do you know what they're going to say?'*

'No!'

*'Do you think it will be any good?'*

'No idea!'

*'OK let's do it!'*

There's an unavoidable risk in taking on a participatory video project that aims to produce a usable product at the end of it – how can a process be participatory and guarantee quality output? The very nature of the participatory process means that the participants, in this case survivors of sex trafficking, devise the content and shoot the film themselves. What they want to say to the Metropolitan Police may not be what the Metropolitan Police want to hear, let alone use as a tool in their existing training programme on trafficking.<sup>2</sup> Approaching this kind of project raises the question: 'Who's leading who?'

To me a successful participatory process does not have to ensure that every aspect of the project is 100% participatory to present the authentic voice of the participants. And in any case, it is rare to find funders

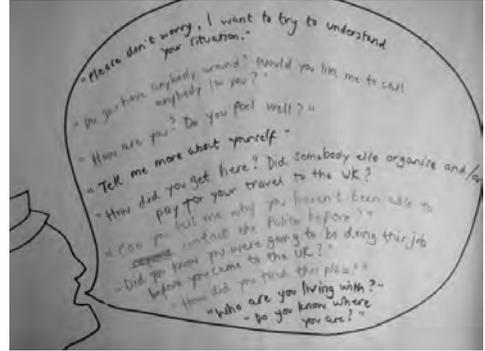
<sup>1</sup> Living Lens has been using video as a creative tool with groups in the UK and other countries for over eight years. Living Lens started off with local projects and now run national and international projects. We use video as a tool to mobilise groups and individuals to explore the issues that bring them together. Our projects open new channels of communication and build productive partnerships. See: <http://livinglens.blogspot.com>

<sup>2</sup> The Metropolitan Police are the police force for London (also sometimes referred to as 'the Met').

Photo: Living Lens



**Contribution Flower** – used as a tool in Fresh Start to allow participants to reflect on what they were contributing to the process and the team. Flowers can be used as a display over time to give a sense of the continuity and diversity of contribution within the team.



**Display from Fresh Start presenting the questions that the women wanted the Police to ask victims of trafficking on first point of contact. These questions were included in the video and later incorporated into Metropolitan Police protocol for interviews at first point of contact.**

who are willing to fund a project such as this, simply because of the time it takes and therefore the size of the budget. What is vital, is that it is clear to all participants and project partners what aspects of the project are 100% participatory and what aspects are not. Charting the project along the participatory continuum allows everyone involved to understand the limitations and opportunities of their involvement and the risks involved.

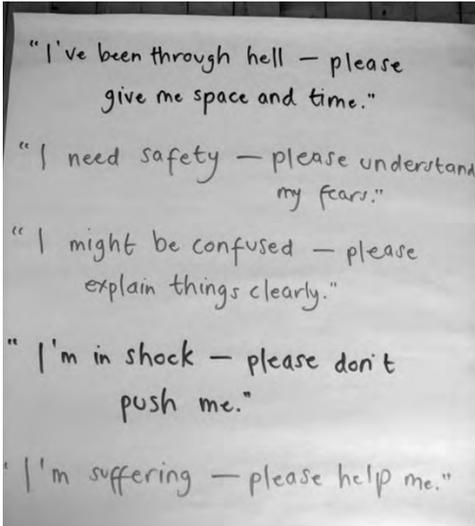
### Creating a safe space for trafficked women to talk

Our conversations with survivors of trafficking and their service providers, and reading of relevant literature, highlighted key needs which we sought to address through the Fresh Start project. Many survivors of trafficking have insecure immigration status, are socially marginalised, stigmatised and very afraid of the consequences of speaking out. They are often unaware of the support available to them. They need a safe space to articulate their experiences, views and needs and to access relevant information. They also need the chance to build skills for their economic and social reintegration. Meanwhile, police training on how to deal with victims of trafficking has been, arguably, uncoordinated and incoherent.

In the light of this, Living Lens set up the Fresh Start project, with funding from Comic Relief, to work with trafficked women to gain confidence and self-esteem, build key skills, reduce their sense of marginalisation and support them in contributing to positive social change. The Metropolitan Police agreed to be involved in the process and use the resulting DVD in their training. This link was very important. We needed to understand the needs of the Police in order to work with the trafficked women effectively. The Police needed to understand the production process with the women to have a realistic idea of how best to integrate the women's film into their training. We committed to ensuring this dialogue continued throughout the project, but we wondered if it was also going to be complicated to manage the needs and interests of two such different groups.

### Bridging gaps and building relationships?

We knew that in order for the DVD to be useful – and therefore used – we needed to create collaboration between the women and Police, but without them ever meeting. For us to feel confident that we could deliver, we had to set up a strong project team – and this required building



**Display from Fresh Start revealing what women thought when first dealing with the Police.**



**One of the cameras used by women during the Fresh Start project.**

Photo: Living Lens

some unlikely partnerships. At this point the women's view of the Police was negative. To them, they were part of the problem. As a result those working with the women (service providers and NGOs) often took a similar view. To bring together a project team that included members of these groups was a risk, but one we were willing to take. What the project team could provide was different points of view that needed to be taken into account to make the project a success. If they could work in collaboration, we'd have a supporting process that would allow the women to lead in the production of the film and ensure that we could deliver a quality resource to the Police.

The meetings of the project team were unexpected and inspiring. An NGO worker turned to me after the first one and said, 'Wow, I've never had a meeting like that with the Police'. Perceptions started to change and opportunities opened up. Creating an on-going conversation ensured that we could structure the workshops in a way that met the needs of the participants and the Police. All of the project team were able to feed ideas into the process and

this improved the quality of our work. It also transformed the women's opinion of the Police. In hearing about the Police's commitment to the project, the women could see their willingness to learn and improve their ways of working. At the end of the project, one woman reflected, '[the project] boosted my trust, I had a problem trusting people, this has changed my perspective.'

This is a powerful outcome for a PV project, but I recognise that she was not the only one to experience this. An unexpected outcome of the project was that, as a result of the women's film, the Met revised their interview protocol. This is testimony to the power of PV and the courageous work of the women. The fact that the Police asked the project team to work with them on this is testimony to the willingness of people to set aside their differences and learn from one another to find successful solutions that benefit everybody.

I believe a PV project has the potential to leave everyone involved – participants and project team members – with a renewed confidence in what they have to contribute. Through building relationships and mediating between groups, the ques-

tion moves away from 'Who is **leading** the process', into 'How can everyone **contribute** to the process'? In our experience at Living Lens it is when someone

understands their contribution and can recognise the contribution of others that they are able to work collaboratively to find successful solutions together.

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## 8

## Digital Storytelling

by TESSA LEWIN

**Introduction**

We know that good communication is a two-way process. To engage the public and have an impact on the people who shape policy we need real stories, told by people in their own words, on their own terms. But there is an inherent tension between making a communication product that speaks for itself – which is powerful enough to elicit a strong emotional response from an audience or change their views – and one where the emphasis is on the integrity of the process. A process that is concerned with engagement and voice has participation at its core. A process overly concerned with the quality of the final product will privilege this end at the expense of the means by which it is arrived.

New digital tools somewhat change this as, for example, they make constructing visual arguments more accessible and affordable to ‘non-experts’. But producing fantastic products from truly participatory processes is just the beginning. How do we then get the right people with influence to



Photo: Tessa Lewin

**A story circle at a Dhaka workshop.**

see or hear these arguments? And how do we ensure that desired changes are then made?

This article looks at a particular participatory methodology – Digital Storytelling (DST) – and how it can be used in a development setting to draw out stories and engage both storytellers and their future audiences. Through this example, I examine the extent to which it is possible to practice communication that is both truly participatory and produces ‘useable’ results – communication as engagement rather than communication as marketing.

Participatory processes such as DST

Photo: Tessa Lewin



Participants building their egg mobile in the 'egg game' icebreaker at a Dhaka workshop.

allow NGOs to listen to, and learn from, the people and the communities with whom they work. They also enable these NGOs to use these stories to lobby and advocate on particular issues. For NGOs interested in increasing awareness and understanding of a particular issue, or in genuinely exploring how best they can support the communities with whom they work, DST offers a fun and empowering means.<sup>1</sup>

### What is Digital Storytelling?

Digital Storytelling is a methodology that was developed in the mid-90s at the Centre for Digital Storytelling in San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> It has been widely used since then by activists, researchers and artists. The

process involves intensive workshops during which participants develop a personal narrative, usually around three minutes long. They then record and illustrate this narrative with still images or photographs. The final product is a short film, which has been produced and edited by the narrator. A first person voice is used in the narration.

Pathways of Women's Empowerment is an international research consortium that uses creative communication at every stage, both to broaden engagement and to synthesise ideas for influence.<sup>3</sup> In November 2008, the Pathways communication team was involved in the Feminist Technology Exchange instigated by APC (the Association for Progressive Communica-

<sup>1</sup> There are numerous online resources on Digital Storytelling. See e.g.: <http://tinyurl.com/dst-10-steps>. Full URL: [www.socialbrite.org/2010/07/15/digital-storytelling-a-tutorial-in-10-easy-steps](http://www.socialbrite.org/2010/07/15/digital-storytelling-a-tutorial-in-10-easy-steps) and [www.storycenter.org/cookbook.pdf](http://www.storycenter.org/cookbook.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Every element of this process is 'digital' – i.e. enabled by computer technology – and participants are able themselves to control each stage. It is the access to relatively affordable technology that has made this methodology possible.

<sup>3</sup> The consortium comprises activists and researchers based at universities and research units in South Asia, Latin America, West Africa and the Middle East – more details can be found at [www.pathwaysofempowerment.org](http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org)

Photo: Tessa Lewin



Participant working on her storyboard.

tions). Two members of the team took part in the Digital Storytelling track and were so profoundly impressed by the experience and the methodology, that they began lobbying within Pathways to launch our own digital story project.

DST is both about enabling people to tell stories and enabling others to listen to those stories. The combination of visual images and first person audio narrative is compelling. It is hard not to listen to these stories, and they are generally far more accessible than the academic or legal documents that often articulate policy debates. Some argue that Digital Storytelling is a 'feminist' methodology, in that research participants control the way in which their stories are represented, and through the process learn new skills (see Box 1). So researchers are 'giving back' to the participants, not merely extracting data for their research. Digital Storytelling has often

### Box 1: DST – a 'feminist' methodology?

There is much debate about whether or not it is possible to call a methodology feminist. Without going into details of the debate, I believe that there are tools that can be used in feminist ways, to protect and promote women's human rights. Digital storytelling lends itself extremely well to feminist projects. The process of women creating their own digital story is designed to transform their 'inner' embodied worlds, as well as have an impact on 'outer' material or structural conditions. In articulating their stories, the women are developing both technical and creative skills, and confidence.

The collaborative nature of the workshops, and the sharing of each other's stories, helps the women develop a sense of solidarity with each other. They are 'not alone' in their struggles. This kind of transformative learning process follows in the tradition of Freire and others, who see the development of personal critical consciousness as a necessary precursor to action for social change.

been used with groups that have experienced stigma or violence. They experience the process of telling and constructing their narratives as therapeutic, empowering and solidarity-building. In southern Africa, for example, workshops have been held for people affected by the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS.<sup>4</sup> In Palestine, workshops have been held with marginalised youth in refugee camps.<sup>5</sup>

### Digital Storytelling workshops – introducing the methodology

The Pathways team first used the methodology in Bangladesh in 2009. We ran three Digital Storytelling workshops, facilitated by an international team, between November 2009 and February 2010: two in Dhaka and one in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Participants included Pathways researchers from Dhaka, university students, local government officials,

<sup>4</sup> This was part of an initiative funded by the Open Society working with the Centre for Digital Storytelling and Women's Net. More details can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/sa-hiv-workshop>. Full URL: [http://storiesforchange.net/event/open\\_society\\_initiative\\_for\\_southern\\_africa\\_hiv\\_stigma\\_workshop](http://storiesforchange.net/event/open_society_initiative_for_southern_africa_hiv_stigma_workshop).

<sup>5</sup> Voices Beyond Walls project. See: [www.cs.uiowa.edu/~hourcade/idc-workshop/sawhney.pdf](http://www.cs.uiowa.edu/~hourcade/idc-workshop/sawhney.pdf) and [www.voicesbeyondwalls.org](http://www.voicesbeyondwalls.org)

women's rights activists, peace activists, staff of local NGOs and performers from the Chittagong Hill Tracts.<sup>6</sup>

The three workshops enabled participants to learn about the methods and develop their own digital stories. People learnt through doing: creating, editing and showing their own digital stories together. Participants were told about the process before the workshops. They were asked to think through possible stories and bring relevant materials with them (such as photographs). Where this was not possible, participants drew illustrations to accompany their stories, or persuaded their colleagues to do so. Some participants also took photographs at the workshop.

After initial icebreakers, participants were introduced to the Digital Storytelling process and shown several digital stories showcasing a variety of narrative devices. While showing digital stories we talked about confidentiality and ethics and discussed what might happen to the stories after the workshop. We also looked at how other organisations had used stories in different contexts. In the workshop for Pathways researchers, we also introduced various DST web resources and looked in-depth at the history of its development as a methodology, anticipating that they might use DST in their future work.

We were nervous about showing too many completed stories for fear of influencing participants' own presentations of their stories. However, we all agreed afterwards that we could have shown more, as the discussions that came out of the screenings were extremely useful, and the participants found the stories inspiring rather than prescriptive.

### Creating digital stories

The story circle is the point in the workshops when participants start to get their teeth into the process. The idea is that through publicly articulating the story it

#### Box 2: Digital story workshops: the basic steps

- **Ice breaker:** relaxing the participants and getting them to feel more comfortable with the facilitators and other participants.
- **Explaining the process:** looking at examples of digital stories. There is always debate amongst facilitators about the timing of this – some feel that it is important to give participants concrete examples of what they will be doing, others feel that this may overly influence participants' creativity.
- **Story circle:** participants outline their ideas to the group – normally followed by small group work where participants refine and structure their narrative. This process is very important and it is vital to spend enough time on it so that participants are happy with their stories.
- **Recording the audio narrative:** This is usually done using a voice recorder and some basic audio software (Audacity is the most popular free, open source software).
- **Storyboarding:** Working out which images to use at which stage of the story.
- **Editing:** putting the audio and the images together – most commonly done using Windows Movie Maker.
- **Rendering:** Exporting the final story as a movie file that can be uploaded or copied.

begins to emerge and, as others respond to it and participants pick up on new ideas and narrative devices, their stories are refined.

Each participant outlined their broad ideas for their story to the rest of the group and then fleshed out the details of the story in smaller groups or pairs. Often the stories that people ended up telling were not the ones that they set out to tell.

Once participants had structured, written and edited their stories, or shared them with others in the group, they rehearsed and recorded themselves narrating their story. Meanwhile, others began the search for supporting visual material and music (bearing copyright issues in mind). Participants who didn't have photographs used this time to illustrate their stories.

With a clear sense of their story structure, and with the necessary audio

<sup>6</sup> More details about the Chittagong workshop and the stories can be found here: [www.thedailystar.net/magazine/2010/06/02/education.htm](http://www.thedailystar.net/magazine/2010/06/02/education.htm)



Photo: Tessa Lewin

Sohela Nazneen discusses story structure in one of the Dhaka story circles.

segments recorded, we began the editing process. In some workshops, participants created a storyboard of the visuals in preparation for the edit. Editing was done using Windows Movie Maker, as it is the most common simple video-editing tool.

The last phase of the process was often rather frenetic, as people struggled to put the final touches to their creations. But we learnt to make sure to keep enough time for screening, as this gives participants valuable insight into the thoughts of the other participants – and the benefit of seeing their own story on screen in public, which is always a moving experience. We also found it worthwhile to keep time aside to talk through the stories and facilitate a group discussion about their feedback and reactions.

### What we learnt about the process of storytelling

The DST process allows a reflective space that not many people are given, or able to take time for. Beyond that, the act of telling one's story can be healing and empower-

ing. Participants actively construct and reconstruct themselves and their stories through the process of narration. And then the stories are shared, and the 'audience' take the narrator seriously – the feeling that one is being actively listened to is profoundly important.

As with every truly participatory process, getting the best out of DST takes commitment. It involves people using unfamiliar technology and developing personal stories, which takes time. Our first two workshops were compressed into three days, which was not long enough. The next workshop was five days long and much more coherent as a result. It is also worth budgeting additional time for the unexpected technical hitches that invariably accompany the use of technical equipment. Seven out of the eleven computers in the Chittagong computer laboratory could not be used.

Another interesting element of the DST project process was how it disrupted our own organisation's age and power hierarchies. Junior members of the team



Photo: Tessa Lewin

Team celebrates egg landing in the 'egg game' icebreaker, Dhaka.

in Bangladesh led the project and taught the senior researchers. Because younger team members were more confident with the technology, the usual age hierarchies were reversed. I would argue that this shift had implications beyond the DST workshop, in increasing both the confidence of the younger members of the team and the older members' respect for their work.

### Using the digital stories

I have talked about the process and why it is valuable, but what about the product? The end result is usually a short video, made by a first-time director, often one who has never used video or computer equipment before. It is not the technical quality but the content which has most impact. What is interesting about these stories is related to the positionality of their creators.

So far, the stories generated through Pathways of Women's Empowerment have been used to give policy makers a sense of the textured, everyday reality of the women

storytellers, from a variety of backgrounds. But using the stories can be tricky, especially when moving to different contexts. One highly entertaining story, generated at a workshop in Dhaka, was not considered appropriate to show to participants in the Chittagong Hill Tracts because the narrator was 'too upper class' and therefore her story would not resonate with the participants. Another story, though aesthetically beautiful, was seen as 'too flat', with little dramatic tension or direct linkage to 'policy' or 'research' issues. In one of the Chittagong stories, there was a disjuncture between one narrator's understanding of history, in particular local violence, and the researchers' understanding of that history. The researchers felt that using the story could both compromise the researchers, and possibly incite political unrest.

In all of these cases, the fact that the final product was not necessarily of use to Pathways in a particular context does not undermine the significance of the process of their production.

However, it is worth bearing in mind that if a research or communication process is to be truly participatory and yield a 'useful' product, it is likely that the process will need to be iterative and time consuming. If the audio narrative of a digital story is well recorded, it is always possible to spend time after the workshop refining the video edit. Some of the participants we worked with, who had access to computers outside the workshop setting, planned to 'perfect' their stories on their own, after the workshop. It would have been useful to have the resources to do this with them and to further 'polish' the visual elements of the digital stories.

### The impact and influence of digital stories

People are inherently story-driven – the way we understand the world is through narrative. First person stories are very powerful and emotive, particularly when they offer us a view on the world that we have not encountered previously. Because there are so few authentic indigenous voices in mainstream media, DST provides us with genuine, non-stereotypical and often unexpected representations of people, gender roles and relationships. These representations often contradict dominant images of both men and women. These stories should not be seen as just anecdotal but as a potential source of change for both creators and viewers. If they can be used to support, amplify or better articulate a policy campaign then they can be extremely influential.

There is a growing body of literature asserting the importance of using non-text-based policy arguments. In a policy culture where women and girls in particular are increasingly identified as drivers of – or responsible for – broad social change rather than as individuals with their own needs and differences, and where 'evidence'

means statistical, quantitative data, bringing real people back into the picture seems ever more important. Understanding and articulating the specific, nuanced stories of individual injustices are vital if we are to make any progress towards substantive and sustainable social change. Otherwise ordinary people are in danger of being rendered invisible by the very people who purport to act on their behalf.

How you assess the capacity of Digital Storytelling as a process to catalyse or create change depends to a large degree on your theory of change. Most practitioners accept that policy change happens both in formal 'policy spaces' and in the broader environment within which these 'spaces' sit. If I want to influence change around a particular issue I need to address not only these formal spaces, but also their broader environment. There are numerous cases of new legislation, for example, which cannot be adequately implemented because the social environment within which it operates is not adequately receptive to the changes. South Africa's progressive constitution is a good example of this. It was the first in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation. This has not, however, stopped the horrific cases of 'corrective rape' that continue to be a threat to South African lesbians.

Another example is the legal reform *khul* in Egypt – which gives women access to a 'no fault' divorce, provided they give up their financial rights. *Khul* has helped some women extract themselves from abusive marriages. But divorce, including *khul*, is still very taboo in Egypt. 'It's important as a rights-giving mechanism – but what can it do to change how people think about gender norms?'<sup>7</sup>

Because of Digital Storytelling's emotive power and its participatory approach, it is an excellent tool to build awareness, strengthen groups with a shared agenda or

<sup>7</sup> Mulki Al-Sharmani talking at the Birds Eye View film festival in 2011 about her research on Islamic legal reform in Egypt. See: [www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/Familycourts.pdf](http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/Familycourts.pdf).



Photo: Pathways, Bangladesh

All participants and trainers from the two Pathways digital storytelling workshops after the final screening, Dhaka.

facilitate mutual understanding amongst those who do not. Women's Net and the Sonke Gender Justice Network in South Africa have used DST to address complex issues around gender and HIV/AIDS. Their work with digital stories has helped to build community solidarity, break down prejudices, facilitate public debate and inform organisational priorities, approaches and policies.

In Uganda, Engender Health (with Silence Speaks and St. Joseph's Hospital) has used DST in communities with genital fistula to develop nuanced policy implementation strategies that have at their heart a strong understanding of the many and varied factors that affect these women.<sup>8</sup> DST has been used similarly to inform approaches to mental health problems in the UK National Health Service (NHS)

and to explore the complex dynamics of institutionalised racism in the US.

### DST, learning and change

Through constructing a story, narrators are pushed to articulate a position in an engaging and efficient way. This process is likely to help clarify their thoughts and in doing so lead to further engagement or action. Participants regularly set out to tell a particular story and then, to their surprise, find themselves telling another one entirely. This can be extremely revealing as to where their true convictions lie. Freidus and Hlubinka (2002) talk about how through the group working alongside each other crafting their digital stories and influencing each other, there is often a meta narrative that develops in the group.

<sup>8</sup> Genital fistula is a painful and uncomfortable condition, usually caused by difficult childbirth, and that leaves women with chronic incontinence. Read more on the storytelling project mentioned: [www.engenderhealth.org/our-work/maternal/digital-stories-uganda-fistula.php](http://www.engenderhealth.org/our-work/maternal/digital-stories-uganda-fistula.php)

DST genuinely has the capacity to contribute to community building, through the space it offers for reflection and through the process within a group. But it is also because the story can then be shared. By giving people a platform and tools to articulate a personal story, DST can in itself be transformative, particularly in severely marginalised communities – not only for the storyteller, but for their friends, family, colleagues or NGO workers and activists fortunate enough to see it.

The potential for DST to impact on people's immediate social environments and their individual capacity to make change is fairly clear. They also have the potential to disrupt organisational orthodoxies and hierarchies. But as the ripples of the immediate personal impact of digital stories extend outwards, away from the original context, they tend to get weaker and less influential. The digital stories need to be supported within wider processes of lobbying or learning, and with complementary material which clearly identifies

and explains some of the issues in a broader sense.

An individual digital story can enable someone to articulate her views directly to someone on the other side of the world. This makes for very powerful viewing and does not necessarily need an intermediary to interpret and relay the material. If it is done well, it should speak for itself. Having said this, to influence organisational thinking and learning more widely, the story needs to be linked into larger processes with more voices or analysis. Advocates need to think carefully about how to talk to the issues raised by the stories, and link them to concrete concerns or perhaps broader campaigns.

As other articles in this section highlight, there are tensions inherent in using this kind of material out of context and out of the control of the narrator/editor. But with care and respect, the power of these digital stories can have enormous value to organisational and individual processes of learning and understanding.

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# Bridges to understanding and action: using stories to negotiate meaning across community boundaries

# 9

by CYNTHIA KURTZ and STEPHEN SHIMSHOCK

## Introduction

Community change often involves many perspectives. Some people might be primary benefactors of an improvement. Some might implement, maintain or promote it. Some might come to the community with resources and a desire to help. How can these perspectives come together to develop a shared understanding and a common plan of action to make the improvement a reality?

Bridges help us cross chasms and safely travel from one area of solid ground to another. In the same way, stories can bridge chasms between perspectives and create spaces for shared understanding and action. Since ancient times, people have used everyday stories of personal experience as social devices for the ritualised negotiation of meaning. Like protective packages, stories help us share feelings, beliefs and opinions without exposure to direct attack. Stories **unite** communities by building shared identities and transmitting unspoken rules with gentle strength – and they can **mediate**

between communities by communicating values and beliefs without making claims to absolute truth.

Stories can also help us map out new bridge building sites. The suspension of disbelief that takes place when a story is told helps people use stories to explore complex, difficult and even strange or taboo issues at the outer edges of community life. Stories **define** communities by establishing, and revisiting, where they begin and end; and they can **survey** the spaces between communities by revealing where they overlap and where they stand far apart.

And stories can help us build better bridges. While stories can explain ‘the way things are’ and support stabilising norms, they can also confront hidden assumptions and examine long-held beliefs. Stories **challenge** communities by enabling transitions and welcoming new ideas and they can also **revitalise** communications between communities by overturning assumptions that hamper fruitful innovation.

## Developing a community story project

Several approaches are available to work with stories, including Appreciative Inquiry, Most Significant Change (MSC) and various forms of participatory community theatre.<sup>1</sup> These are all useful and recommended. Here we draw on our experiences with Participatory Narrative Inquiry, but our observations apply to any approach that focuses on listening to and working with stories (see Box 1).

Rarely is everyone in a community equally willing or able to work with stories, so most story work involves some degree of facilitation by people who have the knowledge, experience, skill, time and dedication to make the project work. In this article we assume that you either want to facilitate story work for your own community or want to help someone else do this. To avoid confusion, we will speak primarily to those who want to facilitate story work in their own communities. If you want to help someone else do this, consider how you can help them carry out the work we describe.

## The three phases of a story project

Generally speaking, any story project has three phases. They might take place within the same day or months apart. They might involve recording stories (as text, audio or video) or simply telling and listening to them – and they might happen once or many times.

### Gathering stories

People in the community recount their experiences while others listen. As a facilitator, you might help people focus on topics of concern to the community while including a diversity of perspectives. You might also ask people to reflect on their stories and annotate them with comments or answers to relevant questions. Gathering many such reflections creates aggregated

## Box 1: Participatory Narrative Inquiry

Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is an approach to helping groups of people gather and work with stories to make sense of complex situations for better decision-making. PNI emphasises raw stories of personal experience; diversity of perspectives and experiences; interpretation of stories by those who told them; catalytic pattern exploration; and narrative group sense-making. PNI is described in Cynthia's free book *Working with stories in your community or organization*, available at: [www.workingwithstories.org](http://www.workingwithstories.org)

patterns that complement and augment the experiences described in the stories.

### Working with stories

A group of people (sometimes the entire community, sometimes a subset) uses a variety of narrative methods to make sense of the stories and discover transformative insights. For example, people might build a larger composite story that incorporates many views of a time period or event in the life of the community. They might also explore what **might** have happened had things gone differently. You might help people as they go through this process of discovery.

### Returning stories

The stories go back into the community in some way, for example by providing direct access to what has been collected, by reporting on the sense-making activities that took place, or by taking informed action based on the insights gained. Again this will often be a facilitated process.

Most importantly, the goal of story work is never the **creation** of stories. It is the creation of authentic insight and understanding that leads to informed, balanced, multi-perspective decision-making. Stories are the vehicle, not the destination. A few stories of real projects will serve to illustrate.

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appreciative\\_inquiry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appreciative_inquiry) and [www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.htm](http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.htm)

### Example: story sharing for shared understanding

A collaborative group of service providers in the Western United States who serve young people leaving foster care were looking for a new way to evaluate their work. The group's previous experiences with evaluation had produced mixed results. Evaluation was expensive and failed to capture the nuances of their work.

Stephen approached the collaborative group with some ideas for using participatory narrative methods. He felt this would help to change the focus of evaluation from effectiveness to learning, centring on what the community members (service professionals and the young adults they serve) could learn together about issues affecting young people journeying into adulthood. He was keen to keep the evaluation in the hands of the community and act only as facilitator.

A subgroup of service providers and young adults helped develop some story eliciting questions and a set of semi-structured questions about the stories. Those questions were used to collect information from a larger group of service providers and young adults. After collecting over sixty stories and answers to questions about them, Stephen transcribed the stories and brought together the answers into patterns to catalyse thought. Then the service providers and young adults engaged in a day-long group session where they discussed their stories and clustered elements from them. The two groups worked separately at first to develop their own frameworks of contextual meaning based on their clusters. Then the two groups came together to share their frameworks. The process helped each group see the world through the eyes of the 'other.' Together the two groups created a list of recommendations, issues and ideas that would be used in the strategic planning process for the service providers.

This case illustrates the use of stories and story patterns to mediate between two

groups, one of which has a clear responsibility to help the other. By sharing and working with their stories together, the young adults and service providers developed new insights into how they could more effectively pursue their common goal of supporting young people on their journey to independence.

How was this evaluation different from previous evaluations? Previous inquiries looked to produce outcomes that could be replicated as best practice. But the term best practice implies that the 'best' is in the **practice**, not the practitioner, which dehumanises both the practitioner and the recipient of the practice. Instead, the participants in this project created a rich tapestry of meaning together. A final report was produced to summarise the method and findings of the project. However, the evaluation meeting served as an intervention in itself by providing an insightful experience to those who participated.

### Example: story listening for future planning

Our friend John sits on the board of a community market that has been a feature of his town for over a century. He wanted to help the board think about the market's place in the community and plan its future. He went to the market and asked people about their experiences coming there. Some had been coming for weeks, some for years, and some for decades. They all had their own perspectives and their own stories to tell. John recorded and transcribed sixty stories. He answered questions about the stories: How far people did people travel to the market? How often did they visit it? How old were they? He graphed the numbers of some answer combinations and chose patterns that seemed useful. He also picked out the stories that seemed most memorable.

John took the stories and graphs to his next board meeting. Together the group wrote down themes they saw and clustered them to show different needs of the

community. Some were surprising: cleanliness and safety were unexpectedly strong. Other themes brought out issues everyone had known about but nobody had discussed, like how much the community relied on the market's long-term presence. Fruitful discussion followed and plans were made. Long after the meeting, the board members found themselves using the themes and stories as touchstones when they needed to respond to new conditions.

In this case, the project took time and effort on John's part. Many people were involved in the project, but John played a special role. Trust was involved when people told him stories and when board members accepted his selections of patterns and stories. Would he recommend the process to others? Said John,

*Even though you will make mistakes, as long as you gather enough stories, the patterns will make themselves known. You will get useful, surprising, powerful results even if you are just starting.*

### Facilitating story work

As a facilitator in your community's storytelling project, you may need to negotiate two relationships: one between yourself and your community, and perhaps one between your community and those outside its boundaries who offer help and resources. We will start by considering your relationship to the community, since it is the foundation on which any other relationships must stand.

Any facilitator of story work must earn the right to gather and work with their community's stories by negotiating trust and demonstrating responsibility and commitment. How can you do this? First, involve community members in all decision-making regarding the story project. Develop **participatory channels** of feedback and transparency as you tailor the project to the needs and wishes of the community. Second, **negotiate clear rules** for managing ownership of stories and

projects, and follow them. For example, say each group session must have equal numbers of people from different groups. Periodically review the rules to see if they need revision to keep them relevant and useful. Third, **observe your community**. Watch how people behave and react, and learn your collective strengths and weaknesses.

These three practices — channels, rules and observations — will combine to help you resolve disputes and maintain accountability. Say you are facilitating a group session, and someone suddenly objects that what the group has produced is too private to be revealed outside the community. How should you respond? You should have been **observing** the community well enough to know the people who are making the objection and any special concerns they might have. You should have already negotiated some rules that apply to the situation. And you should have **channels** in place for making decisions together about the project. By drawing on these resources you can reach a compromise that restores the group's sense of privacy without endangering the success of the project.

While trust in the community will enhance a story project, strong trust is not an absolute requirement. In fact, because of their role in negotiating conflicting perspectives without forcing consensus, narrative methods work better than some others when only partial trust is in place. Developing clear project outputs that maintain the integrity of multiple views will increase trust in the **process** even when people do not necessarily trust each other. This can improve participation in community initiatives even by those who disagree or distrust others in the community.

When there are strong internal divisions in your community, it may be impossible to accommodate multiple groups in one project. In that case we do not suggest trying to negotiate participation and rules or carry out sessions that include all groups. Instead, conduct multi-

ple parallel projects and then find ways to bring them together into a larger story project that bridges the entire community. This will help all groups to feel ready and empowered to take part.

One of the most useful aspects of stories is that they **nest** into ever larger stories of stories. They can do this because they do not force unity but preserve conflict and contrast at all scales. Like a folk tale that incorporates smaller tales within it, a story project can contain other story projects. Your community's story project can **contain** – without controlling – the projects of its sub-communities and families. In the process of building the larger project the community may discover things about its divisions it had not understood before.

### **Bridging community boundaries**

There are three ways you can bridge the division between your community and people who want to help it but do not belong to it.

#### Telling stories

During or after your story project, you can simply tell some of your collected or built stories outside the community. This is the least involved approach. It works best when you have a strong need to protect your community's private information, or when those outside it are not willing or able to be more involved in story sharing, or when you do not have the experience to attempt more complex projects. But it also has the greatest potential to create misunderstandings, because not all stories make sense outside of their original context.

#### Exchanging stories

You can tell stories to people outside your community **while** you ask them to tell you **their** stories. The more you know about their stories, the more you will understand what stories they need to hear from you. What is their world like? What difficulties do they face? How do they define success and failure? With both sets of stories in

hand, you can explore similarities and differences. This approach is intermediate in both benefit and risk, because it both shares and conceals.

#### Working with stories together

You can invite people who do not belong to your community to **join** you as you work with the stories you have collected, yours and theirs, and derive insights meaningful to both groups. This approach provides greater understanding through participation, but requires greater trust for deeper sharing.

Completing an effective story project that includes the goal of communicating with people outside the community does depend to some degree on a friendly relationship with them. But while it is helpful when outside helpers are cooperative, it is not a necessity. The process will have value to you and your community independent of any outside group, and could support your relationships with several such groups.

#### Keeping the process internally driven

What if those outside your community like the idea of gathering stories but want to do it themselves, or want to use a process you find foreign or confusing? We suggest directing attention to the greater likelihood of success if you control the story gathering process from within the community, and finding an approach that works best for you and your community. Because working with stories draws on ancient practices of social negotiation, it does not require statistics or computers or experts to work well. In fact, some of the most powerful methods of story work are the simplest. Explore your options and find a solution that works for you.

#### Negotiating meaning

You know that your stories express important truths about your community. But be aware that some people may view stories as 'only' anecdotal evidence that does not

stack up into reliable facts and measurements. Stories **are** anecdotal and local, but they carry tremendous value by creating a context in which facts can be better understood. Telling stories and presenting facts are complementary forms of communication, each valid in its own way.

There are two ways we have learnt to address a perception of stories as insufficiently factual. One is to conduct your story project as a **complement** to other projects whose goals are to collect factual data. For example, if people would like to know what sorts of food you eat, you can tell them those facts, but you can also tell them stories about why your ancestors ate particular foods.

The second method is to derive facts from reflections about stories. Ask people to think about stories they have just told and answer questions about them. For example, after someone tells you a story, ask, 'How do you feel about that story?' Or ask them about something that happened in the story, like 'Do you think that person showed responsible behaviour?' Then

count the answers people gave and compare the counts. You might find that women said they felt differently than men or that older people said something younger people never did. By presenting stories and facts you can give people two forms of understanding at once.

### Conclusion

The ultimate reason to pay attention to stories, whether at the individual, family, community or regional level, is not so much because of what they communicate but because of what they help us discover. We tell and listen to stories in order to make sense of the world around us, and we do this both individually and collectively. Working with stories in your community can help you reflect on the past, understand the present and build a better future. Using such a process to bridge boundaries between your community and helpful people outside it can help you benefit from their good intentions without losing the integrity of your own vision for your community's future.

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# PART II

Making sense:  
the dynamics of  
interpretation  
and use of  
participatory  
outputs

This section explores what happens when intricate, nuanced, qualitative information generated through participatory processes is used in other contexts. In Part I we explore how participatory communication processes are facilitated and the tension between creating an empowering process and a useable product. Here we explore what happens next: how this information is interpreted and reshaped as it is absorbed into a system designed to give an international organisation direction, and improve its understanding of issues of a global scope. The interest, knowledge and intention of the audience colours their reading of the material. Stories and perspectives are aggregated. Themes and patterns are discerned. Conclusions are drawn about priorities or needs. Bits of people's lives and opinions are turned into material to justify or explain development interventions or theories of change. It is what Jasber Singh (**Beardon *et al.***) calls 'disembodied aggregation'.

The first two articles in this section emerged from discussions at the Ripples workshop. First, **Cathy Shutt** reflects on how context, and her sense of accountability to her clients and the communities she visited, influenced the outcome of a research process and draws some conclusions for designing future research processes. The next is by **Hannah Beardon, Jasber Singh, Rose McCausland, Cynthia Kurtz and Clodagh Miskelly**. Working as independent consultants to international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), they reflect on the role we often play of interpreter: transferring information from one context to another in the form of reports or articles. Many of us have played similar roles within INGOs in the past. The

more we discussed and shared, the more we understood the unrecognised power of this role. In essence we are making our own meaning from what others tell us. Yet we often present it as representative of other people's stories – in the process giving it more legitimacy. We felt that our role as sympathetic outsider, facilitator and reporter was not to be undervalued, but wanted to explore our own accountability to the people who informed our thinking and writing. The authors look at how meaning is made from the product of participatory processes within INGOs, examining their own roles and how they manage the tensions.

The second part of the section shares two case studies of tools and approaches for participatory approaches to aggregation and sense-making. Many more exist, some referenced in the article by Hannah Beardon *et al.* The first, by **Nathan Horst**, describes a smartphone application which enriches survey and assessment processes by allowing respondents to code, or tag, their response. It has enhanced the monitoring, evaluation and assessment processes of the organisation involved – and also had the (unanticipated) effect of building dialogue and exchange between respondents. The second, by **Soledad Muñiz**, shares an experience of extending a participatory video process to involve participants in editing and aggregating the material they produced. Both highlight the opportunities of participatory aggregation, coding and sense-making processes. They reflect on some of the challenges of representation, managing conflict of opinion and so on. In the end, the quality of the participatory process, and the relationships on which it is built, are fundamental to the outcome.

# Whose accounts?

# 10

by CATHY SHUTT

## Introduction

As a consultant carrying out research, I often end up translating my own partial understandings from brief, though rich, engagement with communities into objective and authoritative reports. This article is a reflection on a recent experience that prompted concerns that my efforts to do this, shaped by personal interests and the desire to appear ‘professional’, may ultimately reduce my accountability to poor people in the Global South.

For participatory research processes taking place in international NGOs with universalist aspirations working in different cultural contexts, conceptualising accountability in is no straightforward task.<sup>1</sup> What are the tensions that can emerge in such situations and what are the implications for learning and practice in INGO northern offices and headquarters?

These are some of the questions explored in this article.

## Designing the research approach

In 2010 I was commissioned by Plan International to research for a *Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)* article (Shutt, 2010). The article was to explore the nature and degree of child and youth participation in a Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) approach being implemented in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania.<sup>2</sup> Broad research questions explored how children and youth were involved, and whether this was empowering. While negotiating my terms of reference with Mark Rolls, the Senior Programme Officer commissioning the work, we considered various approaches. Underpinned by a theory of change shaped by national and international managers, it could never be a truly

<sup>1</sup> See Ossewaarde, Nijhof and Heyse (2008) ‘Dynamics of NGO legitimacy: how organising betrays the core missions of INGOs’ for a fuller discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Although Plan had wanted to employ local consultants to undertake the work, they had not been able to identify anyone suitable within the short timeframe allocated for the research.

bottom up, participatory research process.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, we believed it provided a useful opportunity for frontline staff to critically reflect on their practice. To enable community-level learning and empowerment, we also proposed community representatives be part of the research team.

The final research design, agreed in consultation with staff in each country, was devised around an ambitious three-day workshop process. My approach was influenced by engagement with the participatory inquiry paradigm that encourages reflection on how our personal backgrounds shape our understandings of events in different ways.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective the aim of research is not to document 'facts', but rather to explore multiple social realities that result from different perceptions and interpretations of events. For this reason the research teams in each country were to spend the first day developing research objectives and culturally appropriate questions together. The second was to be spent visiting communities to explore how groups of different ages and sex variously perceived child and youth involvement in CLTS. The third day was devoted to analysis to enable staff and community members to reflect on findings in ways that helped them learn. This was also to help me, an outsider with only a very basic understanding of the specific contexts, make sense of them.

### The research process

The three-day event proved demanding in all three countries. As anticipated, language was a major challenge, as was ensuring the representativeness of communities visited. Moreover, it was difficult to know how and why certain individuals had been invited to participate in research



Photo: Cathy Shutt

Youth and Plan Ethiopia staff members of the research team.

teams and village level discussions, and how representative they were either. Without sufficient time to visit the poorer parts of the villages, we relied on speaking to those who had been invited to meet us. While men were often vocal, the silence of some women in focus groups suggested they might have been coerced to attend.

Despite challenges and obvious weaknesses of the short research process, the team was able to collect sufficient data to form opinions about how different groups in the community perceived child and youth involvement in CLTS. These were the result of the analytical process described below.

### How (and with whom) I made sense of what I had heard and seen

In each country we went through systematic processes to look for patterns and differences in perspectives related to child and youth involvement in CLTS. Research teams were encouraged to have discussions in their own language and look for patterns in responses from different focus groups. They then used a set of questions to interrogate the patterns and reach conclusions

<sup>3</sup> The CLTS theory of change at the time was that triggering and training lead to increased awareness of the risks of open defecation and poor hygiene. This capacity change is expected to ignite a citizenship change – commitment to individual behaviour change and collective action, which will eliminate open defecation and improve sanitation, leading to a well-being change – improved health.

<sup>4</sup> See Heron and Reason (1997) 'A participatory inquiry paradigm' for further discussion.

that related to the theory of change.<sup>5</sup> Hart's ladder of participation encouraged debate on how meaningful the participation described had been. It helped to identify operations of power that affected participation. This prompted lively discussions and disagreements about the nature of child and youth contributions to CLTS. Debates among staff and community members helped me understand cultural norms that influenced the roles that children traditionally play in communities that appeared to be partly challenged by their involvement in CLTS.

The sense-making process suggested to me that our various experiences, backgrounds and interests shaped what each team member learnt from the research and analysis in different ways. Some staff and community members were particularly interested in new conceptual lenses introduced as part of the research process. Several engaged with the theory of change that emphasised the social dimensions of CLTS. Others could see potential use in applying ideas from Hart's ladder of participation to their practice. Visiting communities and engaging in discussions around CLTS experiences in unfamiliar contexts opened new possibilities for some. It also sharpened critical thinking, raising new questions for further exploration.

As I began writing up my interpretation of the process at the *Participatory Learning and Action* writeshop, I met with Mark Rolls.<sup>6</sup> We were both pleased that, despite weaknesses, the process had produced convincing evidence that children and young people were playing key roles in the social change necessary for CLTS to impact local health. Other writeshop participants shared stories that largely validated the favourable impression I had formed of CLTS through my brief, imperfect research encounters.

But there was a fly in the ointment. In an early session of the writeshop, a senior member of Plan Kenya's staff drew my attention to an issue to which I (and other members of research teams) had given inadequate attention. Very occasional reports of children being beaten as a result of shaming adult open defecators raised child protection issues for Plan, an organisation that aims to enable the realisation of child rights.

A newcomer to the field of CLTS, I put this concern aside and allowed myself to be infected by the enthusiasm of more experienced practitioners at the writeshop. Their passion for, and commitment to CLTS influenced my interpretive lenses when I started my draft. But I still struggled with my usual writing demons. How could I condense the rich process and findings into three thousand words? What should I include and what should I leave out? How could I represent the different perspectives of community members, staff and myself? And how should I deal with the rather awkward issue of child protection?

Inevitably my interpretations were influenced by partial understandings and subjective biases. For example, I wanted to give readers a sense of the messy research process. I was keen to emphasise that imperfect processes do not achieve the emancipatory potential of truly participatory research, **or** produce representative 'evidence' for generalised conclusions. But I also wanted to show they **can** provide valuable opportunities for learning, reflection and empowerment, at least for some.

Discussing the findings and analysis in a short article was tough. General trends could be briefly synthesised. But it was impossible to explore the apparent differences in relationships between children and adults in the different communities to

<sup>5</sup> The process was reduced in Kenya, where school exams meant some research activities had to be carried out on the third day.

<sup>6</sup> The week-long writeshop in January 2010 brought together authors and editors for the then forthcoming *Participatory Learning and Action 61 Tales of Shit: Community-Led Total Sanitation in Africa* (Bongartz et al., 2010).

### Box 1: Towards a more participatory writing style

- Employ reflexivity to give readers an idea of who you are and how your interpretive lenses/biases have been shaped throughout the piece. A style of dialogue or conversation with the reader can help this.
- Include details of the methodology that make clear its limitations without compromising the questions raised and conclusions made.
- Only use an active authoritative voice for points for which there is general agreement by different groups involved.
- Use 'I' or 'we' to communicate authorial interpretation, and verbs such as 'appeared' or 'seemed' to indicate uncertain interpretations that might be contested by others.
- Include different perspectives and interpretations in reported speech, and attribute these to different groups using pseudonyms for sensitive issues.
- Attribute analysis and sense-making by key informants.
- Include important issues and hypotheses that have emerged but not been fully explored as questions for reflection and further investigation.

my satisfaction. I wanted to resist the power of 'professional' writing orthodoxy. It favours a positivist, objective authoritative speech style and discourages practitioners from using the first person or making evident their own uncertainties and doubts. I was keen to follow some general principles outlined in the box above.

### What happened during my interpretation and reporting?

Among helpful comments from my initial reviewer was one that cautioned against the lengthy methodological section. While he acknowledged my humility in raising caveats, he warned it might undermine my argument. Given I was struggling with word length, I was only too happy to comply and revert to a more authoritative writing style. I found it more difficult to handle comments about child protection that potentially undermined my argument. Despite personal experience of Plan

International's openness to critical evaluation, I felt rather uneasy about mentioning it.<sup>7</sup> I suspected it would not fit well in organisational narratives. Eventually I settled on an approach and sent a draft off to Mark and country representatives for further comment, together with more detailed country level bullet-style reports. These included raw findings from the focus group discussions for use at country level and sharing with communities.

Feedback on written documents from country level staff was scarce, making the efforts to solicit their opinions during the research process all the more important. Mark asked for some minor revisions. However, several months later I received much more critical comment from a *PLA* reviewer, raising queries about the methodology. S/he implicitly held us to account over our response to the issue of child protection.

Sitting thousands of miles away in the UK, where hitting children is considered as universally unacceptable, the shades of my interpretive lenses began to shift. I found myself in general agreement with the reviewer's criticisms. But as a relative outsider to Plan, I was not sure how to respond. Eventually I decided to re-engage with staff in London to find out more about how the research had influenced decision-making and practice within different parts of Plan. Renewed communication with Mark reassured me that the research had stimulated further discussion among various actors within Plan about possible risks to children arising from their involvement in CLTS that were considered to be very low. This was all good news. However, I could not help wondering whether there would have been any need for this email discussion had I thought more about links between learning and accountability during the research process.

<sup>7</sup> Plan International has previously published critical evaluations, one of which I was involved in, on its website: [www.plan-international.org](http://www.plan-international.org).

### Managing accountability relationships in research: ideas for debate

On the face of it this story is as an example of an imperfect research process shaped by actors in the North that benefited from community and staff participation in producing data and sense-making. It illustrates the privileged roles that consultant authors (like me) play and the subjective decisions we take about what is included and excluded in the final outputs of research processes. Often this is blamed on pressure to be accountable to donors.

What is interesting about this case study is that there was no real pressure to produce a document to demonstrate Plan's accountability to donors. The research was not part of an evaluation and I was given a relatively free hand in writing up. Many of the decisions I took were the result of a desire to conform to my perceptions of what would be considered professional and likely to fit organisational narratives. I was so busy worrying about being able to write about staff and community members' involvement in sense-making and learning in my article I forgot to think about how this learning would translate into accountability to people in communities.

If I had conceptualised and prioritised learning by local staff **as a means** to directly enhance their accountability to poor people, the third day of the research process might have looked quite different. We may have spent more time discussing if and how CLTS approaches were putting children at risk of harm and what that meant for an organisation promoting child rights in African contexts. The substance of these discussions could have then been included in the draft of the article avoiding calls for more accountability that originated from Plan UK and the *PLA* external reviewer.

The above provides a neat argument in favour of 'downward' accountability, but perhaps one that is slightly disingenuous? Children and communities did not perceive child protection as such a serious issue in

their accounts, framed by their cultural contexts and experiences. This highlights the particular difficulties of conceptualising accountability relationships and practices in cross-cultural research characterised by multiple interpretations and understandings of what is right or wrong. There is often a disconnect between the notion that poor people know what is in their best interest and the operation of power implicit in rights-based programming that is shaped by particular cultural lenses. This is one of several legitimacy challenges for international organisations with universalist aspirations working in different cultural contexts (Ossewaarde *et al.*, 2008). So given the disconnect, how should notions of accountability or responsibility be conceptualised and implemented in consultants' (and indeed staff) research practice that sometimes has to mediate between different cultural interpretations of 'what is right'?

Unsurprisingly, there is no magic bullet. However, in this instance, acknowledging and talking about such issues provided opportunities for reflection and learning that influenced the practice of northern managers. Mark and others allowed me to play the role of a critical friend, and we became involved in an implicit process of cooperative inquiry and reflection on our practice. For example, it was a comment from Mark on a draft of this article that prompted greater realisation of how my own interests and desire to be considered 'professional' – able to deliver expected outputs on time – had influenced my behaviour. Similarly, our discussions and reflections prompted further reflections within Plan about how the theory of change (and future efforts to test it) might benefit from more explicit acknowledgement of power relations within communities.

Could these lessons form the basis for more formal processes to expose and discuss the implications of various values, perceptions and interpretations at differ-

ent stages in complex research relationships? I offer here some initial suggestions of how INGO staff and consultants might work together to better manage such complexity and make clear assumptions about various accountability relationships that need to be negotiated during the process:

- Frame contracts with the northern offices or headquarters of INGOs as a process of cooperative inquiry for those commissioning the research and those conducting it to reflect on challenges and issues and how they change as relationships develop. Build in links between the research and decision-making during and after the process.
- Seek to reach agreement that the consultant is playing the role of a 'critical friend' who is granted permission to come back and ask follow-up questions.
- Try to anticipate and discuss possible differences in values, perceptions and social

realities of different groups involved in the process and think about:

- o How they might be handled in terms of framing research questions; analysis and decision-making; and approaches to writing up and sharing findings with different audiences and interest groups. Consider whose meanings should be given priority in final texts.

- o Implications for conceptualising accountability relationships: who should be accountable to whom, and for what? This process should aim to identify opportunities for negotiating specific accountability relationships at different steps in the process, as well as clear responsibilities for responding to concerns or issues arising at the 'local level'.

- Where possible try to include a relevant objective that links learning to accountability to community groups in the terms of reference.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Mark Rolls and other staff at Plan for the opportunity to research and learn with them and for comments on earlier drafts. Hannah Beardon and Kate Newman deserve mention too for all their helpful comments. I am particularly grateful to Hannah for the substantial edit of an extremely muddled early draft!

# Telling stories: who makes sense of participatory communication?

# 11

by HANNAH BEARDON, JASBER SINGH, ROSE McCAUSLAND, CYNTHIA KURTZ and CLODAGH MISKELLY

## Introduction

*Those who tell the stories rule society.*

Some attribute this statement to the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato, others to the Native American Hopi tribe. Taken in context, the two meanings could not be more different. Plato spoke of the need to censor the stories told to children in order to form them into soldiers willing to die for the state. The Hopi seem to have included the proverb in their general belief system where each tribe member held the responsibility to create the world anew every day, in part through storytelling.

These two interpretations of the same statement – one controlling, one enabling – are **both** essential parts of the story of (stories in) human society. Today, as we construct our concepts of what development is, what constitutes a ‘developed’ nation, and what the goals of development should be, we still tell stories. Just as knowledge is power, so power defines whose stories are heard and accepted.

Participatory processes open spaces for different stories, analysis and insights to be told and, by implication, heard. In this way we challenge, transform or subvert social constructs and narratives which favour the interests of the powerful. Yet whose stories and perspectives are we actually using when we take that information into a different context, to influence the thinking or the narrative of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)? How can we decide whose experiences and analysis should have influence? And how do we know that we really understand the meaning of what they say?

This article is the product of discussions at the ‘How wide are the ripples?’ workshop, and subsequent sharing of experiences and ideas between the authors. We shared a discomfort with the way in which people’s stories, analysis and ideas – generated or shared through participatory processes – are packaged and used in INGOs. We recognised that meaning is found in part in what people say, but also derived from the context in which they say it. We shared a

concern that the aggregation and use of this information in distant and different contexts lead to it being subsumed into, and understood within, someone else's narrative. Thus the meaning is ultimately **given** to rather than **drawn from it**.

### **Bias and aggregation of participatory processes**

Directly or indirectly INGOs deal with, and have an impact on, millions of people in communities across the world. It makes sense that their conclusions about global development problems, objectives and priorities should be drawn from the inputs of a range of people and groups in these different contexts, as well as analysis of the macro environment. Specific case studies or life stories are often used to illustrate particular issues, and in this process unavoidable bias appears.

Bias guides what a person or organisation thinks is a relevant or acceptable opinion. Reason (1994) argues that we have to 'accept our knowing is from a perspective'. Making sense, understanding or analysis is coloured by our perspectives and worldviews – our biases. The problem is not that bias exists, but when it is hidden and unacknowledged. If we can begin to expose it, discuss and debate it, reflect on it, we can be more open to challenge and more honest in our relationships with others – and maybe call into question beliefs that we hold and behaviours which we practice that are inconsistent with our professed bias.

INGOs have a particularly complex relationship with bias. For example, Christian Aid describes its purpose 'to challenge and change structures and systems that favour the rich and powerful over the poor and marginalised'.<sup>1</sup> On Wikipedia, bias is described as 'systematic favouritism' – does that not describe the role and approach of these INGOs? ActionAid recognises this in its vision and mission, stating its: 'solidar-

ity with poor and marginalized people, so that our only bias will be a commitment to the interests of the poor and powerless.'<sup>2</sup> But this leaves INGOs with a paradoxical problem. They implicitly state their fundamental bias on the part of the poor, but they cannot help but have bias on the part of the rich and/or powerful. Especially when that is the perspective within which evidence is defined.

Participatory processes generate information that is complex, nuanced and context specific. But when this type of information is collected and aggregated in other contexts, how we make sense of it is influenced by pre-conceived ideas and bias. When we bring together diverse community experiences into a meta-narrative we make decisions about what the key themes are, what issues and points are relevant and what gets left out. These decisions differ depending on who is making them: the participants themselves, consultants on a specific mission, or local, national or international INGO staff from teams with different functions or objectives. Our reading of what is relevant or interesting is coloured by our intentions in using the information, as well as our own cultural perceptions of what constitutes valid communication (text? song? numbers?) or knowledge.

Participatory methods and principles are now fundamental to many organisation-wide knowledge-management systems, and may underpin how information is gathered in the field. But they do not always extend to the ways in which the information is chosen or interpreted. This can result in what has been termed 'policy-based evidence' – selecting the stories, views and issues which confirm the organisation's or individual's pre-existing understanding, intention or policy messages. Cynthia Kurtz calls this 'fighting with stories'. Many times people have asked her to help them to collect stories, but have then been unwill-

<sup>1</sup> See: [www.climatenetwork.org/profile/member/christian-aid](http://www.climatenetwork.org/profile/member/christian-aid)

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://actionaidusa.org/who/vision>

### Box 1: The disembodiment of lived experience: Jasber Singh

When I was doing participatory action research with peasant women in India I was very present, I listened attentively, connected emotionally, got angry about the oppression or pain, and felt a deep sense of empathy and solidarity. I 'captured' this as best I could, and this was then somehow made sense of: themes were picked through collating stories from one village to another (case studies), and these were somehow aggregated. What was presented and reported was then discussed in rooms in London, adapted to meet the needs of media, policy, funders and the like. For sure, their interpretation is different than the women themselves would make.

After a year in India, I came back to the NGO offices in London, the home of disembodied aggregations, and was upset to see how people were analysing and discussing the suffering I had seen. Aggregation, themes and case studies result from a separation of data from the human realm. It effectively dislocates, disembodies the human lives to a report to be read. It is the disembodiment that allows the disordering (ordering) into what an audience wants to hear. Not the women's story, just some of the women's words. If the women were present, the meaning of this 'data' would have had to be negotiated.

ing to really examine the content of those stories, ignoring or even changing those that don't confirm their existing view.

### Participatory aggregation and sense-making

Given the influence of subjectivity and bias in how we interpret information there is a strong argument to support participatory aggregation and sense-making within organisations. Muñiz (this issue) shows how participatory editing processes allow storytellers to decide the broader messages which emerge from aggregation, and Kurtz (this issue) shows how stories can be woven into broader narratives in creative aggregation processes.

Rick Davies has developed a method called Participatory Aggregation of Qualitative Information, precisely to support the process of aggregation without prema-

turely imposing our own interpretations on the data. Using card sorting to categorise people, objects and events and social network analysis to explore relationships between them, people can 'aggregate and analyse the information in a way that is participatory, transparent and systematic.'<sup>3</sup>

There is also a range of software available to support this kind of analysis – clustering or showing relationships between stories which have previously been tagged or categorised. Software can pick out patterns from pre-determined categories or themes and visualise them in ways which enable people to make (or contest) connections when combined with participatory sense-making processes. This can be a powerful tool. New insight can emerge (for example see Horst, this issue). Though, on the whole, the same thing can be done with a pencil and paper.

Just because these processes are participatory does not mean that they are bias free. As with any other data collection or analysis processes, participatory processes come packaged with biases of all kinds. But participatory aggregation digs deep, asks difficult questions, crosses boundaries and can create transformative insights. The messy, complex negotiation and construction of meaning, with attempts to overcome or mediate power imbalances, is important and valuable. Participatory aggregation techniques do not pretend to overcome bias, but to recognise it, and ensure that it is discussed, analysed and agreed. In the process they strengthen accountability to the original project participants.

### Telling our own stories

Participatory aggregation is not always possible, or appropriate. Many of us working in, or with, northern offices of INGOs want to include different voices and perspectives in our own work, or to influence others. However we may not be able

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://tinyurl.com/davies-paqi>. Full URL: <http://mande.co.uk/special-issues/participatory-aggregation-of-qualitative-information-paqi/>

**Box 2: Understanding in context: Rose McCausland**

The question of gathering 'authentic' voices became a problem for the team when we were using participatory video with an indigenous community in Southern Madagascar. None of the participants had held a video camera before, and we knew it was vital to work with a local NGO to introduce it in a relevant, sensitive and productive way. However, working in partnership with local NGO staff made it difficult to distinguish whose voice was being captured. We were aware that the local NGO's agenda would come through and debated whether that mattered in some depth. We concluded that as part of the group, the views of the NGO staff should come out but that this should not be heard at the expense of the community's voice. We tried to find a balance, and regularly checked in with the local community for their feedback. We accepted that, as outsiders communicating through interpreters, we may not have picked up subtle communications that they were telling us otherwise.

to co-construct meaning, claim authentic voice or check back on our interpretations. Awareness of our role and the inevitability of constructing new meaning is an important part of becoming more accountable to those whose voices we use and represent. The authors share a commitment to work in this way, and we have developed our own approaches to being more accountable to the people whose stories and perspectives we use. We share these as examples, not answers, to provoke reflection about our own role in shaping the stories which determine how development is understood – and how it happens.

Often when INGOs gather qualitative information, it comes down to individuals to make sense of it. Consultants are commissioned to produce evaluations, facilitators report on a participatory workshop, or editors put together newsletters or magazines. Even when local NGO staff are supported to document their own work they are making sense of their experiences, and it is their story which gets passed on through the organisation.

In making sense and creating meta-narratives we reflect our own meaning and

**Box 3: Providing multiple interpretations: Cynthia Kurtz**

I call the reports I build for my clients 'catalysis reports', to avoid them being seen as fact-based analysis results. I intentionally include some extreme, naïve and provoking interpretations – some competing – of patterns I find in the stories and data collected. And I make sure to tell my clients that some of what they read will seem confused or wrong-headed.

This deliberately mischievous stance has two purposes. It keeps me from slipping into making claims to truth or providing answers to questions and instead keeps me focused on generating useful catalysing material for thought and discussion. And it helps my clients think for themselves and take ownership of their conclusions and decisions, avoiding any tendency to slip into easy but self-limiting statements such as that 'the data proves' or 'the consultant recommends' a conclusion or course of action.

our own cultural context. And if our approach to aggregation and sense-making is not articulated or made visible then we do a disservice to the original storytellers and participants. We should be accountable to these participants who have shared their stories in order to influence development processes. Yet when we use stories in the North that have been produced in the South we are rarely expected to check or even share the meanings we make with the people whose voices we claim to represent or use. Taking on the role of an intermediary in participatory processes requires us not only to take seriously the responsibility of using the voices of others, but to continually improve our ability to manage the tensions between providing a meta-narrative or interpretation that can be used within the knowledge-management systems and decision-making processes of INGOs' northern offices and our responsibility to the storyteller and the integrity of the original stories.

**Cross-checking interpretations**

The outsider, facilitator or researcher can be a resource for people at the grassroots who want to influence how development is conceived and implemented. But dialogue

#### Box 4: A useful but negotiated role: Hannah Beardon

When developing 'Critical Stories of Change' (see Carroll, this issue) I build my own story from conversations with different stakeholders. This creates a two-way process: people reflect on their work and take that forward in their own ways while their comments and contributions shape the content, structure and focus of my story. After each conversation, I feed back my written summary of the conversation with the interlocutor for further comments and additions. But in the end, eliciting reflection and creating a broader narrative is my role and it is an important and useful one for all involved. My interpretation as a sympathetic outsider is what is required – it enables people to reflect on their own work, and allows a narrative to be constructed which draws on diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives, and sets them within a context. Participatory editing would come to a different point, with its own value but different. So the role of interpreter is given, but also negotiated, and handled with care.

and openness are essential attributes in negotiating and responsibly wielding the power of interpreting, and telling, other people's stories. As is self-reflection and awareness of differences in social, cultural and educational background which create our personal, subjective context for understanding and making sense of information.

#### Towards a complementary approach

The current climate for development is requiring ever more value for money, evidence for decision-making and proof of results. As the overview for this issue of *PLA* notes, this trend risks simplifying development to a technical exercise which only values that which can be measured or quickly achieved. We recognise the importance of quantitative information in understanding and planning development work. But we argue that there is a false dichotomy when statistics are classified as neutral and objective, while information generated through participatory processes is dismissed as biased and subjective. Whether we are using quantitative or qualitative approaches we need to be able to abstract and analyse, but without losing the

#### Box 5: Embedding contextual meaning: Clodagh Miskelly

Through Digital Storytelling (see Lewin, this issue) I support people to craft tightly edited stories, facilitating a collective process of reflection, establishing priorities and shaping image, narrative and sound with particular goals in mind. A well edited and presented digital story can, in my experience, lessen the chance of cherry-picking or extracting data and produce an account which shows relationships and interconnected experiences – the ways people live out the issues affecting their lives.

Where a group wants to communicate with an audience unknown to them my role moves beyond facilitator to intermediary – a powerful editorial role often underplayed or hidden in participatory practices. I share my knowledge of that distant audience and what I think might help to communicate the stories to others in a different context. I try to ensure that the stories are told in a way which will increase their chances of being heard or understood – giving my view of the points and examples which might have most resonance or impact.

I recognise that my skills and experience in using different media put me in a powerful position to shape what is told and prioritised, and try to keep check of my own beliefs and motivations in order to ensure that people tell the story they want to tell. It is not always a comfortable process.

wider social, political perspective which gives meaning to our work.

There is no single 'voice of the people'. INGOs have to draw their own conclusions and make their own sense. What is relevant or not, what they will respond to or not, depends on the organisation's (and individual's) social and political worldview and objectives. And yet what they hear should also **inform** that worldview.

Making the best use of the complementary information provided by facts, proof, views and perspectives requires a culture where **each** of these things is given the attention and respect it deserves. If the information generated through participatory processes is really to inform and influence INGO decision-making and understanding of development then staff members need to reflect on their bias and interpretation – and create opportunities for sense-making

together. This means using participatory aggregation when appropriate, recognising people's own interpretations when useful and negotiating representation as mediators when necessary (for example in international debates). It requires a culture that does not

solely rely on one way of negotiating truth or one person's construction of reality but in which these truths and realities are just one part of a larger process of collective sense-making for mutual benefit. That is a goal worth striving for.

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# EthnoCorder in Burundi: innovation, data collection and data use

# 12

by NATHAN HORST

## Introduction

Participatory research is a key to understanding complex contexts, but using the results for learning and decision-making can be difficult. To grapple with complex realities of the context and assess the impact of its interventions, Help Channel Burundi (HCB) identified a need for a tool to facilitate multimedia mobile collection and real-time processing of the field data resulting from various participatory processes, consultations, focus group discussions, surveys and inter-stakeholder dialogue. The organisation wanted to immediately analyse the results and respond.

In early 2010, I worked with an independent technology firm to adapt its existing mobile data collection software to the specific needs of field research.<sup>1</sup> We created EthnoCorder, a powerful mobile system for conducting rich multimedia surveys in the field.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I discuss our experience of developing and using EthnoCorder. I look forward to how we

might further enhance our approaches to data collection and use.

## Why we needed EthnoCorder

HCB's food assistance interventions were done in response to food shortages and famine. Our project designs were based on the assumption that prevalent donor-driven approaches to food assistance would be effective in Burundi. Over time, HCB observed various unexpected results from its projects, such as the increasing commercialisation of food, which raised several questions. What was the relationship between food distribution and food security? Did the fact that people were selling food mean that they were not hungry? What were the dominant social dynamics at play?

My efforts to make sense of these unexpected results – and strengthen HCB's impact assessment capabilities – were complicated by the organisation's weak capacity for data processing. Much previ-

<sup>1</sup> Robot Blimp Industries is a technology firm based in Portland, OR and San Francisco, CA.

<sup>2</sup> For more info about EthnoCorder, visit: [www.ethnocorder.com](http://www.ethnocorder.com)

ously collected survey data were not available, or could only be accessed in hard copy. The organisation barely had the capacity for quantitative data entry and had no strategy for systematic aggregation of qualitative data. I had some ideas about how to address this situation from my experience as a monitoring and evaluation practitioner. But I also wanted to consult with the latest research on food assistance impact assessment. This was to make sure I was considering any sector-specific issues related to decision-making and complexity. My brief review of literature proved to be quite helpful.

Research emphasises the need to design food assistance interventions to be contextually appropriate (see e.g. Levine *et al.*, 2004) and the importance of using narrative, perception-based approaches to assess outcomes (see e.g. Pimbert, 2009). Other research shows that learning from – and use of – evaluation findings requires dialogue between actors to generate actionable knowledge (Johnson *et al.*, 2009). Snowden and Boone (2007) have also argued that complex contexts call for ‘increased levels of interaction and communication’.

Such an approach made a lot of sense in the context of HCB’s work in Burundi. However, HCB had a history of working with donors who expected to achieve planned results. This left little room for monitoring and evaluation activities to affect learning and change processes. When participatory processes were used as part of planning, there was a perception that costs were high – in terms of time and money. This resulted in reduced programming flexibility, caused by avoidance of costs associated with participatory processes needed to inform revisions.

HCB had an urgent need to improve its systems for planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning. We needed a tool that could help us utilise qualitative and quantitative data, enhance our methodologies by incorporating multimedia and higher levels of participation, eliminate manual

data entry and support data analysis. HCB needed functioning information feedback loops. No such tool existed: we needed an innovative solution.

### The process of innovation

HCB’s management was quick to recognise the potential benefits of such a tool, and decided to subsidise the development of software that could address our needs. The software, EthnoCorder, would have a **desktop** component allowing simple design and management of surveys, and a **mobile** component for administering surveys in the field using iPhones. It would allow us to use text, photos, audio and video to ask questions and record responses. It would also package the results in a way that we could easily analyse using a spreadsheet or other data analysis software.

At the same time, I was working with my colleagues at HCB to design an end-line survey for our current projects. These processes were mutually influential and beneficiaries of HCB’s projects influenced this design process through their feedback on the use of video to document and share their perspectives.

### From data extraction to data (inter) action

EthnoCorder supports HCB to infuse multi-stakeholder dialogue into our monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes. We use video clips drawn from focus group discussions and interviews as question and discussion cues (see Photo 1). Our facilitators coded these video responses to the questions in real time, using pre-determined themes that appear on the video display touch screen as data tags (Photo 2).

These themes are derived from the results of pilot research and discussion with stakeholders, and updated through iterations of the process. We have tried to balance what Mohan (2001) describes as the need ‘to allow local people to generate their own categories, concepts and criteria for understanding and changing their lives’

Photo: Nathan Horst



**Photo 1:** Survey participant viewing a video cue.

– with enough methodological consistency to ensure data validity. This is a critical balance to achieve. Validity can be compromised by insufficient participation of stakeholders in determining tags used for thematic coding, but also by the use of different tags to code data in the same series.

EthnoCorder prompts the user to immediately play back the recording to approve, use or re-record the response – this puts beneficiaries in direct control over initial stages of data analysis and validation. In a context where there are significant issues related to informed consent (literacy, awareness, lack of legal regulation etc.), this process also helps to address ethical concerns (see Box 1).

Video recordings can later be viewed to ‘drill-down’ into the data, but patterns in the qualitative data can be immediately detected based on the codes assigned during the data collection process. EthnoCorder’s real-time coding capability reduces the need to review extensive video footage before conducting primary analysis. This allows us to focus on using the information for analysis, decision-making and further communication activities. The immediate availability of quantified quali-

#### Box 1: Inevitable ethical issues

It is important to acknowledge a number of ethical concerns that users will undoubtedly face in any data collection process, regardless of the tool used. Ultimately, these are ethical questions of use and abuse of data and the researcher remains obliged to answer for their methods.

Informed consent is always a topic of debate. Some researchers must navigate stringent privacy and legal regulations, while in other contexts the issue may be almost irrelevant. The question becomes more complex when considering research with children. The possibility of personal video statements winding up in the public domain presents opportunities, but also threats, particularly in contexts of political volatility.

As we push into new areas of investigation, types of interactions, dimensions of citizenship and forms of subjectivity, there will inevitably be unprecedented ethical issues to consider.

tative data is one of the major benefits of this tool that has led to a dramatic increase in the use of this information in decision-making.

When HCB piloted EthnoCorder in the field, many respondents expressed interest in meeting the people in the video clips for face-to-face discussion. This indicates the tool’s potential to stimulate dialogue and build social networks. We have come to see EthnoCorder as a tool for data collection



Photo: Nathan Horst

Photo 2: Coding video response of a Food-for-Work beneficiary in Burundi.

and data use. As part of the endline survey for our Food-for-Work project, we asked people about the most significant change they had experienced in recent years related to food security – these stories were coded in real-time as described above. Then, using video recordings of change stories that had been collected and validated earlier in the project, respondents were asked to select which of several stories was most significant from their perspective. We then asked them to explain their selection – these responses were also coded and validated on the spot.

The results of this process provide an example of project beneficiaries participating in data analysis, determination of relevance and sense-making. Research on the use of Most Significant Change (MSC) methods (Willettts and Crawford, 2007)

has noted, ‘the difficulty of remembering story details when writing retrospectively, and the problem of maintaining the “voice” of the villager’. By enabling HCB to use digital video in the MSC process, EthnoCorder has helped us to address concerns about data validity and heightened levels of stakeholder participation. There has been compelling discussion of the added value that digital video methods can bring to the MSC technique (Lunch, 2007). The process we used in Burundi is an example of that.

### **EthnoCorder: the next generation**

EthnoCorder already provides a powerful set of communication possibilities. However, a few improvements will allow for even higher levels of participation, data validity, data use and influence of stake-

holder perspectives in decision-making processes. We have identified some technical capabilities that will create an even better fit between this tool and a wide array of participatory methodologies: more options for navigation, features enabling researchers to comply with more stringent research protocols, composable results tabulation options, validation and real-time data display, processing and analysis for example. Highly connected environments (places with strong telecommunications infrastructure) present many possibilities for more dynamic and interactive research designs. HCB plans to explore these areas in the future.

EthnoCorder has revolutionised data utilisation for HCB by eliminating manual data entry and helping us integrate data analysis, data collection and data use processes. Our investment in software development and iPhones is not a luxury, but rather an innovative strategy that saves time and money while increasing our use of information generated from participatory processes. As a result, we have increased the adaptability of our projects and the extent to which HCB's M&E processes can be considered participatory. It is not clear that EthnoCorder necessarily changes who is

heard in participatory processes (levels of participation ultimately depend on methodological choices). But its multimedia abilities can significantly change who hears in the process by opening new communication channels between stakeholders at all levels of participatory processes.

### Ways forward

Previously, HCB barely participated in data analysis, but simply hoped to get survey results tabulated in time for reporting. With a drastically different time horizon enabled by EthnoCorder, the door is now wide open for HCB to utilise processes that involve beneficiaries throughout various stages of data analysis and decision-making. HCB also plans to dramatically increase sample sizes in its survey work to increase the power of its statistical analysis and strengthen the validity of its data triangulation between quantitative and qualitative results. EthnoCorder has allowed HCB to leapfrog many constraints to data use: the main challenge that lies ahead is taking full advantage of this tool by strengthening methodological practices. Networking with other organisations to share knowledge and experience will be an important part of that process.

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#### NOTES

Nathan Horst left Help Channel Burundi in June 2011 and now works for UNICEF Nepal.

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# Western Balkans Green Agenda: local storytelling through participatory video making

# 13

by SOLEDAD MUÑIZ

## Introduction

Who tells the story is as relevant as the story itself, or even more so. It speaks of their understanding, feelings, reflections and actions around particular issues portrayed in the story. Often it also speaks of their dreams, suffering, resilience and expectations.

Green Agenda is a participatory process to promote greater involvement of local people in shaping their own environment and influencing local level policy-making. Between 2007 and 2010, 18 communities from six countries in the Western Balkans worked to develop their Green Agenda, coordinated by Millieukontakt – a Dutch NGO – and Kocka, an NGO from Macedonia. InsightShare (UK) worked in partnership with them to use participatory video for collective storytelling in the Green Agenda process.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I reflect on the process of

using participatory video not only to document local issues but also to build broader consensus. I describe how it was done in communities across six Balkan states, and reflect on some of the challenges involved in blending local stories into national and regional narratives.

## Building a local and national picture with participatory video

*We have made a small treasure that will remain as a tradition for new generations.*  
Participant from Albania.

*In the future when people see this they will be motivated to do some things themselves.*  
Participant from Kosovo.

The community Green Agenda processes were coordinated by local NGOs, who were given training to set up and facil-

<sup>1</sup> InsightShare is an international network that uses participatory video (PV) as a tool for individuals and groups to grow in self-confidence and trust, and to build skills to act for change. Our PV methods aim to value local knowledge, build bridges between communities and decision makers, and enable people to develop greater control over the decisions affecting their lives.



Photo: InsightShare

#### Zavidovici – Bosnia and Herzegovina.

itate multi-stakeholder working groups. These included active citizens and local government, businesses and education institutions. The working groups used participatory approaches to debate issues and prepare a sustainable local strategy and action plan. The process included writing up the local Green Agenda and getting it passed as local policy, as well as implementing pilot projects proposed within it.

Participatory video provided a pathway to ‘widen the ripples’ of Green Agenda, raise awareness of the process, share knowledge, build skills and strengthen advocacy. Millieukontakt and Kocka were also interested in raising awareness of the Green Agenda methodology and the impacts on people’s lives – as drivers of their own sustainable development agenda – as well as influencing policy at national and regional levels. InsightShare helped the communities to create their own 15-30 minute films, for use mainly in a local context and for sharing with other communities. Later, we helped them aggregate the

films made by the three communities in each country into shorter national films, with a broader target audience, and finally a single regional trailer.

To begin this process, we trained one person from each community to be video coaches: to be part of the trainers’ team during fieldwork and develop skills to support their own groups in the future. The video coaches were selected by the local NGOs using criteria developed by Kocka and InsightShare (see Figure 1). Local groups used participatory exercises to identify and focus on their target audiences before planning their films, and Kocka and Millieukontakt were consulted to define the audiences for the national films. There were crossovers in the selected audiences: local community groups, decision makers and the media. In order to connect with these varied audiences, a variety of outputs was needed.

The process of making the community videos enabled a wider group to come together to reflect on the achievements and challenges of the Green Agenda process,

**Figure 1: Partners involved in the process**

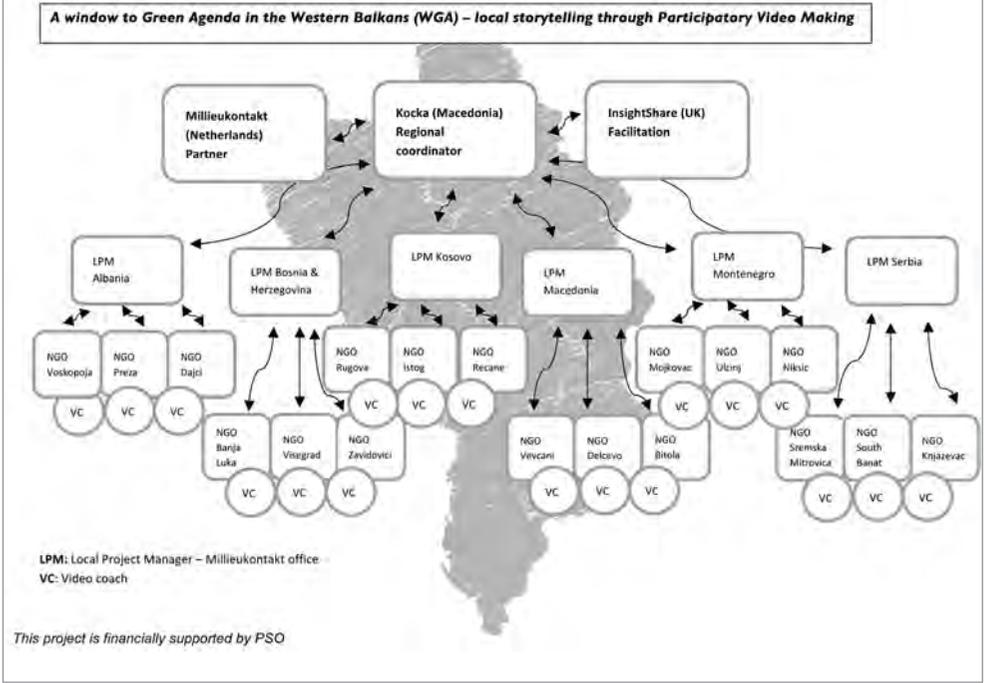


Photo: InsightShare



**Video coaches workshop, Macedonia.**

and learn how to communicate its importance and value through film. This focused the groups and enabled more people from the communities to become involved in the Green Agenda process. Participation was high, in terms of numbers, time, commitment and enthusiasm, and this had important outcomes:

- 394 people were involved in the project
- 180 participated directly in the participatory video workshops to develop the community films

- 194 were involved through screenings and/or appearing in the films.

There was a high degree of consensus building, reflection and collective working, which along with the new skills and approaches increased the capacity of the groups to act for themselves. Using participatory planning tools the groups decided the content of the film. Achieving consensus was a key part of the planning and filming process, bringing all the working groups together. Naturally, each working group usually wants to highlight their own area of work (e.g. water, human potential, cultural heritage etc.) The process of creating the film gave them a unique space to discuss and collectively select what they wanted to say and to whom. For example, in Ulcinj, Montenegro, the community team wanted to talk to their neighbours, show them what they had been doing and the importance of actively caring for their hometown. ‘Our film will make the citizens of Ulcinj think about and take care of their town’, one of the participants proudly told us after finishing



Istog and Rugova, Kosova.

the storyboard. Women and men, young and old worked together for four days (sometimes more than 10 hours a day!) to craft their message. Everyone had a chance to film or speak. These positive changes and relationships happened before the story even left the video camera.

A key concern for us was to balance the participatory process and the work towards an output for wider use. During the fieldwork, the trainers and video coaches facilitated regular local screenings of material. The groups created paper edits together.<sup>2</sup> An initial draft version of the film was developed and screened for approval or to elicit different people's inputs. At a regional participatory editing workshop, video coaches finished their communities' films based on the feedback they had collected. This was a crucial time for them to feed in their ideas on the content that should be in to the national films using our paper edit method. Reproducing the audiovisual timeline in paper, the participants represent with drawings the footage using post-it notes and go through a group consensus process to agree on the final order of their film.

### The challenge of representation

A major challenge of the process was selecting the local video coaches. At the editing and aggregation stage, video coaches represented their communities



Photos: InsightShare

and this required trust. Despite detailed guidelines and an application process, the people put forward for this voluntary role were not always the most suitable. On the ground we were able to work with groups to select suitable replacements in some cases, but it was a delicate task to ensure that everyone was fully satisfied. In particular, we encouraged our partners to choose someone who was involved in the project, highly motivated to keep collaborating and being available to the groups, as well as having patience and willingness to pass on the skills. This selection process is clearly a critical aspect to the long-term success of the project and is very hard to do remotely.

The paper edit process and draft film screening were essential for consensus building and for agreeing on broad structures. But some final editorial decisions had to be made at the workshop, far away from the community. This placed great responsibility and power in the hands of the video coaches. In general they stayed true to the participatory process and ethos and fully honoured this commitment, but there were cases where the community groups were not fully satisfied with the resulting video. In one case, InsightShare and the local NGO coordinated an extra session to resolve a conflict between a video coach and a working group member and support them to reach an overall satisfactory consensus.

<sup>2</sup> You can learn more about the paper edit method from the InsightShare online toolkit: <http://insightshare.org/resources/right-based-approach-to-pv-toolkit>.

Photo: InsightShare



Ulcinj, Montenegro.

### The challenge of aggregation

Transforming 18 locally made films into six national films presented several challenges. To ensure transparency and fairness, we decided that each locally made film should contribute five minutes to the 15 minute national films. The editing workshops and collective paper edit processes were key ingredients. The main InsightShare facilitator for each community advised the editor on each national film to ensure continuity and sensitivity. From a team of five InsightShare facilitators, each built skills in an average of six communities in two countries (I was part of Kosovo and Montenegro). One of the facilitators also played the role

of editor, which strengthened the continuum. In this way we sought to reduce the directive role of the editor to a minimum, but still some decisions had to be taken to shape the films for the intended audience and distribution channels. For example, in some cases the music was changed or cut to ensure copyright was not infringed.

For many participants, the final regional meeting in Macedonia (that I had the pleasure to facilitate) was the first time they were able to see these national edits. Not everyone was satisfied. Some of the comments were related to changes in the music. Others related to the fact that in their allocated five minutes the effort of the communities could

Photos: InsightShare



Voskopoja, Albania and Knajazevac, Serbia.





Participatory editing workshop, Montenegro.

not be fully honoured. There was clearly a conflict between the creative process itself and the wider needs of the programme, which recognised that to get the maximum impact from this dynamic process on the ground, the films needed to be packaged for multiple audiences.

The discussions that followed were interesting and reinforced the clear sense of pride and ownership the participants felt over their local films. They also gave people a view of the bigger picture: a regional programme with communities sharing the same goals across national borders. Part of this bigger picture was the need to communicate the work with a variety of different partners and communities: for raising awareness, fundraising, peer-to-peer learning and policy influence. The fact that the diverse partners (INGOs, NGOs and community groups) had several products available for multiple uses reconciled their individual interests.

## Local participation: regional impact

*For the first time I have the feeling I am doing something for my city.*  
Participant from Montenegro.

*The method built cooperation between us.*  
Participant from Serbia.

The videos provide an invaluable insight into people's perceptions and understandings of Green Agenda and how their local values have shaped this programme. Through making and screening these films, relationships have been strengthened and discussions stimulated. The process gave participants the space to participate. They not only took this space, but shaped it to their own interests and identities. This opened a window for Kocka and Millieukontakt themselves to look through and reflect on what Green Agenda meant to each community and country.

In this way, the videos have not only influenced policy, but the organisations themselves. Partners are now able to identify commonalities, interpretations and ways of representation – and share critical information and feelings that cannot be found in a report. They can see through the eyes of those people who are the main actors of the story, the real makers of Green Agenda.

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### NOTES

For more information about the project or participatory video, visit:

- InsightShare: [www.insightshare.org](http://www.insightshare.org)
- Green Agenda: [www.greenagenda.net](http://www.greenagenda.net)

To watch the regional trailer and access some of the national films (with English subtitles), look at a photostory of the process and watch the community films (without subtitles) visit: <http://tinyurl.com/is-green-agenda-videos>.

Full URL: [www.youtube.com/user/Insightshare#grid/user/97EA7CF384AE2F65](http://www.youtube.com/user/Insightshare#grid/user/97EA7CF384AE2F65)

# PART III

## Learning in organisations

If international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are to listen and respond to the information and knowledge generated through participatory processes at the grassroots, they need to be ready to learn. At a basic level, being a learning organisation implies a recognition that learning can mean change. Change in how development is understood, in what the relationship with and expectations of partner and community organisations are, and in terms of everyday practice and culture within the organisation.

The first article in this section by **Ashley Raeside** argues that to be learning organisations, INGOs have to be brave. They need to recognise constraints on local staff, work to devolve power, and create cultures where local staff are empowered to listen to and learn from what they hear through grassroots processes, and to respond and change. She draws on numerous examples from the work of Engineers Without Borders (EWB) to illustrate the difference between learning organisations and organisations which, constrained by top-down assumptions, struggle to respond and learn.

This argument is further illustrated by **Eliud Wakwabubi** who, drawing from interviews and long-term interaction with three INGOs in Kenya, explores the blocks to organisational learning. The three organisations all have a strong commitment to organisational learning, and have developed innovative strategies to strengthen bottom-up learning and downward accountability. However, basic cultural pre-dispositions and formal and

informal power relations prevent these initiatives from achieving their desired intention.

**Sofia Angidou** shares her experience in the Human Resources department of an INGO, arguing for the important role of this often sidelined function in facilitating both individual and organisational learning. Reflecting on changes to the appraisal process, Sofia notes that, while individual learning can happen without organisational learning, for organisational learning to occur support has to be given to the individual.

The importance of individual reflection and empowerment is extended by **Daniel Guijarro**, who explores how through the use of a participatory process in the northern office of an INGO, a staff member was able to assert her active agency, negotiate organisational power and influence decision-making processes. For Daniel, the transformation of North-South power relations within INGOs is a crucial precursor to recognising, valuing and responding to the knowledge and information generated through participatory processes at the grassroots. He argues that for transformation of power to occur we need to recognise our own power, becoming active agents in our organisational learning and development.

Together these articles illustrate the complexity of bottom-up learning and responding to grassroots voices, but also show possible strategies for strengthening this ambition, and in the words of Ashley, for investing in becoming 'brave organisations'.

# Are INGOs brave enough to become learning organisations?

# 14

by **ASHLEY RAESIDE**

## Introduction

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) need to make proper use of the information and knowledge generated through the participatory processes they support in communities if they are to live up to their own declared values of participation and empowerment. To do this, they need to understand how their organisational relationships and processes impact on their staff's ability to learn from and respond to the outcomes of local participatory work.

During the Ripples process for the preparation of this issue (see Beardon and Newman's Tips for Trainers, this issue), we analysed how information generated through grassroots participatory processes could and should have more influence on INGO decision-making. We distinguished between supporting information to flow up to decision makers in the North, and pushing decision-making power nearer to where that information is available and makes sense – the grassroots. Within this dynamic it is central to understand local

context and the challenges local staff face.

Local staff are responsible for implementing development projects. But they are often low down and marginalised in the hierarchy of international NGOs. This empowerment gap is a complex product of history and culture, influenced by factors such as the historically paternalistic role of westerners towards low-income countries, local power dynamics (based on education, class, culture), and organisational theories which associated centralised command with efficiency and effectiveness, which are often inappropriate for enabling local development initiatives.

Local staff need to be empowered within the development process to make decisions such as:

- What information and knowledge is worth passing on?
- When is it worth changing the organisational direction?
- When should entrenched views that may prevent transformative change locally be challenged?

But too often, the potential for local

**Table 1**

| Learning is limited   | Learning is enabled  |
|---|--|
| <b>Interactions</b>   |  |
| <p><b>E.g. Recognising staff</b></p> <p>Front-line staff rarely receive positive feedback, even though they work hard. They feel they are only pointed out among their colleagues when they fail to achieve their targets, or if their report is late. Eventually, this discourages them from taking time to do quality work, and makes them prioritise what goes into the reports rather than what they can learn from or provide to the community.</p>  | <p>Managers praise and show appreciation for learning behaviour, in a culturally appropriate way. When a staff member asks a challenging question about their work, the manager proceeds to help the staff member reflect and resolve their challenge. When staff draw on their community-level experiences or opinions to recommend a way forward or change, this 'evidence' is strongly considered and warmly received by managers. Staff are acknowledged and/or rewarded for hard work, openness, critical thinking and creativity.</p>  |
| <p><b>E.g. Supervision techniques</b></p> <p>Managers do not go out to the field very often. When they do, field staff are anxious to ensure everything looks successful, lest any failures reflect on their own abilities or efforts. The manager's visit becomes highly planned and controlled, inhibiting the manager and staff's ability to learn together.</p>   | <p>Managers regularly book time in their schedule to go to the field, in addition to official 'monitoring visits'. Visits by the manager are usually informal, with the manager joining staff in implementation of normal activities. Due to this frequent on-the-job interaction, managers develop confidence in their staff, and staff trust managers to understand and help with the challenges of the work.</p>  |
| <p><b>E.g. Community mobilisation</b></p> <p>Project staff visit a community to 'sensitise' them about an upcoming project of a new well being drilled. It emerges that the community members would prefer to have a less expensive hand pump that they can fix themselves, and so that the project could afford an additional well to cover the village.</p> <p>Project staff believe the community's idea is a good one but the number and location of water points have already been determined by project planners and people from the drilling company. The budget, timelines and technology have already been approved, and the front-line staff are not confident to ask for a change from management.</p> | <p>In an attempt to trigger community-led changes in latrine building and use, project staff visit communities to listen, ask questions and provoke discussions on local sanitation practices. If it comes out that there are health problems, and if the community becomes charged with a desire for change, the staff will help them build an action plan. If through careful facilitation and follow-up visits the community cannot be provoked to see links between health problems and poor sanitation, staff do not force the issue, even if the project has set a goal for a certain number of villages to 'respond positively' and for a certain number of latrines to be built.<sup>1</sup></p> |
| <b>Procedures</b>   |  |
| <p><b>E.g. Planning meeting</b></p> <p>After the first 'pilot' year of a project, staff get together with representatives from the donor agency to plan for years 2 and 3. Those with higher positions tend to dominate the discussions.</p>  | <p>When the manager from the capital city visits for a planning meeting, s/he tends to play a facilitative role in the planning process. S/he helps the front-line managers and staff identify the current issues that</p>   |

<sup>1</sup> For more information on this unique process of Community-Led Total Sanitation, see Bongartz *et al.* (2010) *PLA 61*: [www.planotes.org/pla\\_backissues/61.html](http://www.planotes.org/pla_backissues/61.html)

**Table 1 (continued)**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>It is clear to front-line staff that management’s proposed goals for years 2 and 3 will not be possible, based on how many communities they were able to support in year 1. But they don’t share these doubts with managers and consequently no discussion of the implementation context takes place during the meeting.</p>  | <p>need attention (resources and staff time). This gives front-line staff an opportunity to raise issues from the community’s perspective. Since the manager works so far from the field, s/he limits his/her role to asking probing questions to make sure the ultimate plan is well thought through, feasible and relevant.</p>  |
| <p><b>E.g. Performance appraisals</b></p> <p>An NGO which is funded through child sponsorship programmes has front-line staff with two major responsibilities: facilitating community development initiatives and fulfilling administrative duties. However, regular performance reviews only assess their completion of sponsorship-related duties. One female field staff, who does amazing development work and is loved by the community, received a failing grade because her sponsorship/administrative numbers weren’t good enough.</p> | <p>In a different INGO, staff at field level who demonstrate excellence at supporting community development are offered peer leadership positions where they play a role in coaching, training and supporting their fellow staff. This puts them in a position to pull together knowledge from many field staff and act as a representative to present ideas for change to management. These promotions prove to staff that management considers learning and adaptation to be valuable aspects of performance.</p>  |
| <p><b>Systems</b></p>  |  |
| <p><b>E.g. Monitoring and evaluation (M&amp;E) systems</b></p> <p>Many NGOs have standard M&amp;E reporting templates where the same indicators and questions are answered every quarter. Usually these reports are generated by staff to satisfy their bosses and are not seen as an opportunity to reflect on practice. The assumption is that there is never going to be a reason to change focus or measure something different.</p>   | <p>One NGO refrains from trying to build an entire M&amp;E system for their project at the beginning. They admit that the behaviour and outcomes they are trying to influence are complicated, that they will occur over unknown timelines, and that valuable changes may occur in sequence and not concurrently. For those reasons, the NGO only plans for monitoring the kind of changes they expect to see in the initial stages. This NGO also encourages the documentation of qualitative learning and observation to help the organisation get a strong sense of how it should adapt its practice based on what it learns.</p> |
| <p><b>E.g. Financial system</b></p> <p>For some donors, the consistency and size of funding they disperse depends mostly on a development organisation’s ‘financial capacity’. That is, their capacity to keep organised and transparent records of their financing and their ability to fully spend precise budgets in the allotted time.</p>   | <p>Some developing country governments and donors are experimenting with performance-based funding models where the organisations/offices who achieve most in partnership with the community (e.g. infrastructure allocation where it is most needed) are encouraged to continue doing so with funding boosts on top of normal funding levels.</p>   |

staff to access and share new and different knowledge and perspectives, and act as a link in the chain between poor and excluded communities and senior INGO management, is not effectively valued or supported.

This article draws on my own experiences, and that of my colleagues at Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB). EWB is an NGO that provides capacity-building and organisational development support to national and

international NGOs, governments and businesses involved in southern community development. Since 2000, EWB has worked with hundreds of organisations in 27 countries to help strengthen capacity for organisational learning.

### Impact of organisational culture on learning

An organisation's culture impacts on its ability to learn and respond. If an organisation is authoritarian, bureaucratic and focused on satisfying the requirements laid down by its funders, it may not have enough flexibility truly to respond to and learn from knowledge generated through participatory processes. Even organisations which take a more participatory approach to decision-making can be blind to the interactions and power relations which determine whether and how community knowledge is valued.

A true learning culture recognises the complexity of any development intervention and the dynamic nature of managing this process. Mistakes are embraced and learnt from. Staff are encouraged and feel safe to be honest and speak out, and the organisation itself is flexible and creative. Learning organisations not only ask, but also listen (to communities, staff members, and other stakeholders). They evolve how they operate in response to what they hear. They proactively develop and foster a culture of learning and development among staff members and teams, and develop processes to enable fruitful collaboration. They recognise the importance of decentralised decision-making. In this way they ensure that they have the necessary knowledge, capability and attitude to respond to complex and changing community knowledge and contexts.

Learning at the grassroots does not happen in isolation. In fact, organisational cultures tend to be replicated. If learning is not valued at national and international levels, it is unlikely to be supported locally. Equally, if staff at national and interna-

#### Box 1: Questions for your own reflection: organisational culture

- How would you describe your organisational culture?
- What is the relationship between northern offices and frontline staff?
- How does knowledge flow? Where and how are decisions made? Who has the power to respond to information and knowledge emerging from grassroots processes?
- How does your organisational culture impact on your ability to respond to the feedback and emerging priorities of your front-line staff and the communities you work with?

tional levels do not recognise and understand the dynamics of local-level work, it is unlikely that they will enable spaces or dynamics to emerge to support local learning.

The question of 'How wide are the ripples?' of participatory processes in INGOs depends largely on the types of relationships which are prioritised. Sitting in a northern office you may feel very distant from the grassroots. But if your role involves interacting with donors, northern publics and policy makers, it is important to consider the relative strength of your relationships with colleagues at the grassroots – and how your behaviour affects their ability to learn and respond to grassroots priorities.

Table 1 is based on real examples from EWB's work with hundreds of community development partners and illustrates some of the pressures that EWB's partner organisations have experienced at local level which impact on their local staff's ability to learn.

As you read through the examples, ask yourself:

- Does this sound like something my organisation does right now?
- Does this sound like something my organisation could do to enable learning?

### Leadership for learning

There is extensive research (e.g. Senge, 1990) that an organisation's leaders are the

### Box 2: Questions for your own reflection: leadership for learning

- How would you describe your own management style?
- What do you do that helps you and others around you learn?
- What do you do that might prevent your own learning?
- What do you do that might discourage those you work with from learning?

most responsible and best positioned for ensuring individual and collective learning. In development organisations, revolutions for learning and change are unlikely to come from the base. Even if local staff had the answers and the confidence, they are unlikely to have the power to do much about the situation. They may also feel that they would jeopardise their jobs if they were to speak up, and for hierarchical organisations (which many INGOs are) this kind of behaviour would go against the culture. It is the role of the organisation's leaders to create a safe and inviting space for continuous reflection and redirection planning, so that community information and realities can have increased influence over the organisation's goals and plans.

While senior leadership is key it is also important to recognise that wherever we are in the organisational chain of management we have a responsibility for trying to change things from where we stand. As Guijarro shows (this issue) it is important to recognise your own power to create change in your organisation.

### A final word

It is easy to dismiss the possibility of becoming a learning organisation or blame a difficult funding environment, where it could be seen as inefficient, strenuous or risky (in terms of funding or political positioning) to prioritise organisational learning and responsiveness to communities. Until an organisation thrives by becoming a learning organisation, most will have serious difficulty

succeeding with all of their change efforts. Therefore, much can be done by those who fund development work to encourage and support organisations willing to shift their focus towards communities.

EWB's support for organisational learning and change is tremendously appreciated by our partner organisations. We have helped our partners make a number of changes that help them learn better from communities and the experiences of field staff, and which help their funders better understand what behaviour is required on their part to enable this change in focus. But when it comes to securing funding for our own work, we are not generously rewarded for our downward focus on partners and the continual iterations we make in our approach for supporting organisations. Some donors become confused with our evolving and customised, partner-specific approach. They would be more comfortable if we could just describe one, simple, uniform change that we work on with all our partner organisations, across the board on a pre-established timeline. But we know that's not how valuable and sustainable change occurs.

Multiple accountabilities complicate how an organisation is able to put its learning approach into practice. But if learning is prioritised this can guide the way these accountabilities are managed – ensuring that funding is supporting a learning approach and strengthening, not undermining, an organisation's ability to listen and learn from the grassroots.

It is local staff who interact with communities every day, who have the knowledge and information generated through participatory processes at their fingertips. If these staff are not empowered to act on this knowledge, it is unlikely that real power transformation will occur at this level, or that this information will ever trickle into mainstream development debates. Organisational learning is not straightforward, and can lead to uncom-

portable and difficult organisational change. Only brave organisations can be true learning organisations, but only these organisations will support truly empowering participatory processes at the grassroots.

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# 'I'm starting with the man in the mirror...' Reflections on personal and organisational learning

# 15

by DANIEL GUIJARRO

## Introduction

*If you wanna make the world a better place, you should take a look at yourself, and then make the change.<sup>1</sup>*

This article explores the role of individual reflection, learning and empowerment in bringing about organisational change. I believe that, if community programmes are truly to be led by the local level, the traditional roles and relationships between northern and southern development agents need to be challenged. If those working in the northern offices of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) recognise their own power and the power dynamics within their own organisations, they will be better placed to support the approaches and uses of participatory processes in the South.

In this article, I describe a process of collaborative learning and change involving myself and another individual, which

occurred in the northern office of an INGO. Through this process we became empowered individuals, able to use our knowledge and analysis to engage with power structures within the organisation and bring about policy change.

## Background

Throughout my several years experience of evaluating NGO development programmes in different contexts I realised that the character, empathy and critical reflection of individuals are important factors in bringing about transformative and empowering processes in the South. This behaviour of individuals is as important as a range of organisational features including missions, visions, policies and strategies. Furthermore in my experience the subversion of organisational norms and values are sometimes key for a transformative process. This personal dimension is generally absent in analysis and reflections on programmes, therefore I decided to spend some time

<sup>1</sup> Lyrics taken from 'Man in the Mirror' by Michael Jackson, the American pop star.

looking at the relationship between individuals and their organisations – to see if they shape each other, and if so how and why.

I joined the northern office of an INGO as an unpaid volunteer. I found myself in a privileged position, able to take the time to reflect on what I was doing and why, with less pressure than there is on paid staff members to show results. While the main reason for my presence was to support a staff member, Mary, in designing a new advocacy strategy on aid issues, I also discussed with her my specific interest in the role of individuals in organisational change.<sup>2</sup>

As the trust between us developed we started to share more personal views and professional knowledge. At the end of this process, we both reflected and wrote about what had changed and why.<sup>3</sup>

### The reflection process

As a new person in the organisation, I showed my curiosity. I wanted to understand the main ideas put forward by the organisation. Mary started to act as a translator, explaining the NGO's opinions and ideas to me. Through this exchange she began a critical reflection process herself, identifying some incongruence between institutional discourses and actions. I decided to promote the habit of posing uncomfortable questions (see Box 1). We talked about organisational issues that Mary was not completely happy about or did not know how to progress with. It occurred to me how different interests and power within the organisation affected her daily work.

I found a manual used by the INGO for working with local people to analyse power dynamics within communities. Stories of successful change at community level tend to rely on recognition of, and engagement

#### Box 1: Remaining proactively naive

One of the main aspects I have learnt from this process is that remaining proactively naive about certain issues is powerful. Sometimes understanding both the implicit and explicit norms of an organisation leads a person to justify certain behaviours and adopt certain mechanical attitudes. I challenged this by asking for definitions and explanations of the core concepts we were dealing with such as 'fragile states' or 'aid effectiveness'.

with, local power structures. Community members are supported to analyse their context, reflect on their own positions and power, decide on any changes they wish to bring about and plan a process of change – which includes identifying local power holders and understanding how best to engage with them. At this juncture, I consciously started to establish parallels between communities and the organisation in which I was working.

While this reflective process was happening, Mary and I were asked by the team leader to present ideas to the wider team for the new aid strategy. We used participatory visuals to map out institutional and personal interests across the organisation, to help us to understand the expected output of our work. We mapped out the organisation's values and rhetoric, and then explored how power and decision-making functioned in practice. We started by trying to understand how the organisation's values should influence the INGO standpoint on the aid debate, and from this how it would understand its institutional role in this debate (Box 2).

We understood that if we were going to propose anything specific for the new strategy we had to engage with the reality of how power worked within the INGO. This meant recognising how influential the marketing and funding divisions were. For example we saw that the marketing depart-

<sup>2</sup> This is not her real name. I have protected 'Mary's' identity and the identity of the organisation to protect the space and the process that we started.

<sup>3</sup> Mary gave permission for me to write this article, based on my interpretation of the experience and drawing on quotes from her own reflections. She also commented on drafts of the article.

**Box 2: Understanding the aid debate**

There is a range of views concerning what role INGOs should play in relation to aid. Should INGOs be campaigning for more aid, for 'better' aid (for example: untied aid, and aid directly linked to a pro-poor agenda), or for an end to aid (due to the global power relations that are reinforced by aid flows from North to South)?

Where an organisation stands will depend on its values, on its analysis of the causes of poverty and on its response to the current context. As part of our reflective process Mary and I explored the values held in our INGO. We discussed how, when and where the INGO discussed and understood aid, and how this interacted with its concept of development. We built from this to look at the policy implications of these understandings and definitions.

**Box 3: 1 + 1 = 4: the power with**

In the strategy preparation process I had the chance to realise that  $1+1 = 4$ . We were more powerful because of:

- What I was learning from Mary
- What Mary was learning from me
- What I was learning about me by interacting with Mary
- What Mary was learning about herself by interacting with me

ment were keen to avoid questioning the nature of aid, and attributed this to the fact that the INGO, like many INGOs, received official funding. It seemed that as an aid recipient the INGO felt constrained in looking too deeply into the nature of aid. But, Mary and I were clear that the organisation needed to redefine its position on aid; and she felt empowered through our reflection and analysis process (see Box 3).

In her reflections, Mary wrote:

*I feel very strong ownership over the evolving strategy. I can't remember the last time something work related kept me awake at night.*

*My confidence that aid is important and that the NGO should work on it has really improved. I know that I have really good knowledge and expertise, and experience/understanding of southern perspectives that is growing all the time. But I have struggled to work out how to use this and have been uncertain of the boundaries of northern and southern work.*

**The action process**

Based on our analysis we prepared a draft for an aid strategy which was discussed in different departmental meetings. The first strategy meeting had identified possible

aid-related topics to deal with, but we were not completely happy with how this discussion evolved. We felt that something was missing so we decided to delve deeper into the similarities and differences between these different topics. By using participatory visual tools and mapping we developed a more holistic analysis. This helped us to understand the core issue we were dealing with: the problem of aid dependency in the South.

Our process challenged common practice for analysis and decision-making within the northern offices of INGOs. Staff working in the North, particularly those working on policy issues, generally collect 'objective evidence' to make 'rational' decisions. For example, literature reviews are one of the most commonly used tools to give any specific discourse legitimacy.

While we read widely and explored other people's analysis we felt the importance of creating one that we 'owned'. We acknowledged that we were unconsciously influenced by what we read, and the specific culture and beliefs of the INGO we were working for. But by starting with our own analysis we turned from customers of ideas to cooks of ideas. We were cooking to order: creating the ideas that fit our context, our reality, or our perception of it.

The use of participatory methods gave us the chance to learn more about how different 'ingredients' interact with each other and evolve. We identified some key 'drivers of flavour' which must be considered in any position taken on aid, and also developed a more dynamic understanding of aid (see Box 4).

**Box 4: The cooking process**

**Step 1: Problem tree of aid dependency**

The problem tree was useful in order to identify the main ingredients:

- donors' self-interest in aid;
  - the southern response to aid;
  - an unfair global trade system;
  - the poor quality of aid; and
  - the role of global institutions in (de)regulating aid delivery.
- Nevertheless it was not helpful in helping us understand how the ingredients interact with each other; our analysis was too static.



**Step 2: Dynamic wheel diagram**

This analysis helped us understand better how the ingredients link to and reinforce each other. New flavours appeared in this dynamic understanding. For example, in the outermost circle we identified the (level of) legitimacy of governments in the South as a sub-driver of aid dependency. If you move the outer wheel you can link this issue to the drivers identified in the inner wheel. For example you can see legitimacy of governments – the outermost wheel – through the lens of donor-self interest or through the failure of international institutions – both of which are in the inner wheel. This enabled us to extend our analysis and understanding of the complex issues involved.

Our next reflection was: ‘OK, we are learning how to cook but what is our restaurant (i.e. what is specific about the INGO we are working for)? What makes our dishes different from other restaurants? How does this INGO’s rights discourses and practice fit into our dishes?’. We needed to involve others to answer these wider questions.

**Engaging others**

To engage other staff members in our analysis and get their support for the way we were approaching the aid debate we needed to frame our propositions within the discourse currently used within the

INGO. We had to ensure that our communication was coherent with the vision and mission of the organisation.

We were also aware that engaging with the way power worked within the organisation – using the personal and institutional power dynamics – was as important as having a brilliant idea in terms of influencing decisions. We needed to be strategic in how we presented our analysis.

We started by sharing our ideas with potential allies, using both formal and informal spaces. We found that in informal spaces people were often more open and able to consider different angles, whereas

in formal settings they tended to stick to the opinions they were known for. We held one-to-one meetings to ensure that influential people were on board prior to the second aid strategy meeting. We deliberately included certain concepts in our analysis, such as tax justice or women's rights, to provoke reactions and engage potential sceptics in the process. We had also gained the approval of Mary's boss. This was crucial for our success. As Mary wrote:

*I remembered how things are in this INGO, where you just contact the right person rather than worry about their title or status in the organisation. I've moved roles and currently work with management who are more formal in their approach, but I need to shake off what I've learnt here about status and hierarchy, and go back to thinking about how the organisation operates in practice. I've known where our powerful allies were, but it's been important to think strategically about when and how to get them on board as part of getting buy-in to the strategy.*

At a second strategy meeting we shared our analysis process with the participants and we engaged them as participants in the analysis. For example, during the discussion, we gave them post-its to write on and stick on a flipchart so that we had a more dynamic and interactive debate. Mary wrote:

*Challenging people's ideas about aid and whether it's worthwhile to work on it (and whose job it was to work on it) has been really important. We've broken down some of the artificial walls and been able to build more interest and excitement about work that supports our joint objectives. I think that people who wanted to be involved now feel that they can be, and that perhaps some of the sceptics can see some utility both in aid for aid's sake, and in aid for their agenda's sake.*

The first reactions to our presentation and process were really positive. For example, another staff member who had previously been critical of the organisation's work on aid started to share writings about the synergies between aid and his area of work. Mary wrote:

*An important part of the change has been making people feel part of the process of developing the strategy, and consistently thinking about how the strategy can reach out to both internal and external constituencies so that we can persuade others to get involved.*

In a follow-up meeting with the head of department we also shared the process and analysis. She pointed out the need to widen the process, to engage with stakeholders in the UK and with southern partners. She recognised the links between redefining how the INGO understood aid and development and North-South relationships, including its own organisational relationships. She realised the need to build and share a common vision within the INGO around development and aid issues.

What had started as a process of individual reflection and empowerment had become an entry point for organisational change. The INGO started to explore its own position in the aid debate; and both Mary and the head of department started involving others across the organisation (including the UK marketing department and country programmes based in the South) in discussions on aid and aid dependency.

### **What have we learnt?**

As in any social structure, different interests and needs, both personal and institutional, create certain behaviour patterns and influence how we, as northern development practitioners, act. We need norms and patterns of behaviour (both explicit and implicit) to enable us to develop our identity as individuals and as a

group, and to facilitate our interactions with others. But we also need to be conscious of how this process of routinisation of behaviour affects us. Moreover we need to be aware of the power relationships that underlie our behaviour.

In this case, we acknowledged how the funding needs of the organisation were creating a certain pattern of thought about the nature of aid, since the expected outcome of our work in the strategy was based on the 'more aid' discourse of the aid debate. To change these routines it was necessary to create spaces for reflection and critical analysis to help clarify the wider

picture of the system we are immersed in, and enable us to act.

By reflecting on our norms, values and ways of behaving we can become more open to the ideas of others, and to knowledge and information received through non-traditional channels. But equally importantly we can become aware of our own agency, our own power, and our ability to influence our organisational positions and strategies, how we work with and relate to others, which organisational norms we buy into and which norms we challenge. As empowered individuals we can play our role in widening the ripples.

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# Bridging the gap between individual and organisational learning: the role of HR

# 16

by **SOFIA ANGIDOU**

For international NGOs to listen and respond to the information, knowledge and learning generated through participatory processes at the grassroots they need to be able to learn, but this is not always easy for them.

During my time with Bond, part of my role was to work with and support NGOs on organisational learning. I was able to listen, discuss and debate the barriers to organisational learning with a number of different actors, as well as reflecting on how to overcome them.<sup>1</sup> During these discussions, what always struck me was that the focus of our analysis is always on an **organisation's** capacity (or incapacity) to learn. Our analysis rarely touches on **individual** capacity to learn. If learning is a process that leads to behaviour change, I cannot help wondering if we, as individuals, know how to learn. Do we have the skills and abilities needed to observe our experiences, reflect on them and articulate

a conceptual understanding of them? Do we have the necessary learning attitudes to help us to transform our individual learning into organisational learning? Do we feel comfortable, able and willing to share our learning, to challenge the mental models of others and be challenged on our own?

Looking for a new angle to approach these questions, I made a rather adventurous and, according to some colleagues, bewildering decision to move to a different role, in Human Resources (HR). I was aware of the traditional image of HR as a bureaucratic function dealing with recruitment and personnel processes – research by The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development on graduate perceptions of HR revealed that the three words most associated with HR were 'dull', 'bureaucratic' and 'repetitive'! However, The Brooke, my new employer, took a much broader view of HR's

<sup>1</sup> Bond is the UK membership body for NGOs working in international development. See: [www.bond.org.uk](http://www.bond.org.uk)

responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> They saw a wider learning role for HR: supporting training, learning and staff development, instilling a culture of learning across the organisation, and ensuring that individual learning links to organisation learning.

A few days after I started in my role as learning and development manager in the HR team, I was asked to review the organisation's staff appraisal process. At first, I was rather sceptical as the word 'appraisal' did not resonate very well with my learning ethics. I knew also from experience that appraisals are often cumbersome, bureaucratic and top-down, rarely resulting in actual change.

The Brooke appraisal process was paper-based: staff appraised themselves and then discussed their views and comments with their line manager who then gave feedback and finalised the form. Most people saw it as a time-consuming, bureaucratic requirement and it was followed somewhat mechanically. The process was re-engineered annually, in part in the hope that this would stimulate more interest amongst staff.

However, this time there was a genuine drive for change, related to the new 'people-focused' approach of the new chief executive officer (CEO). This had already led to a number of initiatives such as a staff representatives group, cross-organisational work in areas identified by staff, and my recruitment to support learning. A sense of 'renewal' and 'creating space' was in the air, and the HR team felt that appraisals could play a role in that.

Soon, my initial scepticism was overtaken by excitement: excitement that appraisals could create a facilitated environment for feedback and discussion that could eventually lead to learning and change!

Although there was not enough time to transform the entire process, my manager

and I decided to introduce changes to make the appraisal process more learning-oriented and less administrative.

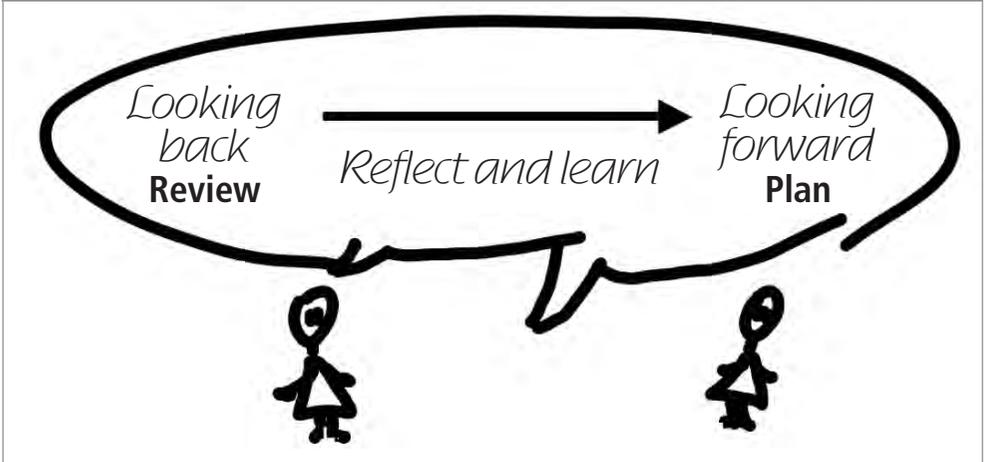
### Creating space for individual reflection and discussion

We transformed most of the questions in the appraisal form into open questions that encouraged reflection and 'sense-making' and discouraged staff from just listing and reporting activities against objectives. The questions encouraged staff to reflect on their experiences of the last year, the challenges they faced, how they overcame them, what kind of support they would have liked, how they felt about the past year, and why? The questions gradually moved towards asking staff what they wanted to do differently and/or better over the next year, based on their experiences, and what they felt they (and the organisation) needed to change so as to be able to do that.

Figure 1 (which was used in all appraisal workshops) reflects the idea that the appraisal meeting should be a **discussion** between the staff member and his/her manager where they 'look back' (review the past year), they reflect and discuss learning and then 'look ahead' (plan the next year) based on that learning.

Staff, by and large, appreciated this new space and approached it with a positive attitude rather than viewing it as a finger-pointing exercise. However, it did create challenges. Managers (and staff in some cases) found that the appraisal meetings and forms became rather long. For those who managed lots of staff the whole process of discussing, noting and writing became far too heavy and time-consuming. We aim to improve this next year by simplifying the form further, and also extending the deadlines for completion of appraisal forms.

<sup>2</sup> The Brooke is the UK's leading animal welfare charity working to improve the welfare of working animals in the world's poorest communities across Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Brooke UK office employs about 65 staff across three directorates: international development, fundraising and communication and resources. The Brooke UK is governed by a board of trustees while managerial responsibilities lie with the senior management team (the CEO and the directors of the three directorates).

**Figure 1: Creating the space – a visual representation of an appraisal meeting**

### Developing skills and attitudes for effective appraisal discussions

Another significant challenge we anticipated in introducing the new approach was the quality of relationships between staff and their line managers. For example, where trust was an issue, discussions would not be open or honest enough and, as a result, the 'space for reflection' would not be used effectively. To begin to overcome this, we helped staff recognise that they are also responsible for the quality of the appraisal discussion. We worked to empower them to take on this responsibility, increasing their confidence and capacity to break through some of the power and trust issues by opening up themselves and by asking open questions to their line managers.

To this end, we provided workshops to all staff as well as one-to-one 'coaching' sessions for individuals who wanted to discuss issues in a more confidential way. The workshops were run separately for staff, line managers and senior managers. We focused particularly on listening, giving feedback, asking questions and having 'courageous conversations'. It was important that we clearly acknowledged to staff the challenges and obstacles they would face in running an open and learning-focused appraisal process. We particularly talked about the power dynamics in line management relationships, including trust

issues and lack of time or interest.

Most staff valued our approach of encouraging dual responsibility for their appraisals and they felt positive and empowered to exercise that responsibility. However, for certain people, the discussion around these fundamental and deep-rooted challenges made them realise that they felt disempowered more generally in their work. As a result, some of them withdrew from the process and others remained rather negative. These reactions and signs were indicative of the potential that the appraisal process has to unearth, explore and potentially transform power dynamics across the organisation.

We also noted that some of the tools we used, such as the reflection and feedback tool in Box 1, carry significant cultural assumptions. There are differences of view and level of comfort between staff from different cultures in giving feedback to senior staff and in questioning authority, which we need to further acknowledge and address as we continue to develop the new processes.

### Aggregating findings from appraisal forms

Aggregating findings from appraisal forms was a major change as appraisal findings had not been properly analysed before. The confidentiality aspect was very important and staff were reassured that their appraisal forms were read only by their line

### Box 1: Reflecting and giving feedback (the start of an open and honest relationship)

This simple technique was used to help staff at all levels feel more comfortable in giving 'behavioural' feedback in a constructive and less threatening way.

- Behaviour (when you did/said/acted like that...)
- Outcome (I felt...)
- Consequences (as a result...)
- Action (what can you... change/do differently...?)

*When you criticised my work at the last partners' meeting it made me feel very uncomfortable and I could not then engage with the rest of the discussion. I would ask you, in the future, to first discuss this feedback with me during our one-to-one meetings so I can understand it better before it gets discussed with others.*

manager, the director of their department and HR. Reading and analysing all the information from the appraisal forms took significantly longer than we anticipated, but it was an extremely useful exercise. It allowed the HR team to identify trends and links between different individual 'stories'.

Given time and capacity constraints, we decided to aggregate the findings by directorate only (international development, fundraising and communication and resources). This enabled the heads of each directorate to have a more in-depth analysis of the findings relevant to their teams. We felt that this would facilitate stronger engagement with follow-up of the findings, although we realised that we were missing out on analysis of other important variables, e.g. years of service within the organisation and level of seniority (see Beardon *et al.*, this issue, on the dynamics of aggregation).

We decided to prioritise analysis of:

- learning to be taken forward; and
- prerequisites for change (organisational cultural and attitudinal changes needed to create a learning environment and tackle operational challenges – see Box 2).

### Cross-referencing the findings

We used information and findings from the annual staff survey and exit interviews of the same year to validate and enrich the findings from the appraisal forms.

### Box 2: Prerequisites for change across the organisation

- Staff can openly talk about their expectations or concerns about their involvement in a project/area of work.
- Staff feel comfortable with the need to prioritise both on a strategic and on a day-to-day level.
- It is OK to say 'no' to others.
- Staff feel comfortable and safe with sharing learning, asking questions and critically reflecting on their work.
- Informal learning is promoted, encouraged and rewarded by all within the organisation.
- Horizontal growth (learning and growing from others at similar levels across the organisation, e.g. through secondments or shadowing) is promoted and valued.
- Critical reflection is encouraged both at an individual and at an organisation level.
- Staff have a more proactive approach to seeking information (finding information has been recognised as a major challenge across the organisation).
- Staff have a sense of individual responsibility in understanding and learning more about their work.

Comparing and cross-referencing findings from different resources proved to be extremely powerful, helping us gain a deeper understanding of organisational challenges and giving more legitimacy to the changes we were proposing to the senior management team.

A good example is around the area of communication. We had strong feedback from both the staff survey and last year's exit interviews that communication of departmental plans needed to improve. However, given that all plans were available on the intranet, the nature of the problem was not clear to managers. Through analysis of the appraisal findings it became evident that the main issue was that staff were not able to identify the links and dependencies between different plans and therefore not able to incorporate them into their individual plans, resulting in last-minute requests to contribute to projects and stressful deadlines. As a result of that, we introduced dedicated staff meetings to discuss departmental plans. Directors highlighted cross-team dependencies and priorities when they presented the plans and managers were advised to discuss with their teams planned projects from other departments that were expected to impact on them.

### Box 3: How HR can enhance individual learning and the links between individual and organisational learning

#### Direct access to grassroots information

HR coordinates various formal organisational processes which generate and consolidate information about employees' needs (appraisals, personal development plans) and their views of the organisation (staff surveys, exit interviews). These can feed into meeting individual and organisational learning needs.

#### Creating space for learning

HR can create spaces for learning and reflection through changes in the employee-related processes it coordinates (e.g. performance management, appraisals, personal development and inductions). Because of the scale of HR processes, changes in how these processes are run and in how staff experience them can impact on the whole organisation and can expand space for learning in a highly visible way.

HR can also create new spaces for learning through formal or informal internal processes and systems (e.g. introducing staff meetings, setting up staff representatives schemes, organising internal networking and learning events across departments and teams, creating communities of practice or peer support groups or even organising social events!).

#### Strengthening learning capability

HR can strengthen learning capability within the organisation by creating a conducive environment for change and by building learning competencies like listening, giving feedback, reflective skills, being open to new ideas, questioning skills, sense-making and others (which every organisation needs to define to reflect their own context and character). For example, it can look for staff with learning attitudes when recruiting, it can promote and reward learning attributes and competencies (through performance management and reward approaches) and it can support individuals to build learning skills, as well as offering learning opportunities such as secondments and peer groups.

### Sharing the findings with the senior management team

We discussed our findings with the senior management team, helping them (and us) to make sense of them. We were careful not to alter or edit the information for the sake of the senior managers' ears. However, we recognised that we needed to consider style and tone when presenting the information. We knew that the management team would be more able to listen and respond to the information if it fitted with their leadership style, in our case, a positive, forward-looking, action-focused style (see Guijarro, this issue, for more on this point).

Another learning point from this stage was the importance of the 'travel time' of the information. Time delays in the process meant that by the time the information reached the top level of the organisation a couple of the challenges were no longer relevant. This was a strong reminder that organisations are dynamic places that constantly change (due to external or internal factors) and that learning needs to be considered in the context, and at the time, that it takes place.

### Developing an action plan

The senior management team committed to an organisational action plan in response to the appraisal findings, which was reviewed and discussed with the staff representatives group. HR led the development of the action plan and provided quarterly updates on its progress to senior management and the staff representatives. Not all challenges could be tackled through this annual action plan as some of them required longer-term changes. However, the level and kind of responses that were put in place signal a commitment to change which we hope has a positive psychological impact on staff.

### Lessons and impact

Box 3 summarises three areas within the HR function which, in my experience, offer great potential for enhancing individual learning and the links between individual and organisational learning. Of course, these opportunities can only become a reality if the organisation recognises them and gives HR the legitimacy and space to capitalise on them. In our case, the broader organisational culture changes that were happening facilitated staff's interest and

investment in the changes we were making.

In terms of impact, it is too early to know the full extent of change resulting from our efforts. However, there are some visible shifts.

- There is a real sense of commitment and accountability around the follow-up of the appraisal findings. HR gives updates and reports progress to management and the staff representatives group.
- There was a significant increase in participation in the appraisal process – from around 60% in the previous year to 100% this year.
- There has already been change in a number of areas across the organisation, most significantly around communication, cross departmental work and planning processes.
- A significantly greater appetite for learning spaces! Since the appraisals, I have introduced an organisation-wide learning and development programme (with courses, peer learning, coaching, share and learn meetings and internal learning workshops on thematic areas). Both participation and engagement levels have been extremely positive.

Finally, this whole process offered an invaluable platform to HR to introduce and advocate for individual learning skills and behaviours in a very practical and relevant way (rather than in an abstract and theoretical way as is sometimes the case). We have created a momentum as well as interest and excitement – encouraging staff to become better learners and to drive change. We need to ensure that we continue to fuel this momentum.

The relationship between individual and organisational learning is still one of the most contested issues in debates amongst learning practitioners. It is a very complex one which has been explored by many: from Archer's (2000) 'stratified individual' approach which incorporates both individual and social learning into the organisational learning theory, to Kim's 'observe, assess, design and implement shared mental model' (OADI SMM) (Kim, 1994). As much as I recognise the complexities of transforming individual learning into systemic organisational learning, I believe that we tend to overlook the power of this simple statement:

*Individuals can learn without the organisation learning but the organisation cannot learn if its individuals don't learn.*

It makes even more sense to me in the work I am doing within HR. I constantly realise that, as important as it is to work on improving our organisational processes, structures and systems to enable organisational learning, it will not get us far if at the same time we do not work on empowering and enabling individuals to be better learners and change agents. After all, change starts from within! I hope that you are inspired to speak to your HR team to help bridge the gap between individual and organisational learning.

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# Learning in INGOs: the case of Kenya

# 17

by **ELIUD WAKWABUBI**

In thinking about how staff sitting in the northern offices of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) learn from and use the information and knowledge generated through participatory processes, it is important to consider how knowledge flows function from the local to the national level. At the international level the Ripples process was keen to look at what staff in the North or international offices could do differently to strengthen the ripples. However, reflecting on what can be done at this level requires understanding the dynamics in-country. How well are flows actually happening from local to national level? What are the obstacles faced by those working in national offices? Where are the opportunities to strengthen these flows?

In 2009 the Participatory Methodologies Forum of Kenya (PAMFORK) conducted research involving 20 INGOs with offices in Kenya. These INGOs were all members of PAMFORK and therefore had an interest in participation, and were working to build the participation capacity

of the community-based organisations (CBOs) through which they work, to reach grassroots communities. The goal of the action research was to establish the extent to which these INGOs learn from promoting and using participation in their programmes. Specific research objectives were to:

- Establish the extent to which participatory development lessons are being applied (or not) by the INGOs, by examining and documenting evidence of such applications.
- Compile learning through case studies of good practice on how learning from participation has changed or changes INGOs.

The research included interviews with key informants (key leaders in the INGOs and resource people in charge of knowledge management and information flows), a review of INGO material, and a participatory workshop to share and analyse the findings and further explore how INGOs learn from the participatory processes they support. We found that, while there are many initiatives to support learning from

**Box 1: Strategies for accountability and transparency at ActionAid**

ActionAid facilitates sessions in local communities to enable groups to analyse their context and develop community action plans. These are directly linked to the development of staff members' annual work plans. But it is not just a question of integrating community plans into staff workplans. The workplans themselves are shared with the community. This then forms part of the accountability agreement by which community members can hold ActionAid accountable for programme delivery. Once a year, community members are invited to discuss annual work plans with staff and ask critical questions such as: What was done? What is working? Why? What are the renewed ways of doing things and what can be done differently? Following the community-level discussion, emerging lessons and recommendations are used to develop new work plans or improve existing ones.

Local staff work plans are also discussed quarterly at the regional level, with the involvement of local staff, partners and target beneficiaries. Here the challenges and achievements are identified and emerging issues are discussed, along with suggestions as to how they can be resolved. There are also biannual sessions (*Jadili*, meaning debate) for ActionAid Kenya middle- and senior-level staff. These week-long sessions provide an opportunity to link learning from local-level work to regional and national priority-setting and position-taking. Local staff are invited along to the sessions relevant to their work.

ActionAid's emphasis on transparency has led the organisation to develop strategies to share a range of organisational information. For example, they post information about their plans and budgets on community notice boards. They have also implemented a complaints policy so that community members can raise issues in relation to their work.

local participatory work, a range of cultural, structural and capacity issues limit the extent to which the information and knowledge generated through participatory processes flows to the national offices of these INGOs.

This article is a summary of the findings from our original research, extended by further interviews with key staff in ActionAid International, Plan International and SNV. These three INGOs were selected because they were rated in the research as having a good history of learning from participatory processes. As a network coordinator of PAMFORK, I also had long-term relationships with them working as a participatory communication and development consultant for SNV and Plan and on networks and networking for ActionAid. I was therefore able to write about their participatory learning practices with both a practical and theoretical understanding.

**Understanding the role of participation**

If an INGO does not value participatory development at the local level it is unlikely that poor people's voices will be heard elsewhere in the organisation. All the INGOs involved in the study felt that community-level participation was important, both to

involve community members in programme design and delivery and to nurture active citizenship. But, there were differences in the importance placed on participation, and in the extent to which participation was transformative or instrumental. For some, participation was limited to consultation on community development plans. For others, the role of local perspectives and knowledge was considered more broadly.

For example, SNV and ActionAid both used participatory action research to encourage community members to discuss issues (SNV focusing on water and sanitation, ActionAid on HIV and stigma), and drew from this to develop national policy positions. Beyond this, there were examples of how participatory approaches were linked to organisational transparency and accountability. Plan discussed how the shift from top-down service delivery to a rights-based approach meant that they started to look at community involvement in programme design and in ongoing discussions. ActionAid shared how a commitment to participation meant that community members were invited to discuss and give feedback on organisational strategy and plans, and to hold the organisation accountable (see Box 1).

Photo: Eliud Wakwabubi



Plan International doing action research at St Johns Community Centre, Nairobi.

While the use of participatory methods was extensive across the 20 organisations who participated in the research, only four felt that they had ways to learn from these participatory processes. These four had established community dialogue structures for generating feedback from communities. They had institutionalised regular fora with communities to listen, capture and integrate the feedback into subsequent programming activities. They had established participatory action research processes in which they visited communities and listened to them, and they reported having used these to improve on their programming approaches.

### Documenting participatory work

A major stumbling block for all organisations was documentation. For most organisations documentation was not a priority. Where documentation did happen it was geared towards writing funding reports, rather than learning:

*We only document because our donors require us to do so. If we were to be given a choice, we would not document since we never use the final documentation outputs.*

What is more, we found that for many organisations, when documentation did happen it was often done by staff from the international offices, rather than by

national or local staff. Key respondents from 16 out of 20 INGOs noted that documenting lessons learnt as a result of applying participatory methodologies was not their major concern. These 16 prioritised service delivery over learning. Only 4 out of 20 INGOs have used knowledge from their work and interactions from communities to change the tools and methods they use, specifically their planning, monitoring and evaluation tools. This suggests that much documentation fulfils international agendas, rather than responding to local priorities (cf. Beardon *et al.*, this issue).

### Supporting staff to learn

Staff implementing development programmes are often busy, with excessive demands on their time. They face the added complication of poor communication systems and time-consuming travel. Learning is not going to happen if staff do not have time and incentives to reflect, share experiences, read documents and critique other people's work. For **organisations** to learn, they need to support **individuals** to learn (see Angidou, this issue).

The majority of the INGOs (12 out of 20) had cultures that encouraged learning, while the rest had cultures that inhibited learning. Some INGOs (4 out of 20) focused on using knowledge to become more effective by drawing their staff's attention to innovations and promoting the use of best practices. Within others (16 out of 20), individual staff learning was seen as a hindrance to organisational learning, especially if staff members do not have the attitudes, skills and motivation to learn. Key respondents from 16 INGOs noted that their staff are either overworked or do not set aside time to reflect in order to adopt new approaches – and there are no incentives to encourage staff to do this.

The space given to staff learning across our sample INGOs was limited, but most organisations provided annual or biannual

learning opportunities. SNV stood out as one of the few organisations which had regular monthly learning opportunities (see Box 2).

These spaces are clearly important and effective in providing staff with time to reflect on their experiences of interacting with communities. However, having discrete spaces does not make up for the lack of incentives for ongoing learning. There is a concern that these spaces are planned and structured from above, and therefore may not offer the opportunity for open learning. Rather than listening and responding to grassroots priorities, they often reflect organisational priorities and discussions. Moreover, by limiting reflection and discussion space these organisations run the risk of losing the timely response that may be possible with a more dynamic approach to development planning and reflection.

Beyond these spaces there are some other attempts to encourage learning, particularly by ActionAid, which has a well resourced and institutionalised Impact Assessment Unit. This unit was established to create a vibrant structure to promote internal knowledge management and learning, and has two functions: to directly capture knowledge; and to facilitate and build capacity for knowledge-sharing and understanding impact. The unit has developed a variety of approaches and regularly trains staff in a range of areas, including the use of participatory methods.

In addition, both ActionAid and SNV have established communities of practice to facilitate sharing knowledge, although these are informal and voluntary and are not part of staff performance contracts.

### Structures to support information flows

If INGOs do not have good linkages at grassroots level, it is unlikely that they will be able to respond to and learn from the information generated through the participatory processes that they support.

Most of the INGOs involved in our

### Box 2: Learning opportunities at SNV

Currently, SNV is working with over 25 partner organisations in Kenya. To ensure learning among its advisors working in different regions in Kenya, SNV has been organising learning events called 'monthly home days' where all its development advisors working in the field meet and exchange their sectoral experiences and lessons, and listen to each other in order to draw lessons to inform their future programming. The specific sectors include education, water, livestock and tourism. Within each of these sectors, good practice recommendations are produced. SNV is very familiar with the practice of knowledge brokering and networking and this forms the basis for measuring the performance of all its advisors. Each adviser is required to document a case study each year. SNV has put in place an incentive mechanism that rewards advisors whose case studies are judged to be the best, based on the success of the documented project and how well they are written. Such case studies are also published in renowned international journals.

study had country offices based in our capital city, Nairobi, distant from the communities which they serve. However, many of these organisations have established regional offices which are closer to their target groups. While the form and function of these offices differs from organisation to organisation, in general they are operating as outposts of the national office, rather than as empowered organisations in their own right. For example, they devote most of their energy to generating reports to send to the national offices (and onto donors) rather than generating knowledge based on their work with communities. They also have limited power to determine how knowledge flows down or up to the headquarters, and therefore have limited influence to ensure that the outcomes of community-level work flow to national offices and beyond. This relationship was replicated through partners. For example, the SNV respondent suggested that while local capacity builders (NGOs and private organisations funded by SNV to implement their work at local level) are expected to implement SNV's programmes, the SNV staff still hold onto many of the responsi-

Photo: Eliud Wakwabubi



A staff member from SNV's regional office learning from school water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) processes, Kajiado District.

bilities which these local capacity builders could effectively execute. 'Handing over the stick' is still a challenge – and this acts a barrier to good information flows.

### Translating information to knowledge

All organisations have access to plenty of raw data, but they do not necessarily turn this into knowledge that can be used. Consequently, the wealth of valuable learning they come across gets lost and, in due course, forgotten – leaving nothing behind for future reference. Only two of the 20 organisations involved had established a unit to support documentation and communication, and it is this unit which plays a role in translating this information into useful knowledge, packaged to influence policies and policy-making processes. But whether this accurately represents the voice of the poor or not has not been deter-

### Box 3: Limits to knowledge-sharing

For the knowledge and information generated through participatory work to influence INGOs, this information needs to be documented and shared. We found very limited evidence of documentation for learning, or for translating information into organisational knowledge. Only two organisations had physical resource centres, where documentation was available (whether this was published material, or 'grey' material – organisational reports, programme plans etc.). This limits the potential for staff members to access information. Unless knowledge-seeking cultures are nurtured within organisations, it is unlikely that the outputs of participatory processes will be known about or capitalised upon. What was surprising was that, often, information on local and national work was more easily available – via public websites – to the public or staff in international offices than it was to local and national staff, who did not have the benefit of easy Internet access.

mined (see Part II of this issue for more discussion of this point).

### Learning and culture

Africa has an oral culture. People are good at talking, but not so good at writing. It was clear from those involved in the research that if learning is to happen it needs to respond to the realities of our culture. People will share knowledge through workshops, they will learn together. But encouraging people to document is a Herculean task.

Tacit knowledge is stored in people's heads and people are reluctant to write. They have a fairly limited knowledge of existing technological innovations. Lessons are discussed in many fora but are not documented: yet it is documentation that can ensure that lessons are used. In addition, while the people interviewed for this research acknowledge the value of learning, they commented that a conservative culture of hoarding knowledge still exists. Organisational learning therefore remains a challenge. It needs to be addressed head-on through institutional policies that require staff to take the time to reflect and document their reflections, and to draw lessons.

### Conclusion

This brief analysis of the systems and structures that INGOs in Kenya have put into place to support information flows suggests that, while there is strong support for engaging communities in programme development and implementation, investment in bottom-up organisational learning is limited. Approaching learning holistically involves recognising that:

- staff need to be given an incentive to learn;
- spaces need to be available for ongoing learning;
- power dynamics need to be considered and dealt with;
- policies need to respond to cultural realities; and
- information flows need to be actively supported.

But instead, these INGOs take an ad-hoc approach to organisational learning, investing in some key functions without thinking through how to integrate learning across the entire programme. If the information and knowledge generated through participatory processes is to flow to, and influence, the policies and practice of INGOs, learning needs to be strengthened. This can be done through establishing inter- and intra-organisational peer-learning teams, to facilitate both horizontal and vertical learning, and an annual ring-fenced budget to support implementation of these learning processes. To promote internal learning, some INGOs have set up their own information silos, either resource centres or websites, to ensure that knowledge is available to their own staff. However, this needs to be extended to external audiences who do not access information stored in these silos and also move a step further to include beneficiaries. The challenge of storing knowledge in formats and language appropriate to audiences at different levels needs to be addressed. Continuous training and capacity building is a prerequisite for changes in attitude and behaviour of INGO staff and this should be promoted for learning and change to take place.

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# PART IV

Structures,  
mechanisms  
and spaces

In exploring how information and knowledge flow from grassroots to influence international non-governmental organisation (INGO) decision-making and understanding of development, we quickly began to consider questions of organisational structure, culture and decision-making. The default assumption when considering INGOs is that they will be headed by an office based in the global North, implementing programmes in the global South – and that the distance between programme implementation and decision-making is therefore a long one. However, INGOs are complex beasts. By their very nature they operate across continents. But where and how power operates, both formally and informally, across different organisations is not straightforward. This section explores three interacting strands which mediate an organisation's ability to learn from and respond to information generated through grassroots participatory processes.

The first strand, with case studies from **Jonathan Dudding** and **Soledad Muñiz**, shares how network structures – designed with the specific intention of being locally owned and responsive – interact with the challenges of supporting information to reach the ears of staff sitting at the organisation's centre. When the Institute of Cultural Affairs took the decision to support the emergence of local indigenous organisations, the resulting change of incentives and organisational culture shifts meant that there was a lack of investment or recognition of the need for a central organisation or coordinating body. Lack of attention meant that while power had been devolved, there was no system for information to flow beyond the national level. This was a missed opportunity to build from community knowledge to influence global policy makers. For InsightShare, the analysis that sparked 'Global hubs' was different – it emerged during a time where globalisation and global links were seen to be paramount,

and responds directly to the desire to support community empowerment and engage local people in global interaction, debate and exchange. Taken together these case studies illustrate how it is not enough to consider organisational structure. There are a whole host of other decisions, concerning the locus of work, the content for potential links and sharing and the dynamic nature of organisations that need to be considered. Moreover, they challenge the assumption that locally based organisations are more able to use information from the grassroots, identifying how in creating and sustaining this organisation diverse other tensions arise, including the tension between organisational survival and fulfilling a development vision.

This is followed by two more case studies, which look at how organisational spaces can be created or occupied to strengthen the potential for multiple knowledges and perspectives to be shared. **Jo Lyon** discusses the introduction of a virtual platform which is enabling Oxfam staff around the world to make connections with each other, sharing insights and experiences and building new knowledge. As Jo highlights, what has been particularly interesting about this experience is that the platform was introduced informally, and yet staff uptake has been phenomenal. This suggests that where supportive cultures exist, staff will take the time to build understanding and collaborate together across diverse offices and work contexts, even within a vast institution such as Oxfam. **Angela Milligan** and **Emma Wilson** reflect on how they were able to use a pre-existing research discussion space within IIED to bring questions of participation back onto the agenda. IIED was at the forefront of the participatory research movement, and yet in recent years shifting priorities and staffing had meant that participatory values and capacities had slipped off the agenda. Inspired through the Ripples process, Angela and other IIED

staff decided to claim the existing space and use it to re-energise debate around participation, challenging IIED staff to reflect on how and where community voices influenced their research agendas and development understanding.

The final sub-set of articles considers organisational strategy development processes. Organisational strategies are becoming increasingly important for INGOs. Issues of accountability and representation imply that poor and excluded people should be actively engaged in strategy development processes. **Kate Newman** and **Helen Baños Smith** reflect on interviews carried out with senior staff in eight INGOs on their strategy development processes, and identify very real tensions and contradictions in responding to people's voices through this process. This article is followed by two case studies, on ActionAid (**Kate Newman** with **David Archer**) and IIED (**Michel Pimbert**) which show practical ways of engaging with poor people in these seemingly complex abstract processes. But they also raise questions about how involvement is sustained overtime as strategies are revised or extended – and illustrate the challenges in aggregation and interpretation of diverse voices (see also Part II, this issue). Ultimately though, as Helen and Kate argue, if strategies contain an organisation's analysis of poverty, and

their articulation of a response to it, there is no choice but to engage the poor and excluded groups that these organisations exist to serve in developing it.

Structures, spaces and mechanisms is a vast topic. These articles only scratch the surface in relation to the challenges and potentials of INGOs listening and responding to the information and knowledge generated through participatory processes. We are aware, for example, that we have not included reflections on organisational wide systems such as ALPS (ActionAid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System) or PALS (Plan's Participatory Accountability and Learning System), and how they support information flows or devolution of power. Equally we have little reference to self-organised virtual spaces, blogging and social networking and what potential influence these might have. What this section does illustrate are the dynamics involved, issues to be considered and opportunities that we should attend to across organisations, in facilitating and strengthening the flows of such knowledge. Suggesting that responding to the information and knowledge generated through local participatory processes is not just about a good participatory communication tool (see Part I, this issue). It is also about whether and how an organisation values this knowledge, and whether space exists to act on it.



# 'The centre cannot hold': reflections on the effects of a transition from single entity to global network

# 18

by JONATHAN DUDDING

This article shares the experiences of the Institute of Culture Affairs (ICA), an international network linking national ICAs which are concerned with the 'human factor in world development'.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on my experience of working for different member organisations since 1992, I reflect on the changing dynamics as ICA moved from a unitary organisation with its headquarters in Chicago, USA, to a network of national organisations, each locally funded and accountable. I explore how this change in structure has enabled or hindered the influence that grassroots information and knowledge has on decision-making across the organisation. Through doing this I suggest that while at first glance you might assume that a network of local organisations is more able to respond to information generated through participatory processes at community level this is not necessarily the case. Structure is only one of the many factors which impact on how an organisa-

tion is able to use or learn from information generated at the grassroots.

## Introducing ICA

When ICA was established as an independent organisation in 1973 (previously it had been part of the Ecumenical Institute) its mission was 'to further the application of methods of human development to communities and organisations all around the world, based on a secular philosophy'. It emphasised process, providing the tools and techniques to enable people to learn together, to make decisions for themselves and to make long-term and short-term plans together. This focus was informed by extensive research carried out in the late 1960s which identified the three main dynamics that drove society – the economic, political and cultural – and the imbalance between them. ICA's role (and from where the name derives) was to strengthen the cultural dynamic.

The approach was rooted in a strong

<sup>1</sup> See: [www.ica-uk.org.uk/ica-worldwide](http://www.ica-uk.org.uk/ica-worldwide)

commitment to participation, both inside the organisation and in its programmes. The mutual respect for the voices and ideas of everyone led to a decision-making process based on consensus – with as many people as possible involved in the decisions that mattered. Equally the importance of reflective practice was recognised. This meant that it was not enough to reach agreement on a topic or issue – there needed to be an understanding by those who had reached such an agreement as to its significance, its implications for the future and further discussion on how to apply this agreement in reality. Another important factor in ICA was the concept of ‘service’ which encouraged people to help others without necessarily counting the cost to themselves. Although ICA’s work was explicitly and deliberately secular in nature, it came out of a more religious movement and the element of spirituality remained.

### The early days

These beliefs and values influenced the emerging organisational structure, its internal processes and the types of people who worked for ICA. For example there was a strong culture of generating, disseminating and utilising knowledge – people within the ICA family were brought together to learn, develop new ideas and make decisions. This was not just about strengthening the organisation, it was also part of a concern for personal development of staff and volunteers, many of whom were recruited from ICA target groups, and therefore blurring the line between beneficiaries and ICA staff. There was also a blurring of the often-made distinction between ‘making a difference in the community’ and ‘building and developing the organisation’.

At this time ICA relied heavily on volunteers who were paid a stipend. Funds came from individual and institutional supporters in the North, through local fundraising or through expatriate staff

based in-country, who were able to generate income by, for example, working in the private sector. While the overall direction of the organisation was managed from Chicago the staff based there spent significant amounts of time in the field, asking questions and understanding the context. Their insights and understandings would influence decisions concerning local ICA programmes, but primarily in areas of process, focusing on the right questions to ask, rather than proposing solutions.

Much less attention was paid to recording the results of these processes, the effect and impact of the approach, or the more tangible achievements that the processes led to. This kind of information tended to be left with the community. Hans Hedlund, writing of his experience as a member of a Swedish Cooperative Centre mission in Kenya in 1982, wrote: ‘We were told that plans and schedules were normally only kept in the particular villages where the ICA was working, rather contrary to the conventional development projects, where project documents would rarely leave the confines of the head office’ (Hedlund, 2009). While acknowledging the gaps this left in organisational knowledge, this practice was supported by a belief that the information really belonged to the community. It was their project and their development. What ICA contributed, as facilitators and catalysts, was the process. The focus was very much at the community level and any sharing of information and experience was primarily geared towards informing the different community-level initiatives.

### Shifting structure: from an international organisation to a global network

In the period between 1979 and 1988, ICA transformed from an organisation which was run centrally from Chicago to a network of independent organisations. ICA had been like a movement, driven by beliefs, values and an almost messianic zeal. There was a culture of hard work and low (or no) pay and an inherent feeling that

what was being done was right and important. Now, it became a group of more professionally orientated organisations. This change was driven by a recognition that ICA's main contribution to local development was to support and develop strong local institutions. ICA perceived that local development occurs through:

- strengthening and diversifying local economies;
- developing training models to give people adequate skills to support themselves;
- developing and motivating local leadership;
- supplanting disunity and separation with patterns of cooperative action; and
- sustaining people inwardly in the exhausting work of community renewal (avoiding vocational burnout) (Griffith, 1994).

For this approach to work, people needed to be supported to develop themselves. Rather than reflecting on a power-down/information-up paradigm (cf. Newman and Beardon, this issue) ICA argued that both power and information should be with the community. ICA's task was to:

- help reinforce communities' own decision-making processes; and
- offer support to communities in the implementation of those decisions.

### **From international volunteers to locally managed organisations**

One implication of the shift in structure was that expatriates who had previously managed the programmes at national and local level left. With them left the funding that they had been able to access. The local staff who remained found themselves in a position where they not only had to fundraise for the ICA programmes, but also to cover their own living costs.

With the change to a network structure, the commonality around beliefs and values became less pronounced, with members deciding their own priorities and adapting the message to their own markets and

communities. Local cultures, ways of working and priorities and demands took precedence over global priorities. Decision-making within national programmes now became more complex, and while decision makers were much closer (both physically and culturally) to the communities they were serving, they now needed to take into account not only community priorities and expectations, but also the demands of staff members, the fledging organisation and the constraints placed on a local organisation by the social and political context they were operating in.

### **Radical participatory practice and organisational development and survival**

In the early days of ICA there was often a tension between the radical, and at times dangerous, impact of participatory processes and the limited capacity of many of those involved, who were poor, marginalised and unready to take on the established powers and structures of the State. Although afforded some protection by their association, in many cases with local churches, this tension led to ICA keeping its activities hidden from the public eye and focusing more on community-level activities rather than seeking to raise its profile. Such a bias contrasted directly with the needs of emerging NGOs looking for profile, reputation, friends and supporters. To this extent, the survival, growth and development of the local organisation and the need to acquire resources and retain staff came into tension with the communities and clients ICA was working with.

### **A local–international disconnect?**

Beyond the tensions of ensuring local organisational survival while preserving the original ICA values, there was also an increasing recognition of the importance of globalisation and wider influences on local development possibilities. However, the structure and organisational practice

did not facilitate global links. For example, ICA relied on international gatherings for global decision-making, bringing people together to discuss and reach decisions by consensus. In the shift to a network structure, such global gatherings continued to take place. But now, ICA national members had to find their own funding to participate. For many members, national issues were prioritised above international, and therefore they were reluctant to invest in international structures when they perceived them to be of limited benefit. Virtually all key decisions were made at the local level anyway, and the focus on local development (both community and organisational) meant that global influence was given less priority.

Equally, the focus on process over outcome or impact meant that staff members were much more comfortable writing reports relating to what had been done and how people had been involved rather than trying to describe the much less tangible results of being part of a participatory process. This is not an uncommon issue and can be due to a number of factors, but for ICA the feeling that such information really belongs to the community has certainly contributed. There was a lack of support for information flows from the community level upwards. The 'upwards' space had not been recognised or valued sufficiently to justify, in most members' minds, diverting limited resources that were much needed at the local level to a less tangible use and into another set of hands and structures yet to prove themselves.

This does not mean that there have been no international connections. In fact, increasingly connections are made across the network. Rather than starting from a point of unity and catering for diversity, the network now seems to start from diversity and seeks points of commonality. In the late 1990s in Africa, for example, individual ICAs began to recognise and address HIV/AIDS. This was based on their experience and understanding drawn from

working with communities. The issue drew increasing attention across the network, spanning African ICAs and ICAs in the UK and USA (who had a history of working with African ICAs), to the point where HIV/AIDS became a global priority for the ICA network, supported by a global policy paper outlining ICA's approach. Despite the apparent success of this bottom-up process, the impact of the upward information flow remained limited. ICA has yet to establish a strong global presence or the sort of connections and partnerships which would enable it to engage in global policy advocacy with, for example, governments, multilateral and bilateral agencies.

### **So what does this all mean for the 'ripples'...?**

Firstly, I think it is important to recognise that knowledge and ideas will flow effectively to those places where people see the need for it, and where they perceive there is a benefit for their mission in enabling such a flow. Such a flow, if desired, depends not only from structure, but from a range of other criteria which facilitate or obstruct it.

In the case of ICA, during the early period there were strong information flows to the centre in addition to a shared responsibility for decision-making. With the creation of nationally accountable and managed organisations and programmes the need for knowledge flows was less clear. There was no strong voice from the centre demanding information – and little recognition at national level of the need for this. Very little support was given to the emerging local organisations during ICA's transition process, and as a result they became very locally focused. The global presence weakened and lost its relevance to the members and the communities they were serving.

Secondly, the ICA experience suggests to me that, for the effective flow of knowledge and information, it is not enough to consider top-down versus bottom-up or centralising versus decentralising power.

One of the advantages that ICA has is that there are very few steps between a community member and any international office. The distance that 'a voice' has to travel to reach a global audience is very short. A community member can talk to a director from a national ICA, who can talk to the international office. To take advantage of such an opportunity stronger mechanisms are needed to generate, store and disseminate knowledge and ideas by and from the community. But this will only happen if there is a strong demand for such flows, both globally and among network members and their constituents, who will need to see the value of them.

Finally, it is important to recognise that any changing structure – and the shifts this entails – will be strongly influenced by the culture and practices of the earlier entity.

Decisions on structure cannot be taken in isolation. The path of evolution needs to be considered, along with the opportunities and obstacles it might provide. Beyond this, careful attention needs to be paid to those who might inherit decision-making power, their own pressures, influences and bias and how this will affect the functioning of any structure created.

ICA is now evolving again. At the recent general assembly (October 2010) it was decided that, apart from a limited governance role, the global structures will be suspended and a decentralised 'peer-to-peer' approach would be the most effective way for national ICAs to support one another. However the issue of developing and maintaining global structures will be revisited in future: maybe the centre can hold after all.

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[www.ica-international.org](http://www.ica-international.org)

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#### NOTES

- 'The centre cannot hold' is a quote from the poet WB Yeats, 'The Second Coming' (1921).

## 19

## InsightShare global network of community-owned video hubs

by SOLEDAD MUÑIZ

InsightShare, a small northern-based organisation which supports the use of participatory video (PV), has a big vision: a heterogeneous village globe that uses communication media to shift power and relations and create equality. We hope that through providing an enabling environment a peoples' video movement will grow, giving greater power, voice and decision-making to excluded groups and communities.

This short case study reflects on how we have supported the emergence of community-led video autonomous 'hubs' and worked with them to create a global network to enable community voices to be shared internationally. Through devolving power, these hubs are locally rooted and locally accountable, but we have enabled community information to flow across continents.

As an organisation we believe that our core values and charter (see Box 1) need to influence how we are organised and how we work. With this in mind we operate with a flat and flexible structure and facil-

**Box 1: Extracts from InsightShare's core values and charter**

**Values:** make mistakes, lose control, have fun, pass it on, celebrate and come together.

**Charter:** enable positive change and transformation, empower individuals, be satisfying for participants, aim for legacy and sustainability, put reflection at the core of the process, give participants the final say, promote clarity, transparency, ensure informed consent, respect and protect participants' intellectual property rights, be inclusive, respectful and peaceful, allow creative experiences, enable positive and continuous learning.

**Our work should be:** satisfying for donors and stakeholders, challenge power inequality, bridge divides, give ownership of PV equipment to communities.

**Source:** <http://insightshare.org/about-us/charter>

itate a participatory organisational culture. The structure promotes and relies on high levels of pro-activeness and self-motivation. Beyond this, the organisational structure reflects our belief that we must go beyond local people participating to communities achieving full control and

Photo: InsightShare



**InsightShare retreat: visioning exercise, February 2010, London, UK.**

ownership of their development.

Hubs are supported to emerge and develop, and to engage with and influence the emergence of the global network. Beyond this, through continual active communication, online portals (blogs, websites and wikis) and involvement in retreats the hubs are also able to feed into and influence the plans and strategy of InsightShare itself. This means that community voices, analysis and experiences influence directly how InsightShare learns and evolves as an organisation.

### What is a hub?

A hub is a focal point and community catalyst: a physical space where community groups can meet and use participatory video for social change purposes. It's also the place where their locally owned equipment is kept.

The hub network began in 2006 and there are now nine community hubs operating across four continents. Hubs aim to empower marginalised communities directly. They do this by building a new generation of facilitators that do not depend on an external organisation or intermediaries. They work with their own communities using participatory video methods to build bridges horizontally and vertically and develop greater control over the decisions affecting their lives. This ranges from deciding how to represent themselves in a video message to proposing community interventions and influencing policy-making. For example, an indigenous group filmed their discussions about waste management to raise awareness of the issue among their peers.

**Figure 1: Global network of community-owned video hubs**

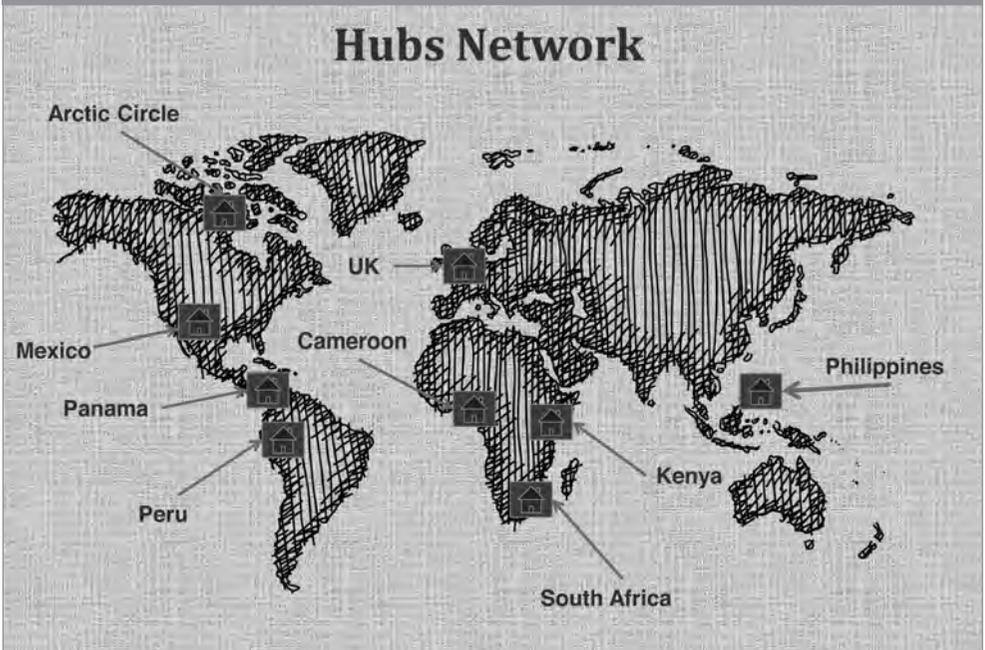
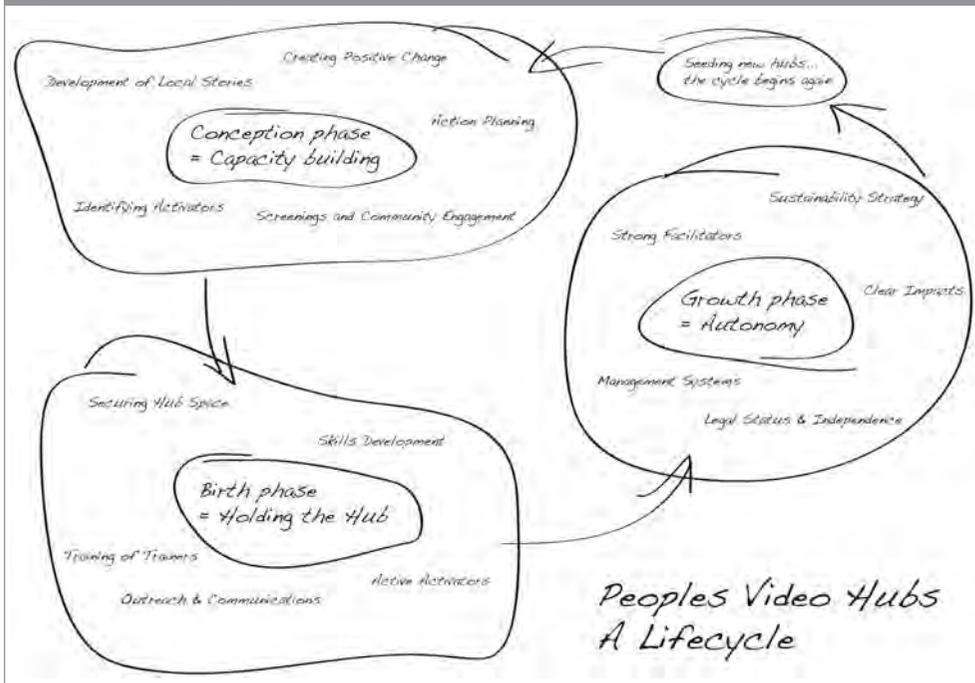


Figure 2: Hub life cycle



They later used a small grant to implement their own solution to making their land free of plastic.

Hubs are run by activators – development workers, local activists and community organisers – who come from or are linked to the communities. These activators, working with the hub community members, draw from the information generated in participatory processes and reflected in the videos to develop action plans for the future, including financial management and resource allocation. Some hubs are financed through a social-enterprise model. Others receive funds that flow through InsightShare, raised from partners such as The Christensen Fund and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Small Grants Programme. These funders are willing to be flexible and keep an open agenda.

Given the emphasis on participation it is unsurprising that the hubs take on different forms, according to cultural and social

context and based on the unique needs of the community groups and location. In some cases hubs are discrete organisations. In others they might be a PV unit working within a grassroots organisation, network or movement.<sup>1</sup> Initially hubs are part of the InsightShare organisational structure, but through support and capacity building, mentoring and development they grow into autonomous organisations, part of the looser network. This change process is driven by the needs and aspirations of each hub, with InsightShare facilitating a reflective and forward-looking process that allows the hub members to revise their initial motivations, confirm or adapt their vision and strategy, check with the community groups and partners involved and take collective decisions for the stage to come.

### My experience in InsightShare

I entered InsightShare in January 2009, on my birthday to be exact. It was a good way to celebrate a new year of life! Initially I

<sup>1</sup> For more details see: <http://insightshare.org/hubs/list>

Photo: InsightShare



Urban youth screening, 3rd August 2010, London hub.

was an intern in the headquarters. After a few months, as part of an ‘accompaniment’ strategy to build the capacity of the London hub, I was invited to join the London hub team as an activator, facilitator and then manager. I became the London hub ‘mamma’ for the InsightShare family, nurturing this ‘young’ project.

Two years after I joined, and three years after the London hub came into being, the hub achieved a certain level of legal and economic autonomy, driven by a team of freelance filmmakers and development professionals who decided to form a collective. This hub had originated in a partnership with a local NGO that manages a community centre in the heart of London. It is now following a social-enterprise model to achieve economic sustainability. During its life, it has reached more than 200 people with participatory video workshops and local screenings, involving a range of young people and local ‘elders’, activists and community workers,

schools and community-based organisations.<sup>2</sup> Today it provides a range of services including social media, post-production, participatory photography and participatory video across the UK, alongside InsightShare.

The formation of the collective followed two years of work building the skills of the team, training local video coaches and reaching diverse community groups through participatory video. During this process, we, as the London hub, actively influenced InsightShare’s agenda through meetings, workshops and continuous online communication. We worked together on strategy, planning, evaluation and resource allocation in relation to the London hub, particularly during 2010.

The structure has given the hub and the InsightShare teams spaces to find common ground. I have also found space to be empowered as a hub ‘mamma’, InsightShare team member and as a person. I

<sup>2</sup> You can read more here: <http://insightshare.org/resources/update/urbanhubs-update-2009>

haven't had to wait until someone else tells me what to do, what project or policy to explore, or who to target our videos at. I was able to make these decisions with my co-workers in the London hub. We choose where to focus, how we will participate and who our audience is. In addition, we had the opportunity to make bilateral links with hubs in other parts of the world. For example, in 2009 we used live streaming chat to exchange ideas and share our videos with the Durban hub in South Africa. In 2010 we were visited by a Philippines hub member to share videos and comment on experiences and challenges. Based on our experiences and interactions we were able to decide how to link to the global hub network, and to InsightShare itself. Because we are able to make autonomous decisions, we can influence as a hub what we expect of InsightShare as an organisation, mentor and partner.

### Impact on InsightShare

The learning process for InsightShare is extremely rich, but also time-consuming, messy and challenging. As part of its learning approach, it builds trust with the hub activators, who are the main link between the organisation and the rest of the community groups. It also learns about the influence that participatory video has in the personal lives of all those who are part of the hubs, and builds upon their experiences to promote their involvement as drivers of the process. What really makes this structure work is the fact that InsightShare's long-term relationships with its partners and members are based on its core values and core charter (summarised above). These are the cornerstones for building meaningful conversations for any development – whether this is how a local hub operates, or how InsightShare develops as an organisation.

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# Hyperlinks subvert hierarchies

# 20

by JO LYON

Technology often gets a bad press, and sometimes this is deserved. Too often, inappropriate tools are introduced in inappropriate ways. But there are times when the opposite happens: think of the impact Skype has had on communications round the world, or the way in which Twitter enabled grassroots activists in Iran to bypass controlled government channels.

This article is about a far more modest innovation: the introduction in June 2009 of a tool called KARL, which enabled staff at Oxfam GB to create online communities which they can set up themselves and invite others to join.<sup>1,2</sup>

There was no explicit intention to address issues of participation or empowerment beyond, or even within, the

organisation. Yet a combination of the particular qualities of KARL (intentional on the part of its creators) and the process we ended up using to introduce it (completely unintentional) produced some interesting side-effects. In an emergent, if also limited, way I have seen how this kind of technology can be used to open new spaces for dialogue and bring previously unheard voices into debates.

## How and why Oxfam decided to use KARL

Before we started using KARL, the only 'official' collaboration spaces in Oxfam GB were Lotus Notes TeamRooms.<sup>3</sup> These were secure, but required technical support to set up and a half-day training course to moderate. Because they were not web-based,

<sup>1</sup> KARL was developed by the Open Society Foundations ([www.soros.org](http://www.soros.org)) and named for the philosopher Karl Popper. The name also serves as an acronym: Knowledge And Resource Locator. The software itself is now available under an open source (GPL) licence. Partner organisations, who each have their own installation, or 'instance', pay for hosting and support, and there are plans to create a KARL Consortium to oversee future development. For more information see: [www.karlproject.org](http://www.karlproject.org)

<sup>2</sup> An INGO headquartered in the UK with around 5000 staff working with thousands of partners in 70+ countries.

<sup>3</sup> TeamRoom is a 'groupware' application developed by Lotus in the late 1990s to support team working and collaboration.

many people also found the interface clunky and non-intuitive to use, and there was no published list of all the different TeamRooms and their purpose. So it was difficult to link across the different spaces or join TeamRooms if you weren't specifically invited.

As new web-based tools came into existence, we found that people were setting up sites and online spaces to support their projects or their communities of practice as and when they needed them. This was messy for the organisation – it was impossible to manage or even maintain awareness of the range of new spaces – and also messy for users. At the same time, we were talking about ourselves as a learning organisation and coming under increasing pressure to demonstrate transparency and effectiveness, but lacking some of the tools to enable us to do this.

In early 2008, I saw an online demonstration of KARL, then in its early testing phase, and it seemed like the perfect next step for us. None of its features, which include public and private communities, blogs, wikis, file sharing and tagging, are unique. There are many other tools and platforms, both free and paid for, which provide something similar. In fact, in terms of a feature set, it is at the low end, and its creators judge success 'as much by what is left out as by what is put in'.<sup>4</sup>

This emphasis on usability really appealed to me. The majority of our staff and partners are not early adopters of new technologies, and many face connectivity and other accessibility challenges which make some tools unusable. The Open Society Foundations' development team had built something specifically for their needs, and they were looking to make the software available via an open source licence. We would be able to use a ready-made platform focused on the collaboration and knowledge-sharing needs of a global non-profit organisation.

It didn't turn out to be that simple, however. My proposal to introduce KARL was turned down not once but twice. Our IT department was being restructured and was trying to standardise tools and streamline processes. They didn't want to support the project for several reasons: they were concerned that it was untested; they didn't have the resources to provide training and user support; and Oxfam had recently made a strategic decision to move away from open source and use mainstream tools. This is a prevailing wisdom in large organisations at the moment, and is frustrating to many people working to support learning and knowledge-sharing. As part of my second attempt to get a green light for KARL, I ended a presentation with a quote from Dave Snowden:

*...the biggest obstacle to adoption [of social computing] is not gaining participation, but the IT department trying to over-constrain the system to retain control of an environment which by its very nature needs to be evolutionary. They want to choose one application when multiple, changing applications in different combinations are more effective. Worse still, [this means] fitting all the social computing requirements into one enterprise-wide purchase.<sup>5</sup>*

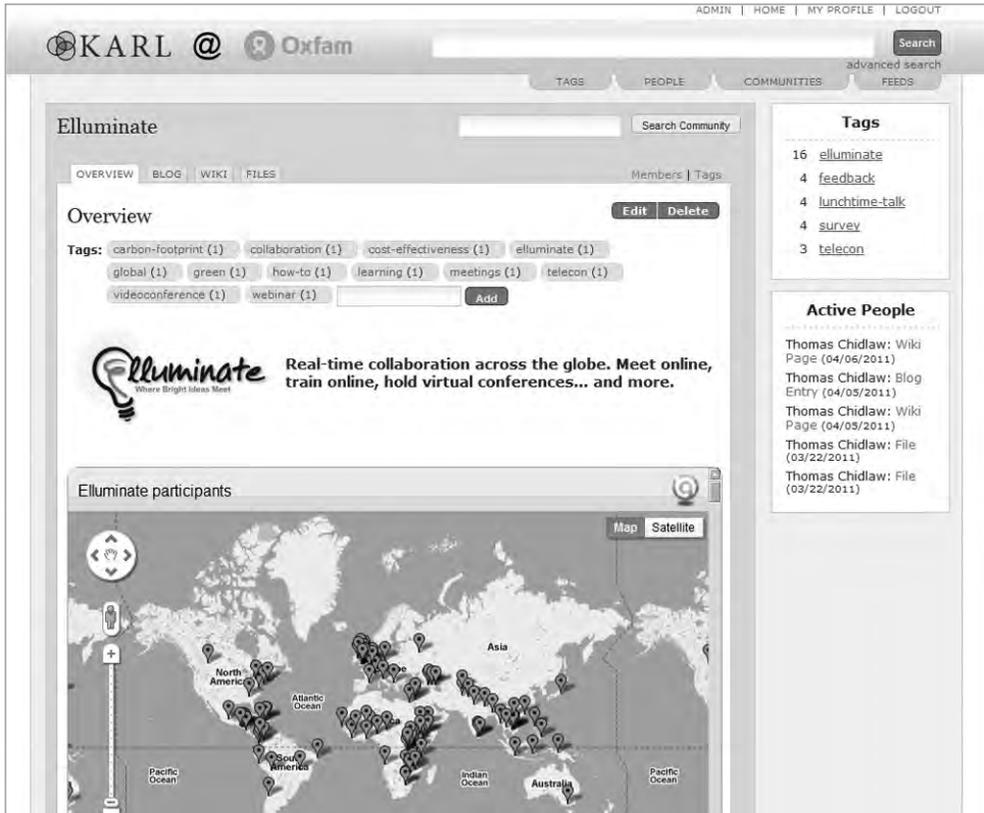
'Well,' said one of the directors present, 'It's a point of view.'

Some people felt that my enthusiasm for KARL was based on a particular approach to solving problems: iterative, organic, intuitive and small scale. I reflected on this, and the more I thought about it, the more I realised that this was precisely because this was the kind of change that was required.

In much of the work that we do, we aim to enable communities to have their voices heard in decision-making processes, and to access the information they need to help with this. Yet we are also a large organisa-

<sup>4</sup> See: [www.karlproject.org/isandisnot.html](http://www.karlproject.org/isandisnot.html)

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://tinyurl.com/dsnowden-quote>. Full URL: [www.cognitive-edge.com/blogs/dave/2008/11/the\\_major\\_obstacle\\_to\\_the\\_adop.php](http://www.cognitive-edge.com/blogs/dave/2008/11/the_major_obstacle_to_the_adop.php)



A screenshot of global online KARL communities.

tion, with centralised control of information flows. These largely exclude those who are on the margins of the hierarchy but who are also at the front line: the people (almost always nationals of the country they are working in) who have the most direct contact with our beneficiaries. These are tensions and contradictions which may never be resolved, but they are live issues. KARL couldn't genuinely resolve any of this, but I began to realise that there was a political aspect to the challenge also.

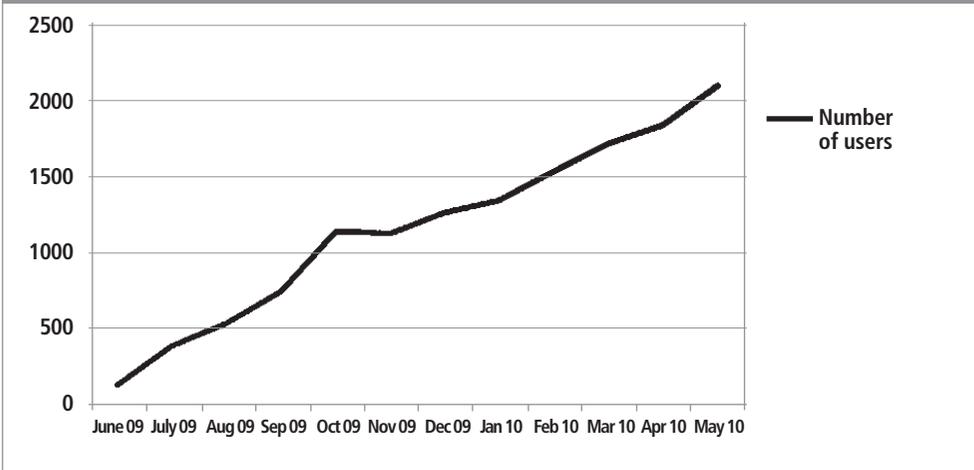
In the end, we got the go-ahead for human, rather than strategic, reasons. It was going to take the IT department 18 months to specify and introduce a solution to our collaboration needs. This was unacceptable to our campaigns and policy department, whose need to share information effectively around climate change work – our top corporate priority – was urgent enough to

warrant an 'interim solution'. An agreement was struck to use KARL until an alternative was available. This would be managed by the knowledge management team (which I lead), and would require minimal involvement from the IT department.

Crucially, while the climate change teams would have priority for support from my team (setting up accounts, advising on making best use of communities etc.) there was no deal to restrict use of KARL to these teams.

We set up the first 150 or so users straight away. We posted some information about KARL on our intranet, and we got back in touch with teams who had asked for collaboration or knowledge-sharing support and let them know KARL was now available. But we did no active promotion, and made it clear that this was 'interim' when people asked. And we stood back and watched.

**Figure 1a: Number of KARL accounts created on request or by invitation, 2009–10**



**What happened next?**

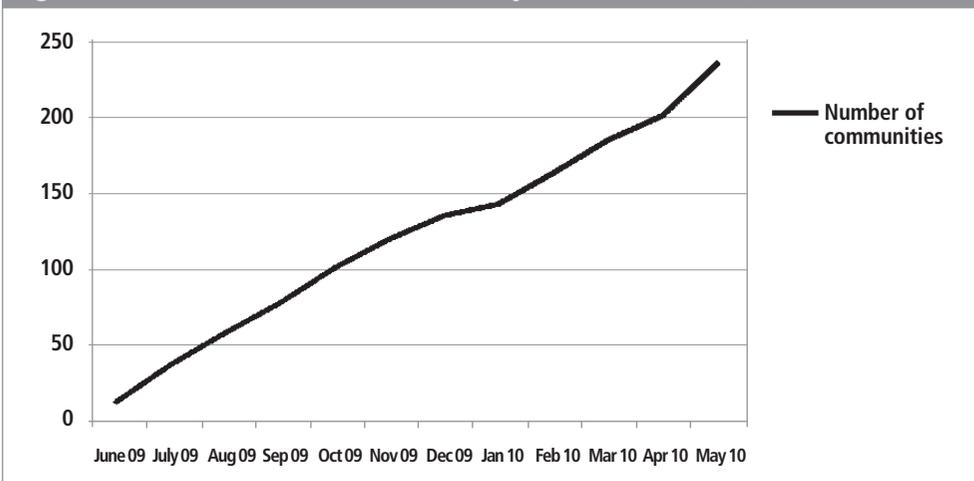
We have seen steady growth in the number of users since KARL was introduced in June 2009, with around 2100 accounts created in the first year. The number of communities has also grown steadily to over 200, and two-thirds of these are ‘public’, which means any staff member using KARL can see the community, comment on posts in it, and request to join it if they want to be more involved. Non-Oxfam staff members can also join as ‘affiliate members’ by being invited in to specific communities and can participate fully in those communities to which they are invited. The average number

of members of a community is 12, but several are much larger.

**How this changes things**

Structurally, KARL communities are pretty simple. Each has a blog (forum/discussion area), a wiki (set of linked web pages), a calendar and some folders where people can store files. Many are being used in a predictable and straightforward fashion: a team sets up a space so they can share documents and develop materials together, and maybe use the blog feature to structure discussions or do some consultation. There are also now some fairly formal ‘corporate’

**Figure 1b: Number of communities created by KARL@Oxfam users, 2009–10**



communities, providing information and updates on significant projects.

But, many of them are much more interesting than this, for example:

- The climate change campaign team used their KARL blog to record outcomes and results. Where they were successful, they tagged them 'success' – an easy way to track this information later for evaluation, but also to share with others.
- The supporter relations team used a KARL wiki to manage the information about Oxfam's programmes and policies that we share with supporters when they contact us. This information is now accessible to the whole organisation, increasing internal transparency.
- A digital-innovation community shares ideas on how to make better use of tools like Skype and video conferencing. People from regional and country offices provide information about their bandwidth and the problems they experience with connectivity first hand, which influences decisions.

More generally, KARL has proved popular with many of our staff. Even I have been surprised by the rapid, voluntary take-up, the creative uses to which it has been put and the potential for genuine collaboration and participation which it has revealed.

It was not (and still is not) compulsory to use KARL. With the exception of one of our regional directors, who got all of his staff set up on KARL and started using it as a core tool, it has been something that you use because you want to and find it useful. I thought its 'unofficial' status would put people off, but in fact it seemed to give it a certain attraction. The first view you got of it was shaped by the people who used it early, who were enthusiastic, influential and – importantly – not all based in our headquarters. There was a user manual, but there weren't any restrictions (beyond basic terms and conditions covering things like our code of conduct). If people needed advice and support, we did our best to provide it, but generally we encouraged people to experiment, and they did. Almost

by accident, we created something that users felt ownership of.

There are also some key features of KARL which support this 'of the people' feel:

- Anyone can create a community
- All communities have the same status
- Communities are visible to all staff users by default

So the process of how KARL was introduced and supported has shaped the outcome. On reflection, this shouldn't be surprising: in many areas of our work we practise, and argue for, participatory approaches. But technology, usually, is imposed from and controlled by the centre. Sometimes this is entirely appropriate – accounting systems, for example, don't lend themselves to spontaneity and iterative reinvention. But in the case of relatively informal tools to support the evolution of good practice, or the sharing of learning, my experience has been that it's more powerful to provide some basic building blocks and then step back.

User feedback has on the whole been very positive, with high support among staff in a user survey and various spontaneous comments to my team, including 'KARL is really helping us improve transparency. We love it'. Fairly early on, the director of our Pan-Africa programme sought me out while he was in Oxford, and said, 'I hear you are Mamma KARL'. This made me laugh, but also feel that we had managed to introduce something which people were genuinely able to engage with.

There have been some problems too, of course. When the Haiti earthquake hit, a KARL community was set up immediately by the crisis team in Oxford. It was confusing for people on the ground in Haiti, as they were already using a platform provided by Oxfam International. As a result we are looking at how it should be used in circumstances where clear guidelines are required.

### **Future potential**

Speaking as a knowledge management person, it can be very satisfying when things

happen that you didn't anticipate. We have now stopped referring to KARL as 'interim' – we will stay with it until we have an alternative which better meets our needs. More 'corporate' functions have started to engage with it, including our internal communications team, who have previously used a much more controlled, actively moderated space for seeking staff input and feedback. An IT project manager asked a KARL community for input on a project and later wrote: 'I have learnt more from this forum in a day than I could have hoped to achieve in a week of interviews.'

### Conclusion and reflections

The 'How wide are the ripples?' process is focusing on knowledge and learning generated at the grassroots level, while Oxfam is a large NGO and KARL a platform predominantly for internal use. You could argue that this story is not that relevant. But it is broadening our own ripples – there are areas where I believe staff-initiated debates will have greater influence on organisational decision-making. It's early days for this, but there is the sense of a new level of engagement which we can explore and experiment with.

These are interesting and fast-moving times for 'social' software tools. I have no doubt that they have transformatory potential. We are already seeing them

influencing the global political agenda, and this is just the beginning. But they are not inherently inclusive. As someone who is trying to support collaboration, learning and knowledge-sharing in a large NGO, my experience is that most users are not actually comfortable with the 'whatever works' approach. They don't have the time or the skills to decide what will work best for them, so I believe a degree of curating is appropriate.

However, when technology choices are made centrally we usually focus on IT concerns: support requirements, security, scalability and cost – with usability on the list but rarely at the top. Promotion of participatory principles and 'information up, power down' considerations do not generally figure. KARL is beginning to reveal some possibilities for us here, and I think this has something to do with both the circumstances of its creation by Open Society Foundations, and its 'under the radar' introduction at Oxfam.<sup>6</sup>

There are no obviously right approaches here at the moment, but I think what's important is that those of us with influence over which tools are supported and/or tolerated in an organisation are aware that these choices have a growing political dimension, and work to ensure that this dimension is more fully acknowledged and considered.

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### NOTES

'Hyperlinks subvert hierarchies' is a phrase first attributed to David Weinberger in *The Cluetrain Manifesto*. See: [www.cluetrain.com](http://www.cluetrain.com)

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<sup>6</sup> I do not want to imply that there was no support at all for KARL from our IT department, as many individuals were keen to see it introduced. But the strategic direction which had been agreed ruled it out.

# Bringing participation back into the heart of IIED

# 21

by ANGELA MILLIGAN and EMMA WILSON

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) is a UK-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) engaged in policy research and advocacy for sustainable development. IIED has been involved in developing participatory approaches to research and development for almost twenty years and its contribution is recognised internationally.

More recently, however, participation seems to have dropped off the agenda at IIED. The work of certain teams within the organisation, notably the Agroecology and Food Sovereignty Team, continues to be rooted explicitly in participatory approaches – in both individual projects and in helping to shape the team’s research and influencing strategy (see Pimbert, this issue).<sup>1</sup> But it is not clear how widespread this is. Similarly, some staff are attracted to IIED by its reputation for participation. But others are sceptical of the value of participatory approaches, while some

newer staff have limited experience or knowledge of participatory values and methodologies.

IIED’s discourse has moved away from participation towards the language of governance, voice and engagement. New concepts and approaches are being explored or promoted (see Box 1), without necessarily making links with participation literature. Even approaches such as community-based adaptation to climate change (CBA), which draw heavily on participatory tools, do not always reflect an understanding of the values and attitudes that underpin good participation.<sup>2</sup>

Those of us who champion participation in the institute have been questioning what we (and others!) are losing if we are not grounding this new work in our extensive knowledge and experience of participation, built up over many years. Inspired by the Ripples process to look at whether and how grassroots voices influ-

<sup>1</sup> Formerly the Food and Agriculture Team.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. *Participatory Learning and Action 60 Community-based adaptation to climate change* (Reid et al., 2009), pp. 11–29 and pp. 173–178 for more discussion of this point.

**Box 1: New concepts and approaches used at IIED**

**Agency:** refers to an individual's capacity to make his or her own choices and to act independently, according to his or her own will. Agency is set against structural factors such as class, religion and customs, which externally influence individuals' choices and opportunities.

**Local control:** (in forestry) 'The local right for forest owner families and communities to make decisions on commercial forest management and land use, with secure tenure rights, freedom of association and access to markets and technology'.<sup>3</sup>

**Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC):** a principle established in international human rights law, and some national law, which asserts that indigenous peoples have the right to give or withhold their consent to interventions, such as industrial projects, that may affect the lands and resources that they customarily own, occupy or otherwise use. The principle is increasingly being used by non-state entities, e.g. commercial companies, and has been applied in relation to non-indigenous local communities.<sup>4</sup>

**Base of the pyramid business models:** 'base of the pyramid' (BoP) refers to the largest socio-economic group – the 4 billion people who live on less than US\$2/day. BoP business models deliberately target this group and their proponents argue for greater engagement with local communities in the development of products, through 'co-creation' and 'deep listening'.<sup>5</sup>

ence decision-making and organisational learning within IIED, we decided to take a step back and look at the current status of participation within the institute.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst it would need a small research project to explore fully staff's perceptions and use of participatory approaches (for an earlier review, see Kanji and Greenwood, 2001), we recognised that IIED has existing organisational spaces that could be used to raise the profile of participation. We planned to use these to try to generate interest and momentum from below.

### What spaces did we use and how did we use them?

#### Researchers Innovation Forum

The first organisational space we used was the Researchers' Innovation Forum (RIF). The RIF is an informal space, primarily for researchers, to share learning, discuss new ideas and approaches and help resolve common problems. It has no decision-making powers, and is loosely coordinated by a small group of researchers.

The participation meeting attracted mainly younger researchers, but also some with a great deal of experience in participation. The institute's director attended, but no other senior management or researchers.

We began by asking participants to think of one or two of their projects and, using a participation typology (from 'compliance' to 'collective action' – see Box 2), show where on the spectrum their projects were and where they would like them to be.

Most participants put their projects at the less participatory end of the spectrum, between compliance and cooperation, but all aspired to be at the co-learning end. Only one out of the seven projects was achieving the desired level of participation.

We discussed why this was and what could be done about it. Lack of time and flexibility were identified as major challenges, particularly with the perceived current donor focus on results rather than process. Some felt they needed more knowledge about appropriate methodolo-

<sup>3</sup> From the Growing Forest Partnerships initiative: <http://tinyurl.com/local-control-ied>. Full URL: [www.growingforestpartnerships.org/sites/growingforestpartnerships.org/files/docs/GFPlocallycontrolledforestry.pdf](http://www.growingforestpartnerships.org/sites/growingforestpartnerships.org/files/docs/GFPlocallycontrolledforestry.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See Article 10 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: [www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html)

<sup>5</sup> See for example: <http://bop-protocol.org> and [www.boplearninglab.dk](http://www.boplearninglab.dk)

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this article we use the term 'we' to refer to a core group of people within IIED who have been keen to promote, discuss and share learning about participation internally.

**Box 2: Participation typology**

**Compliance:** tasks with incentives are assigned but the agenda and process is directed by outsiders.

**Consultation:** local opinions are sought, outsiders analyse and decide the course of action.

**Cooperation:** local people work with outsiders to determine priorities; the responsibility to direct the process lies with outsiders.

**Co-learning:** local people and outsiders share knowledge, create new understanding and work together to form action plans.

**Collective action:** local people set their own agenda and mobilise to carry it out in the absence of outsiders.

**Source:** based on Pretty, Guijt, Thompson, Scoones (IIED, 1995) and Cornwall (IDS), drawing on Arnstein's *Ladder of Participation* (1969).

gies. Almost everyone talked about relationships with partners. We reflected on how participatory these relationships are – and also how participatory are partners' relationships with communities. Participants suggested that we need to build more long-term partnerships, giving the opportunity to develop shared values and relationships of trust.

From the discussions it was clear that a range of views about the purpose and benefits of participation exists. Some focused on better data and community buy-in to projects. Others were concerned with ensuring that the marginalised or excluded have an effective voice. Some believed that IIED's values are rooted in participatory principles – and linked this to our aims of bringing about social transformation, changing power relationships and creating a fairer, more equal society.

The RIF was very positive in that it attracted a mix of researchers and other staff, including Human Resources (HR) (which proved to be important for follow up). There was lively discussion and the meeting came up with some concrete next steps to follow up on (see Box 4 for a

**Box 3: Participation workshop programme****The nature of participation**

- **Why participation?** Exploring the many outcomes of participation (giant mind map), making connections with governance, rights, citizenship.
- **Do I participate?** The various opportunities we have to participate, the extent of our own personal participation and constraints to participation.
- **Typology of participation:** developing a continuum and discussing the appropriateness of different levels of participation for different purposes.
- **Conclusions:** joint definition of participation, recognising key underlying principles and applicable to IIED's position and work.

**Problems with participation**

- **'Utopia' versus 'tyranny' debate:** unpacking the current critique of participation.
- **Power and participation:** drawing on and extending the issues from the point above, critically debating, *'Participation has been co-opted to serve the powerful.'*

**Meaningful participation**

- **Underlying principles:** pre-requisites for meaningful engagement.
- **New spaces:** exploring the emerging opportunities and forms of participation and how to maintain spontaneity and vibrancy.

**Bringing participation back into the heart of IIED's work**

- **Next steps:** what to do next to take 'participation' forward.

combined list from the RIF and the participation workshop that followed). It was clear that some researchers were both working in a participatory way and desired to be more participatory. However, we felt there was a need to look more deeply at the relevance of participation for IIED's work and its links with the new discourses.

**Participation workshop**

The possibility of running a workshop on participation had been raised at the RIF, and our HR department was very supportive of the idea. We asked an external practitioner and researcher Dee Jupp to facilitate as we felt this would help attract a wider range of participants and allow

more open discussion than if one of us facilitated.

The purpose of the half-day workshop, held in September 2010, was to 'engage IIED staff in a critical review of participation and participatory practice and its relevance to IIED's current and future position and work' (see Box 3 for the workshop programme).

The workshop attracted 19 participants, including researchers, communication and core staff (finance, fundraising, HR). As with the RIF, we saw that 'participation' is a contested concept, meaning very different things to different people. Whilst we felt that most people in IIED would claim some sort of participatory practice, the values underpinning it and the discourse around it seem to be quite diverse.

We noted the links between participation and the 'new' discourses of governance, voice, agency, citizenship and rights. Many processes aimed at improving governance involve participation, for example:

- strengthening citizen voice and engagement in policy processes (e.g. participatory policy-making, citizen juries, scenario workshops);
- making government more accountable to citizens (e.g. participatory budgeting, participatory planning); and
- engaging with governments, often from outside, to advocate for change, demand information or the upholding of rights (e.g. participatory advocacy).

We noted that participation in these contexts needs to be viewed just as critically as in other spheres, asking who participates, whose voices are heard, and analysing power relations that work to exclude certain groups and views.

We felt that, rather than replace 'participation' with other terms, we need to deepen and widen the concept and practice, learning from co-opted and badly

done participation. We also felt that the participation frameworks and typologies, values and methods remain valid and useful, but need to be complemented by other tools, for example, those which help to analyse power in different contexts.

The workshop was successful in strongly engaging participants and generating some heated debate. However, once again, few senior researchers attended, or any or any senior managers. The participants were also mostly those who were already committed to using participatory approaches in their work, or those who were new to participation. This meant that we were still unable to gain a wider range of views about the status of participation in IIED.

#### Ideas Fair

In an attempt to draw more people into the debate, we decided to run a session during IIED's No Fly Week in September 2010.<sup>7</sup> The space we used was the Ideas Fair, during which anyone can suggest an idea or issue for discussion. Everyone's idea is given a slot and the whole institute has to attend the fair, which offers the potential to reach many staff. On the other hand, three sessions run concurrently in each 50-minute slot, so it is important to 'sell' your session well. We decided to attract attention by being provocative and came up with the following title and question (see Box 4):

#### **Box 4: Participation is dead! Long live agency and community control!**

Outside the organisation, IIED is known as a centre of excellence in participation, but internally we avoid using the word as much as possible. Why?

We then set up a debate, with three advocates: one for 'participation', one for 'agency', and one for 'local control' (see Box 1). This debate was very well attended, including by senior researchers, but unfortunately time constraints meant that, by the time each

<sup>7</sup> No Fly Week is a week for institute-wide reflection and learning during which staff are requested not to travel outside the UK.

advocate had presented, there was little time for discussion. Some long-serving researchers clearly felt that participation had been replaced by other discourses, but others were keen to engage – perhaps time had been the constraint rather than lack of interest. This was encouraging and the challenge now is to think of ways to keep senior researchers engaged in an ongoing debate.

### What have we achieved so far?

We have had some success in raising the profile of participation and getting at least some people talking about it. We have introduced some newer staff to the concept, and some longer-serving researchers are now questioning how they can become more participatory in their ways of working. We have gone some way towards looking at how participation fits with newer concepts and concluded that it is still valid and useful. We are also using opportunities that arise to identify connections and integrate participation more with the new discourse and approaches such as FPIC. A forthcoming issue of *PLA*, for example, will capture learning from participatory processes to enable indigenous peoples and local communities to negotiate the terms of external interventions that directly affect their well-being, to give or withhold their free, prior, informed consent to them, and to develop community agreements around the sharing of benefits.<sup>8</sup>

We have gathered many suggestions for re-integrating participation skills and values into the institute's work (see Box 5). We have also identified a series of project constraints to participation – e.g. time, inflexible budgets, logframes and results-based management – as well as some possible solutions, for example, identifying funding sources which allow for the participatory development of proposals with partners.

### Lessons learnt and ways forward

IIED's participation champions have taken a flexible, bottom-up approach to raising the profile of participation within IIED. We have taken advantage of opportunities as they arose, trying to win hearts and minds, encouraging individuals to take a more participatory approach in their work with partners. All the activities we have undertaken have had to fit with our day-to-day work, and there is still much to do, but we feel we have made significant progress. We plan to use the launch of this issue of *PLA* to provoke further internal discussions around participation, for example by hosting a Critical Theme session for IIED staff and others in 2012.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the director attending the first RIF, and our head of HR engaging from a training/staff learning perspective, we haven't managed to involve most senior

#### Box 5: Re-integrating participation skills and values

- Discuss the extent to which IIED projects with diverse goals and approaches should be participatory and for what purpose, and consider trade-offs.
- Undertake a stocktaking on the current view and practice of participation within IIED (linking this to how we work with our partners), and use this to challenge and question current participatory practice (ours and partners).
- Identify connections and integrate participation more with the 'new' discourse.
- Revisit our existing code of conduct for collaborative research (2001) so that institute staff can refer to our shared common set of principles and values underpinning participatory practice to help ensure we practise what we preach.
- Organise another RIF to look at participatory research methods and challenges in a particular project.
- Include participation (values and methods) in inductions for new staff.
- Set up a participation learning group.

<sup>8</sup> *Participatory Learning and Action 65: Biodiversity, culture and rights* (forthcoming June 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Critical Themes sessions are a regular event at IIED. Each consists of a presentation on a specific 'critical' theme about an aspect of IIED's work. Critical Themes are open to all IIED staff and anyone else who is interested in our work.

researchers, managers and key decision makers within the institute, particularly those who are more sceptical about participation. A question we need to consider is whether we should now try to engage with more formal spaces within IIED in order to bring about some of the changes we have identified (see Box 5 above).

So we are just at the start of this process of getting people to engage again with the values and principles of participation and seeing how they can integrate them into

their work. We see this process as a necessary pre-requisite to looking at how the voices of the poor, vulnerable and marginalised can influence organisational learning and decision-making at IIED more directly. Bringing participation back to the heart of IIED involves something of a shift in culture. But by raising interest in participation again we hope to create spaces for partners and communities to participate in organisational learning and decision-making more fully.

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# Developing organisational strategies: whose voices (should) count?

# 22

by KATE NEWMAN and HELEN BAÑOS SMITH

The ‘How wide are the ripples?’ workshop ended on a high note. We each left recognising our role and our potential as empowered individuals to challenge international NGOs (INGOs) about how they listen and respond to information and knowledge from the grassroots. However, the workshop also ended with a reality check. It is important to feel empowered, but if we are going to act as change agents we have to understand what we are trying to change. As people working for or with INGOs, we need to understand the challenges these organisations face, to appreciate the context (as described in the overview, Newman and Beardon, this issue) and to work with or alongside others to slowly change perceptions and potential, to create new ways for the ripples to be widened.

We decided to look more deeply at the

challenges of responding to community-level information through a central organisational process, namely, organisational strategy development. Strategies shape the potential for an organisation to engage with grassroots information and knowledge. But does the strategy development process itself provide a useful and empowering space for poor people’s voices, perspectives and contributions? Or is it merely one of the many corporate management tools adopted by the sector as part of the trend towards ‘professionalisation’ (see for example Shutt, 2009) – and by implication, contributing to a context where it is harder for poor people’s voices to be heard?<sup>1</sup>

This article is based on interviews with senior staff from eight INGOs, and draws also from our own experiences of working in and with INGOs.<sup>2</sup> The article shares

<sup>1</sup> ‘Professionalisation is the social process by which any trade or occupation transforms itself into a true “profession of the highest integrity and competence”. Professions [...] soon come to comprise an elite class of people, cut off to some extent from the common people, and occupying an elevated station in society.’ Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professionalization>

<sup>2</sup> We interviewed senior staff, or those charged with strategy development in ActionAid International, ChildHope, Christian Aid, EveryChild, International Childcare Trust, Oxfam, Plan UK and Save the Children UK.

some of the dynamics involved in strategy development. It offers our initial analysis of how strategies could be used as an organising space to become more responsive to grassroots voices. It is followed by two case studies (from ActionAid and IIED) which illustrate specific processes for directly engaging local partners and communities within a strategy development process.<sup>3</sup>

### What are organisational strategies?

Strategies have become increasingly important for INGOs. In part this responds to the pressures from funders and the public for these organisations to be clear about what they do, why and how. But it is also due to a recognition from the organisations themselves that, if they are to target their work at the structural causes of poverty and recognise the complexities within a development process, there is a need to be reflective, analytical and 'strategic'.

For some, a strategy is an articulation of their development vision. For others it is an operational guide: a management tool and a tool for external communication and fundraising. Typically a strategy includes an analysis of the challenges of poverty and inequality, and the INGO's response to it. It identifies an overall organisational goal, together with the approaches (what the organisation will do) and the financial and human resources needed to achieve the goal. A strategy will guide how an organisation interacts with diverse actors, including the poor and excluded groups that they aim to benefit. Explicitly or otherwise, it shows whether the organisation considers poor people to be passive recipients of services or active players in development and, by implication, how much influence they should have over the organisation's activities and decisions.

### What influence do strategies have?

In its ideal state a strategy gives an organisation coherence of vision and mission,

and enables staff members and partners to select and prioritise their work with an understanding of the overall organisational goal and their role in it. Given this, it is important to note the inherent contradiction in considering strategies as a space for 'widening the ripples'. For a strategy to be effective it should guide how the organisation operates. And yet the implicit assumption in widening the ripples is that organisations should be able to flexibly respond to the information and knowledge generated through the participatory processes they support. While a strategy itself could dictate the devolution of power to the local level, the process of developing an organisational wide strategy – and supporting its implementation – requires a centrally supported process. The implications of this are complex, but suggest that the power down/information up paradigm identified elsewhere in this issue is too simplistic. There is a need for deeper reflection on how power is being used and distributed.

In reality, there is great variety in how much influence strategies have on their organisations once finalised. For some, the strategy determines the vast majority of resource allocation, which in turn determines what and how programmes of work will be developed. Others said that once the strategy was developed its visionary elements have an impact on how staff members interpret their role in development, more than having a direct influence on their planning and prioritisation processes. For most organisations it seems to play its principal role at senior management level:

*Different people use the document to a different extent. The Senior Management Team engage most. It would be good if others could get their heads around it.*

For many organisations the strategy has no operational side, and even when it does

<sup>3</sup> See Newman with Archer; Pimbert (this issue).

the content is often fairly broad, leaving room for manoeuvre or ‘interpretation’ within countries. Despite this, the strategy influences what work is recognised and valued globally across the organisation, and how communication and fundraising staff in northern offices talk about the organisation’s work. This means that, whether explicitly recognised or not, strategies are a powerful influence on how money is raised and spent, on organisational relationships (internal and external) and on the role the organisation plays in development.

### Strategy development processes

Given the differences in how strategies are understood, it is unsurprising that the role of poor and excluded people in strategy development varied greatly from organisation to organisation. However, what we were surprised to find was that, for many organisations, there was no clear strategy development process. Some, such as the International Childcare Trust, were clear about the steps they followed in developing their strategy (see Box 1). But in other organisations even quite senior staff were not able to describe their strategy development processes in detail, in many cases describing it as something that emerges more organically. For example, one Oxfam employee said:

*In terms of overall big strategy development this comes from various different initiatives, including the content of country director discussions, who meet every two to three years and discuss issues. Every two to three years we focus on a specific theme. Oxfam ‘reflects’ on this theme, gathering information and learning, and this reflection feeds into setting the strategy for a way forward on this theme. Most recently we looked at livelihood work. Every 15 years or so there is a new global strategy which really shakes everything up. The last one was in 1997 so Oxfam are probably due another soon.*

#### Box 1: Strategy development process: International Childcare Trust (ICT)

The process follows clearly defined steps:

- Programme staff discuss what they want to do, based on their experiences of working with partner organisations.
- The programme development committee, a subgroup of the board of directors, all of whom have programming experience, meet with staff to develop the ideas further.
- Partners are sent ideas and asked to consult with their constituents in preparation for the annual consultation meeting.
- The ideas are presented at the annual consultation meeting (where all partners are represented) and partners provide feedback.
- The selected ideas are taken to the board of trustees for approval.
- A draft strategy is developed by the chief executive and sent to the board, partners and ICT staff for feedback before a final draft is produced.
- The board of trustees approves the final draft.

The lack of clear or well-known processes means that it is hard to understand exactly how community information and perspectives are, or could be, included. In effect, if opportunities for voices from the grassroots (or from relevant staff) are not **explicitly** built into the strategy development process, they may not get heard at all. The extent to which they are will depend on the skills, expectations and intentions of the person (or team) driving the strategy process. This ultimately concentrates decision-making in the hands of a select few.

### Managing the process

All organisations we spoke to trusted the task of coordinating or managing strategy development to senior staff based in a northern office, i.e. the process was **delegated**. These people are geographically distant from grassroots communities in the South, and in general do not interact regularly with people who operate at local level. Given where they sit, these staff are more likely to hear the voices of prominent academics, INGO staff, donors or journalists than those at the grassroots. This impacts the way that senior managers

frame their sense-making and decision-making, and how they understand or value different forms of information and knowledge. This bias of perspective needs to be recognised and responded to when designing any strategy development process.

One counterbalance is to take a **participatory** approach, to broaden the strategy management and decision-making process to include different staff members and partners, something that is clearly more practical in smaller organisations where it is possible to 'keep everyone in the room'. While this did work for some, many argued that since the process could be quite complex and time-consuming, it was better to have a small group of people 'in charge'. This trade-off between participatory strategy development and delegated strategy development is influenced by the importance placed on the strategy development process itself. While for some organisations the process is as important as the outcome (see ActionAid case study by Newman with Archer, this issue), for most, more emphasis is placed on the final document.

### Gathering inputs for strategy development

The distinction between participatory or delegated strategy development influences the extent to which poor and excluded people are directly involved in the strategy development process. As the case studies which follow this article show, there are ways to engage poor people in strategy discussions. But much more common was for INGOs to depend on a variety of other processes for 'hearing' grassroots voices, such as talking to partners, involving head office staff who spend time working with programmes, or using existing materials, such as country strategies and evaluations. Strategy development then becomes a largely internal process of gathering and interpreting information collected at different times, from different places and for different purposes.

### Box 2: Involving local voices in strategy development

Some of the questions people asked us about involving local people in strategy development were:

- What do people living in poverty want to feed into?
- Which people living in poverty would we include?
- How can local people feed in meaningfully if they don't understand the purpose of a strategy or its function within an organisation?
- Do people have the skills and knowledge they need to participate effectively?
- Are they well informed enough to be able to argue the case for some areas being more important than other?

Relying on information produced in other spaces raises two interlinked challenges. Firstly, many of those we spoke to mentioned their concerns with the quality of participatory processes these reports were based on. For example, where national strategies were developed using participatory processes, were the spaces created for local people to feed into national strategies transformative or only consultative? Or, where partners were involved in programme delivery, did this relationship function well? How skilled were the partners in supporting participatory processes, and were they themselves encouraged to seek out local knowledge and pass it on to the INGO? The use of pre-existing information also relies on effective knowledge management behaviours and systems between field, national and head offices, which research shows is often not the case (see Wakwabubi, this issue).

Secondly, there were also questions of the relationship between national and international work and whether those coordinating strategy development actually valued local people's voices. One respondent commented that: 'at the organisational level, there is no expectation or mechanism to enable poor people's voices to be heard'. A different organisation noted how there were implicit assumptions that staff were familiar enough with national-level information for

it to be ‘filtering through’ without the need for specific processes to support this. We also met with many questions concerning the practical issues in involving local voices in strategy development (Box 2).

If grassroots analysis and perspectives are not routinely considered across the organisation it is unlikely that these voices will play a significant role in strategy development.

### **Direct participation in strategy development**

Although in a minority, for some organisations direct participation was key. For example the case study from IIED shows how participatory video and video conferencing enabled local farmers and partners to speak directly to IIED staff sitting in the London office. The ActionAid case study illustrates a year-long participatory process which involved the creation of national and local spaces for rights-holders’ inputs and virtual spaces for staff inputs, as well as building on a routine reflection and learning system with participatory spaces at its heart. Direct participation should mean that poor people’s voices are heard strongly, but both case studies highlight challenges in practice as these extracts show:

*For example, the organisation could not realistically respond directly to every input. And it is unlikely that all points of view will agree anyway. So how could ActionAid ensure that people did not feel they were wasting their resources and time inputting into the process?*

ActionAid case study, Newman with Archer, this issue).

*Two years into the five-year strategy, IIED’s directorate decided to carry out a review of the institute’s work on food and agriculture... two external consultants from a renowned UK-based policy think tank were contracted to do the review. They mostly interviewed people from donor organisa-*

*tions, academia, urban-based researchers and the like. Very few local partners were consulted.*

(IIED case study, Pimbert, this issue).

Just getting information from participatory processes onto the table does not guarantee that grassroots stakeholders influence the strategy agenda. The influence depends on how it is understood and used: put bluntly, whether it is used to support the organisational agenda, or to challenge and shape it. There is a big difference between a pile of raw material with different opinions and inputs and a final strategy document. As Beardon *et al.* and Shutt (this issue) show, the question of who translates, interprets and gives meaning to all of that information, and who synthesises it and picks out emerging themes, is fundamental to the vision which is ultimately constructed or agreed.

This suggests that if an organisation is to maintain accountability to people who have participated in their strategy development process it is not enough to create a good participatory space and involve people in strategy development. These opportunities for direct participation will only be meaningful and empowering if they are linked to a broader organisational system of participation. Organisational culture and ethos is fundamental not only to whose opinions are sought, but how they are used.

### **The importance of the wider context**

Participatory practitioners recognise that, while it is important to listen to and learn from people at the grassroots, it is equally important to bring in alternative knowledge and information streams to which people at the grassroots may not have access. The same is true of the strategy development process. For example, the respondent from Christian Aid shared how inclusion of tax justice as one of their major themes was based on the organisation’s global analysis.

**Box 3: Plan UK's strategy development**

Five key considerations influenced the strategy development:

- Priorities identified in each Plan country office, which were based on participatory processes with communities and articulated in Country Strategic Plans.
- External global-level contextual factors or 'drivers of change' determined by a literature review and internal workshop.
- An analysis of Plan UK's internal capacity, track record and current expertise.
- Funding opportunities accessible to Plan UK.
- The priority countries and areas of work of other Plan national offices, to increase coordination of work and specialisation across the Plan 'family'.

Analysis of the wider context also gives organisations an understanding of the potential influence on their strategies of donor trends, funding opportunities and the work of other INGOs. Many people we spoke to spent time thinking about how their organisations were unique or what their niche is or could be. This is partly a reflection of competition between INGOs and the need to stand out from others in order to attract funding. Many respondents mentioned the pressure to 'grow or die' and to please donors, to 'play to the piper's tune'. Others argued that attention to the wider context also reflects attempts to ensure efficiency, to minimise duplication of focus so that resources can have the most impact and to identify how their organisation can make the best contribution. For example, Plan UK's 2009 strategy development process was in part about identifying the specific role and value the organisation could add to the Plan family, and the development sector more widely. Plan UK is one of 21 'national offices', mostly based in the North, which provide technical and fundraising support to the 48 Plan 'country offices' based in the South. As such its organisational strategy builds from the country office strategies, and reflects which priorities the UK office is best placed to support (see Box 3).

This engagement with the broader context is clearly important for organisations operating at the international level. The challenge is how to value these alternative perspectives and integrate the knowledge streams appropriately, especially given the issues of bias and interpretation mentioned earlier.

**Final thoughts**

When we started researching this article we assumed that organisations would have clear processes for developing strategies, and specific methods for engaging poor and excluded people in them. Instead, we found a lack of clear processes which means that key decisions are often being made about who to listen to, and whose needs or views to consider, without thought or even recognition. Unless there is an explicit recognition or intentional rebalancing, northern perspectives are likely to dominate. This particularly concerns us as we believe that strategies are becoming increasingly important across the sector.

The majority of people we spoke to in researching this article shared a perception that their operating context is one where the space for good quality empowering participatory processes is being closed. Strategy development can create spaces for the open exchange of ideas, and by implication bring new and different voices into the development sector to communicate alternative perspectives on development. Whether and how poor people's voices and perspectives are influential in organisational strategy development seems to reflect whether the organisation – or parts of the organisation – value those voices more generally. Creating discrete processes for grassroots participation in strategy development can only be truly empowering if those people who have participated are also able to influence how their information is used and reviewed in other fora, if there is built-in and ongoing accountability to their

voices and perspectives. Making these links is important if strategies are to be more than another management tool,

which further closes the space for poor and excluded people to determine their own paths out of poverty.

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# 23 Two steps forward, one step back: broadening participation in the strategy process in IIED

by MICHEL PIMBERT

In 2007 the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), a UK-based international policy research organisation, initiated a consultative process to redefine its next five-year institutional strategy. In a year-long consultation process initiated by IIED staff, a number of people and organisations throughout the world (such as donors, academics, researchers and media professionals) were invited to help shape this new five-year strategy. They were asked to reflect on IIED's main strengths and characteristics, the outcomes IIED should aim for in the next five years and how it should work, where it adds value and whether it was influencing the 'right people'.

In addition to the views of these powerful actors, the then Food and Agriculture Team, which I lead, was particularly interested in hearing the views and priorities of

small farmers, pastoralists and indigenous people.<sup>1</sup> With a long history of working with participatory and inclusive approaches, we felt that we could use our strong relationships to engage properly with people at the grassroots and hear from them what IIED should do to improve food, agriculture and human well-being.

## The consultation process

The IIED strategy team and our director agreed that we could involve partners whom we had worked with for more than five years. Following extensive discussions with these partners, we decided to use participatory video methods to elicit views, analysis and recommendations from a range of non-literate and literate people in India, Iran and Peru.<sup>2</sup> All local partners had received previous training from IIED in the use of digital video cameras. So we devel-

<sup>1</sup> Now renamed the Agroecology and Food Sovereignty Team.

<sup>2</sup> Partners were the Deccan Development Society in India ([www.ddsindia.com](http://www.ddsindia.com)), Cenesta in Iran ([www.cenesta.net](http://www.cenesta.net)) and ANDES in Peru ([www.andes.org.pe](http://www.andes.org.pe)). All these organisations work with communities of small farmers, nomadic pastoralists and indigenous peoples.

Photos: ANDES Peru



Local partners ANDES Peru and indigenous farmers from different Quechua communities in the province of Cusco participating in the video conference with IIED.

### Box 1: Facilitated discussions in farming communities in India, Iran and Peru

#### Objectives

The objective of these was to:

- Explain the purpose of the consultative process.
- Secure free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of local partners to engage in IIED's strategy formulation.<sup>3</sup>
- Discuss and plan the methodology to be used to reflect on IIED's role and work and make recommendations for future work on food and agriculture.

#### Producing video messages for IIED by these farming communities

The video messages were prepared on specific topics such as farmers' rights and patents on seeds; dumping of subsidised food on local markets; alternative public distribution systems for food grains; and agriculture and climate change. The videos were then subtitled in English and either posted on a website set up by partners (Peru) or sent directly to IIED on DVDs. The videos were then posted online on a dedicated website for IIED staff to view.<sup>4</sup>

#### IIED staff reflection

Staff had a month to view and reflect on the short video messages received and posted on the website, and to prepare for a video conference with local partners in the three countries.

oped a 10-month participatory process which included the steps outlined in Box 1.

### Video conferences between IIED senior staff and local partners

Two three-hour long, bilingual video conferences were held:<sup>5</sup>

- one between 45 indigenous farmers (men and women, young and elders) from different Quechua communities in the province of Cusco, Peru and IIED's director and staff members in London; and

- a three-way video conference involving board members of the Deccan Development Society in Hyderabad, 60 women small farmers in Andhra Pradesh and 25 IIED staff in London.

The entire consultation process with local partners worked very well. Both IIED staff and local partners felt good about the novelty and relevance of this intercultural dialogue on 'what next for IIED'. Local partners were very proud and happy that their analysis and recommendations were taken seriously by IIED, and that they were involved in the **early framing** of IIED's new institutional strategy.

This bottom-up, video-mediated process was unprecedented in the history of IIED's strategy formulation. Although it focused mainly on one part of the strategy, the exercise demonstrated that more inclusive ways of framing institutional strategies are technically possible, and not overly expensive. Moreover, the experience showed that strategic priorities can be directly based on local realities and knowledge, resulting in more shared ownership and commitment by partners to do joint work with IIED.

No other IIED team used video conferencing or similar participatory processes to involve members of marginalised communities **directly** in framing the institute's strategy. But there were extensive consultations. For example, IIED's Natural Resource Group ran three regional workshops to elicit partners' views on 'what next for IIED'. On balance however, IIED's new strategy relied much more on consultations with scholars, NGOs, donors and sympathetic government staff to 'bring in'

<sup>3</sup> Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) is the establishment of conditions under which people exercise their fundamental right to negotiate the terms of external interventions that directly affect their well-being, and to give or withhold their consent to them. FPIC is a right that is affirmed through an ongoing process of communication, with consent sought at key stages in the process. In this case, FPIC is part a larger process of power-equalising research with our local partners (see Pimbert, 2010a).

<sup>4</sup> Although the website is no longer live, the videos were uploaded to: [www.iedwhatnext.org](http://www.iedwhatnext.org)

<sup>5</sup> No live video conference with Iranian partners was possible in the end due to lack of equipment in the field. But nomadic pastoralists and other local partners sent a longer video message to IIED, outlining their vision and priorities for the institute's work on food, agriculture and land use. This longer video was presented and discussed during a seminar involving IIED's director and 14 staff members, together with two representatives of the partners from Iran.

Photos: Deccan Development Society



A three-way video conference involving board members of the Deccan Development Society in Hyderabad, 60 women small farmers in Andhra Pradesh and 25 IIED staff in London.

views from the regions, rather than on the first-hand knowledge and priorities of marginalised actors and co-researchers (e.g. farmers, forest dwellers, pastoralists and slum dwellers).

### What happened next?

The small farmers, nomadic pastoralists and indigenous peoples involved stressed the need for a strong, radical agenda on food sovereignty and the right to food. Several of their priorities were ultimately incorporated into the food and agriculture component of IIED's new institutional strategy. The acceptance criteria used by IIED's strategy explicitly valued the priorities identified by local partners in their video messages and in the video conferences (see list earlier in this article). The contents of the strategy were first validated at the IIED team and group level, and then by the whole institute in a series of discussions and retreats where consensus was reached. Not all partner views were taken on board – they had to be balanced with other perspectives (e.g. IIED staff, more mainstream partners and donors). But views 'from below' did help to shape a strong programme of work on food sovereignty which challenges the mainstream, neo-liberal approach to food and farming (Pimbert, 2010b). It is notable that although not as radical as some partners might have wished in some areas (e.g. on trade and markets), the final strategy was strongly endorsed by all local partners when presented back to them. And they have since used this as a basis for our joint work on agroecology and food sovereignty. Then, two years into the five-year strategy, IIED's directorate decided to carry out a review of the institute's work on food and agriculture. An important aim of the 2010 food and agriculture review was to identify newly emerging challenges and issues which IIED's research should focus on. Two exter-

nal consultants from a renowned UK-based policy think tank were contracted to do the review. They mostly interviewed people from donor organisations, academia, urban-based researchers and the like. Very few local partners were consulted. In a letter to IIED's director and senior management, one local partner highlighted how important IIED's three tiers of partnership – non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) working from grassroots to global level; social movements; and, the 'ultimate partners', the marginalised, indigenous people – were, noting that:

*... the process seemingly taken by IIED in the review of food and agriculture work has struck some of us partners as very odd and very un-IIED-like... Such reviews or elaborating new strategies must not be top-down, and should follow well worked out approaches that are deeply inclusive and participatory – given the three-tier partnership of IIED – without which the latter would be nowhere and would command no more respect than a regular run-of-the-mill establishment-orientated NGO.*

Mohammed Taghi Farvar, 17th November 2010.<sup>6</sup>

My team have always encouraged two-way accountability, mutual respect, local decision-making, independence, and the right to disagree with IIED's and other's views in our work with partners through non-centralised structures and networks. We've also emphasised participant-owned and governed processes which foster a culture of freedom and self-organisation within the boundaries of our action research. Through ensuring that our action research is power-equalising, local partners know they can exercise their right to be heard. This makes it very difficult for IIED to decide the strategy for food and

<sup>6</sup> Email to IIED's director and strategy team, copied to key local partners in India and Peru, and forwarded to several IIED staff.

agriculture without involving local partners – and gives partners the confidence to challenge IIED if our actions undermine this mutual accountability and respect. IIED management responded positively to the letter, indicating that local partners will be included in subsequent discussions on how to re-prioritise and/or update the institute’s strategy on food and agriculture.

Most IIED staff appreciate how important it is to ‘walk the talk’, and know that donors value the institute’s ability to link local voices into global decision-making processes. Few would want to jeopardise IIED’s reputation in this regard. But this latest episode in IIED’s strategy process is a reminder of the constant risk that:

*... the voices, ideas, perspectives and theories produced by those engaged in social struggles are often ignored, rendered invisible, or overwritten with accounts by professionalised and academic experts.*

Choudry and Kapoor (2010).

From reflecting on moments such as this one we learn the importance of being constantly vigilant and having the courage to ‘speak out’ when necessary to ensure that ways of working are consistent with our organisation’s mission statement and values. Involving marginalised and excluded voices in strategy development cannot be a one-off moment, but must be part of a continuous relationship of mutual respect and trust for the co-construction of reality.

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## 24

# Participatory strategy development at ActionAid International

by KATE NEWMAN with DAVID ARCHER

ActionAid is a large international NGO, originally UK-based, which in 2003 transformed its organisational structure to a federal system. It has an international secretariat in South Africa and around 40 country programmes, which are at different stages of becoming ActionAid affiliates. This requires the development of national boards, so that national programmes are nationally accountable while also being part of the ActionAid International family. Over 50% of ActionAid's funds come from individuals based in the North, who contribute a monthly amount to the organisation. While there are strict rules about how this money can be spent, it does give the organisation significant latitude to decide its own course of development, minimising its dependency on specific donors.

ActionAid's first organisational position paper was developed overnight in 1993 by the then chief executive. A couple of years later a group of management

consultants were asked to develop an organisational strategy based on this position paper. As the strategy was seen as a management tool, it followed that management experts were best placed to develop it. Since then, strategy development has become increasingly important for the organisation. It is now seen as a key organisational tool for achieving coherence across the different affiliates: the way to engage staff, partners and community members in wide-ranging discussions on the nature of poverty, their development vision and the contribution ActionAid can make.

## ActionAid's recent strategy development process

In 2010 ActionAid began developing a new strategy. This was to be a year-long process involving a wide range of activities and stakeholders from around the world. David Archer, Head of International Education, was seconded full-time to lead

<sup>1</sup> Insights drawn from interview data collected for Kate Newman's PhD research on how ActionAid has been able to translate its 2005-2010 strategy into practice.

the process. A core team (the strategy reference team) of nine senior staff from across the organisation, including country directors from Tanzania, India and Denmark, were to spend a third of their time on it. The process kicked off with a ‘taking stock’ review, involving a team of eight external consultants to review progress and critically analyse performance in relation to the previous organisational strategy (ActionAid, 2005).

### Encouraging broader inputs

Beyond the external review, the process created various ways for different groups to contribute ideas to the strategy development.

#### Input from ActionAid staff members

There was a dedicated space on the ActionAid intranet for strategy discussions. Staff members could respond to questions such as:

- What should be the next big ideas at the heart of ActionAid’s future strategy?
- Who would care if ActionAid ceased to exist – what gaps would be left?
- What changes need to be made in ActionAid’s size/shape/structure/staffing/systems and processes/ways of working?

Staff were also encouraged to develop self-organised groups, working with colleagues from across the organisation to put together a one-page proposal for something to be included in the new strategy. A total of 80 group propositions were received, covering:

- issues such as urban poverty and climate justice;
- processes, such as participatory methods or making poverty personal; and
- ideas around organisational development, such as what should be ActionAid’s theory of change, trade unionism in ActionAid, or reimagining accountability.

There was also a system in place to collect individual one-paragraph propositions in any language, anonymously if required. These focused on anything staff

passionately felt should be in the new strategy. The strategy drafting team received 50 propositions and grouped them in clusters to inform discussions of key issues to be taken forward.

#### Input from countries where ActionAid works

In addition to these internal processes, ‘future strategy days’ were organised in about half the countries where ActionAid works. The aim was to allow groups of rights-holders (i.e. the poor and excluded people ActionAid works with) to feed in their views. They discussed ActionAid’s current priorities and its ways of working and raising funds. They took part in a visualisation of how ActionAid’s work – at household, local, national, regional and global levels – should look in 2020.

Following the strategy days, national programmes called together key partners and social movements to share insights from the external review, build from the input of the rights-holders’ groups and identify their own priorities.

The outputs of each national consultation were compiled into a two-page report by country programme staff and sent to the future strategy coordinator. A key concern of the strategy coordinator was whether the inevitable bias at national level would influence how country programmes reported on these events – and how to deal with this in the aggregation process. While no guarantee was given to respond to each group’s priorities (this would be impossible given the extent of participation across the globe) there was a plan to share the final strategy (see below).

#### Other inputs

‘Future visioning’ work was carried out by an external consultant, who identified critical uncertainties of the coming decade, including global power relations, the impact of technology, the potential of monetary reform and the likely nature of future global shocks.

## Making sense of the inputs

The information gathered through these various channels was discussed at a global staff conference, held midway through the strategy development process. This was where all the broad decisions regarding ActionAid's future were to be made. It was attended by 120 staff, including senior management and board representatives from across the globe. There was also some participation from staff below director level, with 'wild-card invitations' for five young, innovative staff members who ActionAid hoped will become leaders in the future. However, no effort was made to bring in staff members or partners who might give a more community-based perspective. The discussions were therefore between a group of people whose primary focus was policy leadership and management, rather than those who had day-to-day interaction at partner or community level. This has implications for the final decision-making given the types of priorities and perspectives involved and those excluded.

The conference was planned to shake people out of their present comfort zones, assumptions and ways of working, creating a new dynamic and helping to transform the organisational culture of ActionAid. A scenario planning methodology was used for this purpose (see Box 1).

Following the conference the strategy reference group went on a week-long retreat, and worked to develop a first draft of the strategy. This was circulated to all staff and partners and shared with some other key stakeholders, including social movements, communities where ActionAid works and the team of external reviewers. Responses to the draft strategy were collected over the following six weeks and a second draft was produced a week later. This is in the process of being critiqued as we write. A further draft will be produced before the final strategy is submitted first to ActionAid's interna-

### Box 1: Scenario planning methodology

The key strategy reference group explored all the background material and identified a series of 'knotty issues' such as:

- What does it mean to be a feminist organisation?
- Do we have too many specialisms?
- Should we be more focused?
- How much should we invest in grassroots programmes?

A sub-group then developed three future scenarios which included some of the 'knotty issues'. But the group reframed them and looked at them through different lenses, detaching people from their immediate struggles and personalities to focus on the 'big picture' and the consequences of making particular choices now. It was hoped that the scenarios would enable people to look beyond immediate results, actions or programmes and explore their assumptions and beliefs. The scenarios were not intended to be real options to choose from: they were stories, caricatures and exaggerations, designed to start a dialogue and facilitate a deeper-level strategic conversation.

Based on the discussion and feedback the conference team produced a 'composite scenario' which was shared with participants on the final day of the conference. Participants discussed the scenario and then everyone was asked to line up across the room, with one end 100% in support of the direction captured in the composite scenario and the other 0% support. Most people clustered around 70% or 75%, some very close to 100% and no-one under 50%.

tional directors, then to its international board and finally for approval to its international assembly in July 2011.

## Analysing the process

ActionAid has a much more intensive and extensive strategy development process than many other INGOs (see Newman and Baños Smith, this issue). It is the only example we found of an organisation with a clear process for collecting information from poor and excluded groups to feed into all parts of its strategy. This reflects ActionAid's wider analysis of poverty and its role in eradicating it, which recognises the fundamental importance of accountability to the poor and excluded rights-holders with whom it works. By

investing such a level of resources, ActionAid hopes that the strategy development process will energise staff, partners and communities in the struggle for human rights, and that this will increase the ownership and relevance of the final document.

However, there are also questions raised, not least of representation and bias. For example, the future strategy days were the main forum for local voices to feed into the national analysis – and thereby international strategy decisions. But how were the participating rights-holders and partner organisations identified? Were they chosen by national country programmes? How were they organised? The strategy process included some suggestions for the agenda, but did not define principles for how they were facilitated, or how the outputs were selected and reported.

Equally, it is not clear how the organisation recognised or responded to internal power relations that impact on staff's ability to engage with the channels specifically provided, such as self-organised groups. Or how those responsible for collecting the different inputs would ensure that it was not only staff with good advocacy skills who got their issues taken seriously.

There are also the questions of subjectivity and bias debated elsewhere in this issue (see Beardon *et al.*; Shutt) and of how accountability is interpreted during the strategy development process. For example, the organisation could not realistically respond directly to every input. And it is unlikely that all points of view will agree anyway. So how could ActionAid ensure that people did not feel they were wasting their resources and time inputting into the process?

And what were the criteria for judging whether such an extensive strategy process has been successful? It is important that strategy development also builds on more routine processes of engagement with stakeholders, such as local analysis and action planning, reflection processes and

country-level strategy development.

ActionAid has shown that poor people's voices can be heard within a strategy development process, but the extent to which the strategy process is empowering and coherent with basic participatory values depends on whether it contributes to transforming power relationships at every level. This includes relationships between staff within the formal hierarchy, different countries where the organisation is operational, its staff and partners, and partners and communities. There are tensions between an empowering process and a useful product (see McCausland; Lewin, this issue) and also in linking a one-off process of strategy development to ongoing spaces for discussion, analysis and action. As David Archer comments:

*The strategy for 2012–2016 is not an end point. Rather, it needs to be a new starting point for engaging with people struggling with poverty and injustice around the world.*

### Final steps

Once finalised and approved, various popular versions of the strategy will be produced, probably including a video, a website and a Powerpoint presentation – and there will be an active programme of sharing the strategy with different constituencies. This will include sessions with community members and partners to enable them to evaluate how the final strategy responds to their initial inputs.

At the end of 2011 there will be a short evaluation of the strategy process where each country, theme and function, as well as those involved closely in the process (the strategy reference team etc.) will be asked to reflect on what worked and what should be changed in the future. ActionAid will be looking not just at the outcome (i.e. the strategy itself) but at all the stages involved. This will be used to guide learning about future strategy processes within ActionAid and to inform articles about the

process which can be shared with other agencies who are going through a similar process. A final challenge will be to ensure that other plans and processes are fully

harmonised with the new strategy, including long-term financing and funding, the restructuring of the international secretariat and country-level plans.

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# PART V

## Tips for trainers



# Working with your community's stories

# 25

by CYNTHIA KURTZ

## Introduction

Once upon a time, in every village there lived people who played a special role in community storytelling. *Griots, shanachies*, bards and other story caretakers took responsibility for the stories of the community. They were the ones who asked 'What happened?' and listened carefully to the responses. They watched new trends while they recalled times past. They could respond to a situation with an appropriate story based on patterns across time and space of which they alone were aware. They helped groups use their old and new stories to settle disputes, solve problems and make decisions together.

In many of today's communities, people move more often, encounter more commercial stories and spend less time talking with people of varying ages than in times past. Many who could fill the roles of story caretakers either do not hear the stories they should or cannot tell the stories they know. In many communities no new caretakers have appeared and stories are being left untended.

Why do communities need story caretakers? Because well-tended stories help communities negotiate the identities, boundaries and rules they need to live together in peace. Stories help people probe sensitive topics safely and experience events through the eyes of others so they can move beyond their initial – often unfavourable – reactions to contentious issues.

Who can become a story caretaker? Anyone can gain the skills and do the work required. But as in times past, the caretaker role is not taken on: it is earned. A story caretaker earns the right to gather and work with a community's stories by negotiating trust and demonstrating responsibility and commitment. It takes time and patience, but the benefits are great.

As a researcher and consultant, I have helped many organisations and communities gather and work with their stories to gain insights, resolve disputes and plan for the future. My work has convinced me that the role of story caretaker is in need of revitalisation in many communities. In some

communities, stories and other qualitative information are gathered when there is a particular need to be addressed. But communities that tend to their stories on an ongoing basis can generate their own sense-making and better respond to dangers and opportunities as they arise. This Tips for trainers shares some practical insights I have gained in over eighty story projects.<sup>1</sup>

### Listening to stories

Taking care of stories means listening to them, remembering them, helping people make sense of them and guiding them through the community. The first step, and the foundation on which all else depends, is listening.

The best way to improve your skills at story listening is simply to listen to as many stories as you can. In my work I have listened to many real stories told by real people, and this has given me a good sense for how stories flow and form. You can do the same in your community. Folk tales are also great teachers. The more stories you hear, the better you will become at listening to them.

### Eliciting storytelling

Long ago I used to think everyone told stories all the time, as I do. But since then I have met many people who do not. Some people think they tell stories, but when you ask them for a story they give you something else: facts, opinions, statements, complaints. I help people tell stories by continually leading them back to the concrete and specific. I say, 'Can you give me an example of a time when that statement was particularly true? What happened then?'

I have also noticed some specific barriers to telling stories that pertain only to some people and some situations.

- When people are used to authority, they sometimes believe I am wasting their time

asking for stories. When this happens I explain why I am collecting stories and respectfully ask for the help they alone can provide.

- When people are unused to being heard, they sometimes believe their stories will not be useful. I assure them their contributions will be valuable and help them find their voices.

- Sometimes people are eager to please and try too hard to perform amazing stories instead of just telling me what happened to them. When this happens I explain that their **authentic** experiences will help the most.

- Sometimes people promote themselves or complain or lecture instead of telling stories. When this happens I explain that I hope to help the **entire** community and need their help.

- When people believe what I am doing is trivial or useless, they sometimes respond with disdain or ignore my questions. When this happens I explain why the effort will help the community and ask them to do their part.

### Stories and social cues

If you sit quietly and watch a group of people as they tell stories, you will see that they negotiate for the right to speak. In the turn-taking dance that is a conversation, telling a story relies on mutual consent because it requires holding the floor for an extended period of time. In conversation you can hear people ask permission to tell stories, and you can hear other people give it – or not. When I ask people to tell me stories, I make sure to provide the permission they need.

I have come to recognise three moments in which storytellers seem to feel especially vulnerable and in need of permission to speak.

- Sometimes people put forth a **prelude** to a story and then pause to see if those around them will give them the floor. Story

1. This article is based on my free book, *Working with stories in your community or organization* (Kurtz, 2008).

preludes are often references to times ('one day'), memories ('I remember when'), or events ('I left home'). When I hear a story prelude, I turn to the storyteller and look at them to communicate my attention and permission to speak.

- In every story there is a **peak** where the storyteller reaches an emotional high point. Their voice rises and their body language becomes more expansive. At this point they often look around to see if people are paying attention. When I see the story peak, I make sure I am leaning in and looking at the storyteller.

- After the **end** of a story, the storyteller often feels vulnerable and tries to save face by summarising the story, referring to its authority or suitability, or asking for approval. When I hear this, I communicate my appreciation so they will feel empowered to tell **another** story.

What happens when you do not give people adequate permission to tell stories? I remember one project where people were asked to interview each other about a factory that was closing down. As I listened to the interview tapes I heard the same conversation over and over:

**Interviewer:** 'Do you remember your first day at the factory?'

**Interviewee:** 'Yes.' (Long silence.)

I could tell that many of the interviewees **wanted** to tell those stories of their first day at the factory, but they did not feel they had permission to do so. After you have watched people tell stories long enough, you will know what it looks like when people want permission to tell a story, and you will be able to respond naturally.

### Asking about stories

As people tell stories they often surround them with contextual annotations, like 'And that is why I hate dogs'. I like to encourage people to annotate their stories by asking them questions like these:

- How do you feel about this story?
- Why did you tell it?
- Where did it come from?
- How long will you remember it?
- Who can tell this story? Who cannot?
- Who should hear this story? Who should not?

If you count and compare the answers to these questions, you may discover new insights about your community.

### Thinking about stories together

Stories are like seeds. Just as deep in the soil seeds are living organisms waiting to spring to life in the sun and rain, deep in memory stories lie waiting to be heard and germinate in new minds. When you work with stories, your goal is not to capture and preserve stories in eternal storage, but to facilitate the living flow of narrative discourse.

In my experience, the best way to facilitate this flow is to bring people together and consider the stories you have gathered as a group. And the best way for a group of people to think about stories together is to **build larger stories** out of them. In the same way that telling a story signals safety to reveal our feelings and beliefs, **building** a story together carries safety into the group process. Say our group is assembling gathered stories into two larger stories told from opposite perspectives. Questions of what really happened, what matters, and what should be done about it do not belong to the realm of story construction, so we put them aside. **After** the larger stories have been created, we can turn to those questions, but we have already explored multiple perspectives without evaluation or attack.

How do you build stories out of stories? Many participatory methods can work, and I describe some in my book. One example is to place the titles of stories you have collected on a landscape where the directions (North-South, East-West) are things you want to think about, like strength and kindness, or cooperation and competition.

Building a landscape story can help you think about the past and future of your community.

Another example is an exercise I call the ‘twice-told stories’ method. Ask people to form small groups and tell each other stories about something. Ask each group to agree on a criterion by which they will choose one story to retell to the whole group. Different groups can have different criteria, but they should all be related to utility (for example, the story the mayor needs to hear most) rather than quality (for example, the most exciting story). After the small groups have told several stories, ask each small group to retell its chosen story to the larger group. Then discuss all the retold stories and what they say about the community together.

The method you use is less important than the participatory nature of the process. If you facilitate the group process well, the group will reach new insights and deepen their shared understanding.

### Returning stories to the community

Rarely will everyone in your community be willing or able to engage in every part of your community story project. Typically the largest group of people will tell you stories, and a smaller group will work with the stories together. Only yourself and other story caretakers will gather stories, help people think about them and help them return to the community. This means you may need to help some stories get to people who have not participated in listening to them or working with them. There are many ways to do this. You might distribute them in an album or newsletter. You might start a community story library. You might put on a community play based on a group-created story. You might cross-distribute stories gathered from two contending groups.

Above all, respect privacy and build experience and trust as you help stories flow through your community. You may be surprised by how much you can achieve.

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# The Ripples process: a framework for facilitating reflection and analysis

# 26

by HANNAH BEARDON and KATE NEWMAN

This Tips for trainers includes some workshop exercises used in the original research phase of the Ripples process. The research involved interested organisations and individuals (reached through our own networks) in developing case studies to look at how information flowed from participatory processes in their organisations or teams. Within each organisation, we facilitated reflection and analysis using a framework of tools and guiding questions based on ideas brought out by the literature review. This research was the basis for developing the methodology and broad questions for the March 2010 workshop discussed in ‘Making sense together: the Ripples editshop’ (Beardon and Newman, this issue).

## Session 1: Understanding information flows

**Aim:** To explore how knowledge is conceived and valued within your organisation – and unpack the systems and structures that exist to support information flows.

### a. Personal reflection

Spend 10 minutes thinking through how you make decisions in your work.

Guiding questions:

- What kinds of decisions are you able or expected to make?
- What kind of information do you rely on in your decision-making process?
- What decisions do you need to refer elsewhere and what types of information might you share to support those decisions?
- Where do you access information? What criteria do you use to assess whether information is reliable, useful etc?

### b. Group analysis

Imagine your organisation as a system. Using coloured cards identify key points in the system where information is **accessed or created**. These could be people, places or events e.g. individuals, teams, offices, databases, intranet, libraries, weekly team meetings or informal meetings in the kitchen.

You may want to code these to make the visualisation clearer, using a specific shape

or colour for different types of:

- information points (e.g. formal, structural, personal etc.); or
- information packages (e.g. documents, meetings, databases).

Think about how this information flows. What information is actively 'pushed out', 'pulled in' or just passively 'put out there'? Use arrows of different thicknesses to show the direction and strength and how far and how widely different types of information flows.

### Guiding questions

- Where is information generated? e.g. within programmes and internal processes.
- What is information used for? How is it defined, recognised and valued? What makes it relevant for decision-making in the system?
- Where are decisions made? e.g. in programme planning, strategy development, policy, partnerships, definition of policy advocacy messages etc.
- Who are the key actors in this process? What information do they use to make decisions?
- What are the information management points or systems? Who controls these, inputs into them, accesses them? How effective are they at making different types of information available? What power relations influence them?
- Does your organisation's theory/official picture of information flow differ from reality?

### Concluding comments

Reflect on your own individual experience of decision-making, and the general organisational systems, culture and practice in your systems diagram. What are the key elements which determine information flows in your organisation?

It might help you to use a metaphor to describe your organisation and the way information flows, for example using the characteristics of a specific animal.

Questions for reflection/documentation

- What are the **points** or **elements** of your systems diagram which support the flow, management and use of information generated through participatory processes?
- What are the organisational values and cultures (written or unwritten) which support or hinder the acceptance and use of information generated through participatory processes in decision-making?

### Session 2: Participatory processes

**Aim:** To look at how participation is understood and used within your organisation.

#### a. Brainstorm

- How is 'participation' conceived and used within your organisation? (You could include some individual reflection on how you understand participation and how you have experienced it in relation to your work).
- What types of participatory processes are there at different levels?
- What is considered as good quality participatory practice? (e.g. key elements of 'quality' participatory practice, who 'judges' and on what criteria?)
- Where does the information generated by participatory processes that you have been involved in sit in the system diagram created in Session 1?

#### b. Analysis of a participatory experience that influenced the wider organisation

In your group identify a specific participatory experience which became well known in your organisation. Use the image of a tree, to look at the roots (inputs) and fruits (outcomes) of this experience.

You can use the trunk of the tree to label the experience, and then address the following questions to develop its **roots**:

- Where, who, how, why was the process developed?
- What were the aims of the process? Was there a planned process of sharing the participatory process more broadly? Why?

- How was the process situated within the wider organisational goals/plans etc.?

And **branches** (and/or specific **fruits**)

- What was the direct impact(s) of the participatory experience?
- What was the broader impact/influence?
- How did the experience impact on those involved (either facilitators or participants). What learning was there?
- How was the learning or information generated by the participatory experience communicated and documented?
- How closely were the outcomes of the process managed?

Look at the tree you have produced in the wider context of your organisation. Does the same wider impact happen routinely? Feel free to take the metaphor of a tree as far as you like, considering the weather, pests, fertiliser etc. For example consider:

- How does the tree interact with its environment?
- What influences it positively/negatively?
- What conditions does this type of tree need to germinate and grow healthily?
- What happens to the tree when you consider it in the larger context that your organisation works in?
- What might influence (or interfere with) growing more trees?

Concluding comments

- How do the two sessions link?
- How can people doing participatory work engage with the information system your organisation operates?
- Are there specific lessons relating to how information is valued and packaged?

Questions for reflection/documentation

- If the information and knowledge generated through participatory practice were to be used effectively what would this look like?
- How would this transform your 'systems diagram'? How would this make the tree look different?

### Building on the reflection: key issues in participatory methods and information flows

Following the reflection sessions with individual NGOs, we developed a set of questions for further reflection, which we included in the 'How wide are the ripples?' working paper, including:

- What kinds of knowledge and information are generated through participatory methods that can be useful at other levels – i.e. that people want to share more widely?
- What is different about knowledge management for participatory methods?
- What is the responsibility of INGOs to bridge local knowledge and international policy?

These questions were the basis for the Ripples workshop held in London in March 2010: the basis for this issue of *PLA*. The workshop allowed participants to discuss these questions from an institutional and individual perspective, and share insights. Some of the emerging questions included:

- Who has relevant information on development issues?
- How is it captured and used?
- How are power imbalances revealed in the ways information is used in decision-making for development/in INGOs?
- What kinds of strategies, tools and relationships have been applied to overcome or shift this imbalance of power?
- What is the role of the INGO/its headquarters in this? Which issues concern us most – do we feel confident enough to address them?
- What is the operating context in which the INGO headquarters are working?
- Who should INGOs be accountable to in their decision-making processes?
- How far can accountability be taken or supported by the organisational structures, cultures and bureaucracies?
- What should be the role of donors in supporting or impeding this?
- What are the technological and practical considerations?

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## CONTACT DETAILS



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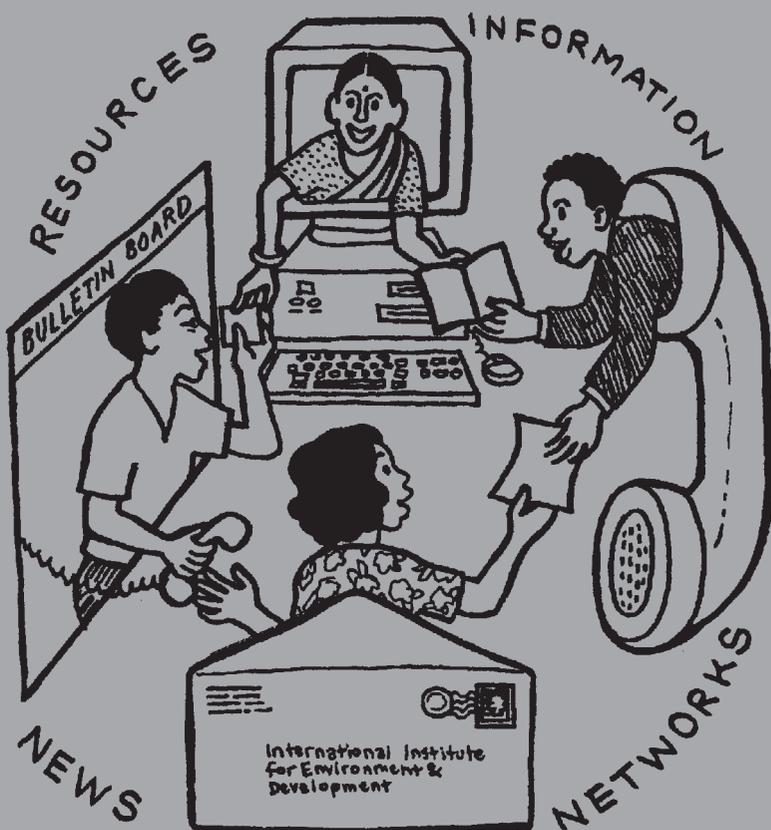


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## REFERENCES

Clark, L., K. Newman and H. Beardon (2010) 'How wide are the ripples? Report of the March 2010 workshop.' IKM Emergent Programme. Online: <http://tinyurl.com/ripples-workshop>

# IN TOUCH





# How wide are the ripples?

## Related resources

### **Failure report: learning from our mistakes**

● *Engineers Without Borders Canada, 2010*

Engineers Without Borders (EWB) believes that success in development is not possible without taking risks and innovating – which inevitably means failing sometimes – and lessons learnt from failure are of crucial importance. So the organisation has developed a Failure report: an annual publication where staff members reflect on the failures and learning from their project work. In the spirit of sharing lessons more broadly and aiming to create a culture that encourages creativity, and calculated risk-taking, the publication is shared on their website below. EWB also have a website where they invite anyone to share and reflect from their failures:

[www.admittingfailure.com](http://www.admittingfailure.com)

■ Download online: [www.ewb.ca/en/whoweare/accountable/failure.html](http://www.ewb.ca/en/whoweare/accountable/failure.html)

Or contact: Engineers Without Borders Canada – Ingénieurs Sans Frontières Canada,

312 Adelaide Street West, Suite 302, Toronto, Ontario, M5V 1R2, Canada. Email: [info@ewb.ca](mailto:info@ewb.ca). Tel: +1 866 481 3696. Fax: +1 416 352 5360.

### **Promoting voice and choice: exploring innovations in Australian NGO accountability for development effectiveness**

● *Chris Roche, 2010, ACFID, Australia*

This publication is based on examples of practice submitted by Australian international NGOs. It shares a range of innovative ways that NGOs are working to improve their downward accountability and social learning. It defines three different loops of accountability:

- single loop (which refers to feedback from partners and communities to NGOs on their activities);
- double loop (which describes ongoing engagement with partners and communities on broader policies, practices or strategies); and
- triple-loop (seen as the most

fundamental level, which explores how NGOs adhere to their core values and mission).

Focusing on triple-loop accountability involves reflection on NGO beliefs about the world and their place within it, as well as assumptions about how positive change occurs. This is the most challenging area of accountability as it is linked to the identity of an organisation. Based on NGO examples, Roche concludes that most accountability practice is focused on single-loop accountability, with NGOs learning how to improve their practice, but not exploring radical new ways of doing things. She argues that NGOs need to recognise the strategic nature of the 'new accountability' agenda: moving beyond participation and improving learning to consider transparency, complaints procedures and response mechanisms.

■ Online: <http://tinyurl.com/voice-acfid>  
Full URL: [www.acfid.asn.au/resources/docs\\_resources/Promoting%20Voice%20and%20Choice%20ACFID%202010.pdf/view](http://www.acfid.asn.au/resources/docs_resources/Promoting%20Voice%20and%20Choice%20ACFID%202010.pdf/view)

### **Organisational learning in NGOs: creating the motive, means, and opportunity**

● *Bruce Britton, 2005, Praxis Paper 3, INTRAC*

Britton explores why learning is useful in NGOs and how to nurture organisational learning in NGOs. He notes that NGOs are usually very action-oriented, partly because they are under constant pressure to demonstrate impact. But that they also recognise that they need to learn, from their own experiences and others. As Britton notes:

*To be a learning NGO requires organisations to simultaneously balance the need to take a strategic approach to organisational learning (at the highest level of organisational planning and management) with the recognition that learning is also an*

*intensely personal process that goes on in the minds of individuals.*

The paper draws on examples from northern NGOs. It looks at how NGOs can provide the motive, means and opportunity for organisational learning, looking at how planned and emergent strategies can be combined, and recognising that while much has been written on conceptual frameworks for learning these are mostly 'western' oriented, and work needs to be done to translate these theories into practice.

■ Download online:

<http://tinyurl.com/britton-praxis3>

Full URL: [www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=398](http://www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=398)

Or contact: INTRAC, Oxbridge Court, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, UK. Email: [info@intrac.org](mailto:info@intrac.org); Tel: +44 1865 201851; Fax: +44 1865 201852.

### **Introducing knowledge sharing methods and tools – a facilitator's guide**

● *Allison Hewlitt and Lucie Lamoureux, 2010, IDRC and IFAD*

This publication was funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre and the International Fund for Agricultural Development as a component of the ENRAP initiative. It aims to support those who want to develop stronger knowledge and sharing capacities, methods and tools. The guide was developed primarily to support a knowledge and sharing workshop. It is also designed to be used directly by individuals to strengthen learning and sharing directly in their work. It is focused on five key elements:

- Strengthening relationships and networks
- Capturing and disseminating lessons learnt, case studies and good practices: a look at some tools
- Generating and sharing lessons learnt, case studies and good practices
- Designing and facilitating better meetings and workshops

- Strengthening and sustaining knowledge-sharing

■ Download online:

<http://tinyurl.com/enrap-pdf>

Full URL: [www.enrap.org/resources/development-themes/knowledge-management/introducing-knowledge-sharing-methods-and-tools-a-facilitators-guide](http://www.enrap.org/resources/development-themes/knowledge-management/introducing-knowledge-sharing-methods-and-tools-a-facilitators-guide)

Also available from: IDRC, South Asia Regional Office, 208, Jor Bagh, New Delhi 03, India. Tel: +91 11 2461 9411. Or contact: Ms Chase Palmeri, IFAD, Via Paolo di Dono, 44, 00142 Rome, Italy. Email: [ch.palmeri@ifad.org](mailto:ch.palmeri@ifad.org); Tel: + 39 0654591.

### Learning from change: issues and experiences in participatory monitoring and evaluation

● *Marisol Estrella with Jutta Blauert, Dindo Campilan, John Gaventa, Julian Gonsalves, Irene Guijt, Deb Johnson and Roger Ricafort (Eds.), 2000, Practical Action*

Based on case studies and discussions between development practitioners and academics, this publication explores experiences in participatory approaches to monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) across different institutions and sectors. It explores conceptual, methodological, institutional and policy issues in relation to the understanding and practice of PM&E.

■ Download online: [www.adpc.net/pdr-sea/eval/file10.pdf](http://www.adpc.net/pdr-sea/eval/file10.pdf)

Or contact: Practical Action, The Schumacher Centre, Bourton on Dunsmore, Rugby, CV23 9QZ, UK.

Email: [practicalaction@practicalaction.org.uk](mailto:practicalaction@practicalaction.org.uk); Tel: +44 1926 634400.

### Changing the world by changing ourselves: reflections from a bunch of BINGOs

● *Cathy Shutt, 2009, IDS Practice Paper*

Based on a series of workshops which brought together academics and staff from a range of big international NGOs (BINGOs) this paper explores the challenges facing BINGOs. It looks at the

change that BINGOs are trying to achieve, and the (perceived) constraints that prevent them from taking on a more radical agenda. It outlines the types of questions organisations (or individuals) should be asking themselves if they want to support 'progressive social change' focusing both on their internal operations and their interaction with the external environment. It is a really useful starting point for understanding the context in which BINGOs are currently working in.

■ Download online: <http://tinyurl.com/ids-bingo>

Full URL: [www.ids.ac.uk/go/idspublication/changing-the-world-by-changing-ourselves-reflections-from-a-bunch-of-bingos-research-summary](http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/idspublication/changing-the-world-by-changing-ourselves-reflections-from-a-bunch-of-bingos-research-summary)

Or contact: IDS Publications, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK. Email: [bookshop@ids.ac.uk](mailto:bookshop@ids.ac.uk); Tel: + 44 1273 915637; Fax: + 44 1273 621202.

### Relationships matter: the best kept secret of international aid?

● *Rosalind Eyben, 2011, Community Development Resource Association (CDRA)*

This is an article published in *Investing in the immaterial*, CDRA's annual digest for practitioners of development. Eyben argues that rather than understanding development as if it is made up of real objects – and therefore predictable and measurable – it would be more appropriate to focus on the 'relational' aspect of development. She argues that current practice means:

- Power relations, the partiality of knowledge and complexity are ignored – as are surprises and positive and negative unplanned consequences.
- Theoretical and contested concepts such as civil society, capacity or policy are made to seem more concrete or real – and therefore quantifiable e.g. 'state the number of policies influenced'.
- Top level aid bureaucrats [...] are obliged

to represent international aid to their peers, their Treasuries and politicians as a feasible project that they are capable of controlling. Over time, they learn to ignore what they cannot deal with.

But what if development were understood instead as an emergent process – uncertain, relative and complex? We would recognise that development involves dealing with ‘messes’: with history, culture and context and relationships all playing a role. Unfortunately, even when people within aid agencies do understand the importance of relational practice their work is often misrepresented up the management chain to conform to the official representation of how aid works. In this way, hidden relational practices may be sustaining the very norms that such practices are subverting.

■ Download online: <http://tinyurl.com/cdra-digest>

Full URL: [www.cdra.org.za/images/publications/fa\\_cdra\\_digest.pdf](http://www.cdra.org.za/images/publications/fa_cdra_digest.pdf)

Or contact: Community Development Resource Association, 52-54 Francis Street, Woodstock, Cape Town, 7915, South Africa. Email: [info@cdra.org.za](mailto:info@cdra.org.za); Tel: +27 21 462 3902; Fax: +27 21 462 3918; Website: [www.cdra.org.za](http://www.cdra.org.za)

### Insights into participatory video: a handbook for the field

● *Nick and Chris Lurch, 2006, InsightShare*

Written by InsightShare’s directors Nick and Chris Lurch, this 125-page booklet is a practical guide to setting up and running PV projects. It draws on experience in PV in several countries. Helpful tips for the facilitator clarify how to use video to encourage a lively, democratic process. Free to download PDF in English, French, Spanish and Russian. You can also request a Bahasa Indonesia language version.

■ Download online: <http://insightshare.org/resources/pv-handbook>

Or contact: InsightShare, The Old Music Hall, 106-108 Cowley Road, OX4 1JE, Oxford, UK. Email: [info@insightshare.org](mailto:info@insightshare.org); Tel: +44 1865 403127.

### A rights-based approach to participatory video toolkit

● *InsightShare, 2010*

This toolkit aims to provide the first few stepping stones for practitioners of participatory video to begin introducing a rights-based approach into their practice. The toolkit (published June 2010) is free to download as a dynamic PDF.

The toolkit is intended to be particularly useful for those already undertaking participatory video work, although the methods, ideas, tools, checklists and additional resources cited will mean its contents are useful and relevant to a broad community of practitioners of participatory communications and media.

■ Download online: <http://tinyurl.com/rba-is-pv>

Full URL: <http://insightshare.org/resources/right-based-approach-to-pv-toolkit>

Or contact: InsightShare, The Old Music Hall, 106-108 Cowley Road, OX4 1JE, Oxford, UK. Email: [info@insightshare.org](mailto:info@insightshare.org); Tel: +44 1865 403127.

### Participation for what: social change or social control?

● *Georgina M. Gómez, Ariane A. Corradi, Pedro Goulart, Rose Namara (Eds.), 2010, The Hague: ISS and Hivos*

*I participate  
You participate  
He/She participates  
We participate. But...  
They decide.<sup>1</sup>*

This publication is the result of a 2008 conference which explored the

<sup>1</sup> ‘The adverse effect of the Law of Popular Participation’ as explained by a Bolivian ‘participant’ – arguing that participation as a concept is meaningful, but in practice it can become hollow because decision-making processes are often dominated by elites.

concept of participation in development processes. Participants queried the notions of ownership and participation espoused by most development agencies, and examined the real processes underneath. They asked whether participation is a gentle way of imposing donor views, or if in fact does it generate authentic social change in the best interest of the various actors?

■ Download online:

<http://tinyurl.com/hivos-oap>

Full URL: [www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-Building/Publications/Open-Access-Publication-Participation-for-What](http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-Building/Publications/Open-Access-Publication-Participation-for-What)

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### **Narratives of accessibility and social change in Shimshal, Northern Pakistan**

● *Nancy Cook and David Butz, 2011, Mountain Research and Development 31:1, International Mountain Society*

This paper analyses 35 oral testimonies that were collected in Shimshal through a Panos oral testimony project. The project's goal was to record villagers' perspectives on social change in the community.

■ Download online:

[www.brocku.ca/webfm\\_send/16468](http://www.brocku.ca/webfm_send/16468)

### **All together now: oral testimony, theatre, media, debate – how one community's concerns reached a national audience**

● *Panos, 2011*

This case study explores how communication activities helped a marginalised community in Pakistan to speak out against the pollution ruining their lives. This case study demonstrates Panos's integrated approach to communication for development:

combining first person testimony, relationship-building, inclusive dialogue and working with the mainstream media so that the voices of people most affected by development issues contribute to national-level understanding and decision-making.

■ Download online: <http://tinyurl.com/panos-ot>  
Full URL: <http://panos.org.uk/resources/all-together-now-oral-testimony-theatre-media-debate/>

Or contact: Panos London, 9 White Lion Street, London N1 9PD, UK. Tel: +44 20 7278 1111; Fax +44 20 7278 0345; Email: [info@panos.org.uk](mailto:info@panos.org.uk); Website: [www.panos.org.uk](http://www.panos.org.uk)

### **Giving voice: practical guidelines for implementing oral testimony projects**

● *Panos, 2003*

This training manual was produced in response to the many requests Panos receives for practical guidelines from individuals and organisations interested in implementing oral testimony projects.

The manual is a practical companion to the Panos book *Listening for a Change*, which explored the ideas behind the methodology and looked at different examples of oral testimony and development.

■ To receive a PDF copy by email contact: [otp@panos.org.uk](mailto:otp@panos.org.uk).

### **Who counts? The quiet revolution of participation and numbers**

● *Robert Chambers (2007) IDS Working Paper 296, Institute of Development Studies*

Chambers writes about the way participatory methods can be used to generate 'numbers' or statistics. He argues that it is possible to use participatory methods to gain more than qualitative insights. There are many participatory methods that can be used for counting, calculating, measuring, estimating, valuing and scoring and comparing. Local people can generate

numbers for all these actions, although often an external facilitator plays a role in supporting the analysis, especially if a large scale process is involved where local numbers are aggregated and statistically compared. Reflecting on learning from participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) Chambers notes that while the use of participatory numbers might be driven by an external agency those involved in generating the numbers may be empowered in the process. But Chambers also discusses some of the tensions. He outlines key

methodological challenges and questions of scale, quality, time, resources and ethics. But he urges that the participatory numbers revolution must take hold.

■ Download online:

<http://tinyurl.com/wp296-ids>

Full URL: [www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=1006](http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=1006)

Or contact: IDS Publications, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK. Email: [bookshop@ids.ac.uk](mailto:bookshop@ids.ac.uk); Tel: + 44 1273 915637; Fax: + 44 1273 621202.

# E-participation

## Dare to share: SDC learning and networking

[www.daretoshare.ch](http://www.daretoshare.ch)

This website is about learning and sharing knowledge. It is owned by the Knowledge and Learning Processes division of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The website currently makes available two types of knowledge:

- tools and methods for learning and sharing knowledge; and
- technical knowledge in relation to SDC's main fields of intervention.

■ You can also follow posts on the SDC learning and networking blog: [www.sdc-learningandnetworking-blog.admin.ch](http://www.sdc-learningandnetworking-blog.admin.ch)

## CDA collaborative learning projects: Listening Project

<http://tinyurl.com/cda-listening>

Full URL: [www.cdainc.com/cdawww/project\\_profile.php?pid=LISTEN&pname=Listening%20Project](http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/project_profile.php?pid=LISTEN&pname=Listening%20Project)

Begun in late 2005, the Collaborative for Development Action's (CDA) Listening

Project is a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance (e.g. humanitarian aid, development cooperation, peace-building activities, human rights work and environmental conservation). For recipients of international interventions, over the years of their experience, what has been useful (and not useful) and why? CDA's belief is that if we ask for and listen carefully to their judgments, assistance providers and donors would learn a great deal about how to improve the effectiveness of their efforts. The project has a web page with a list of project-related PDFs which are free to download.

## InsightShare

[www.insightshare.org](http://www.insightshare.org)

InsightShare are leaders in the use of participatory video (PV) as a tool for individuals and groups to grow in self-confidence and trust, and to build skills to

act for change. InsightShare's participatory video methods aim to value local knowledge, build bridges between communities and decision makers and enable people to develop greater control over the decisions affecting their lives. The website includes videos, articles, case studies and photostories.

### Panos: IDP Voices

[www.idpvoices.org](http://www.idpvoices.org)

IDP Voices is a project by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) with training and technical support from Panos London (2006-08). This site lets internally displaced people tell their life stories – in their own words. The narratives in these pages are valuable complements to the official information on conflicts which governments and international organisations offer. Read and listen to IDP Voices from Colombia and Georgia.

### Mountain voices

[www.mountainvoices.org](http://www.mountainvoices.org)

An online archive of 300 oral testimonies documenting economic, social, cultural and environmental change in 10 mountain communities around the world (1997-2005).

### Oral testimonies

[www.panos.org.uk/lifestories](http://www.panos.org.uk/lifestories)

Oral testimonies, digital stories and participatory video from men and women in Ethiopia, Sudan, Pakistan, Zambia, Kenya, Mozambique, UK and Madagascar. These testimonies come from different Panos projects (2005-2010).

### Oral testimonies: IFAD's Rural Poverty Report 2011

[www.ifad.org/rpr2011](http://www.ifad.org/rpr2011)

[www.ifad.org/rpr2011/testimonials/index.htm](http://www.ifad.org/rpr2011/testimonials/index.htm)

IFAD'S Rural Poverty Report 2011 contains thoughts and perspectives from the rural poor in China, Egypt,

Madagascar, Pakistan, Peru and Senegal. Their testimonies were influential in the preparation of the report and can be read online here.

### Andrew Lees Trust: Project HEPA – oral testimony 2007-2009

[www.andrewleestrust.org/hepa.htm](http://www.andrewleestrust.org/hepa.htm)

HEPA is an abbreviation of *Hetahetam-Po Ambara* meaning 'Proclaim what is in your heart'. The project recorded oral testimonies from local communities in Androy and Anosy. It produced five films, a book in three languages and a range of web publications. The testimonies have been disseminated locally, nationally and internationally to increase the voice of local populations, and improve awareness about the knowledge and experience of indigenous people in southern Madagascar.

### Stories to tell, stories to hear

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=13JHrTFT9Is](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13JHrTFT9Is)

A short (3:51 minute) film by Panos London about its oral testimony work.

### Working with stories

[www.workingwithstories.org](http://www.workingwithstories.org)

This website is the online version of Cynthia Kurtz's book *Working with stories in your community or organization*. This online book is about how to get started working with stories, using an approach Cynthia helped develop and recommend on a small scale in communities and organisations. It includes an introduction to working with stories, as well as information on project planning, collecting stories and working with collected stories. There are also tips and guidance on facilitating story gathering and sense-making.

## Blogs

### Motive, means and opportunity

<http://thelearningngo.wordpress.com>

Bruce Britton's blog on learning and development in NGOs and other civil society organisations. Bruce Britton is a consultant and trainer who has worked for the past 25 years works with international and national NGOs and networks on organisational learning, supporting NGOs to recognise their collective expertise, develop their intelligence, increase their adaptability and become healthier and more enjoyable places in which to work.

### Wait... What? Traveling the grey areas between sectors and silos

<http://lindaraftree.wordpress.com>

Linda Raftree's personal blog focuses on integrating new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media into community development programmes and communications initiatives to improve impact, reach and quality, and to offer tools that can help increase youth participation and voice at local, national and global levels.

### Why aid and development workers should be reading blogs

● *Linda Raftree, 30th November 2010*  
Any discussion of technology inevitably brings up questions. Do new innovations reinforce existing power relations and contribute to the exclusion of poor people's voices? Or is the very nature of

the technology an equaliser and an opportunity? This blog explains why we should be reading blogs – and also gives links to a range of blogs which Linda Raftree recommends.

- Blogs cover many of the same issues as both newspapers and journals and project reports. But blog writers also discuss what these issues mean for practitioners and policy makers.
- Blogs contain stories from the field, heated debates and discussion on latest development trends.
- Blogs are the one place where geography is no barrier to the conversation. Academics, journalists, donors, Washington think tank-ers, United Nations or NGO staff all share ideas using blogs.

■ Read online: <http://tinyurl.com/lindaraftree-30-11-10>

Full URL: <http://lindaraftree.wordpress.com/2010/11/30/why-aid-and-development-workers-should-be-reading-blogs/>

### Where are the local aid and development worker blogs?

● *Linda Raftree, 9th December 2010*  
Following on from the previous blog post, here Linda discusses where 'local' voices can be heard online. These include:

- <http://rising.globalvoicesonline.org>
- <http://globalvoicesonline.org>
- [www.maneno.org/eng/home](http://www.maneno.org/eng/home)

■ Read online: <http://tinyurl.com/lindaraftree-09-12-10>

Full URL: <http://lindaraftree.wordpress.com/2010/12/09/where-are-the-local-aid-and-development-worker-blogs/>



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- *Articles*: max. 2500 words plus illustrations – see below for guidelines.
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- *In Touch*: short pieces on forthcoming workshops and events, publications, and online resources.

We welcome accounts of recent experiences in the field (or in workshops) and current thinking around participation, and particularly encourage contributions from practitioners in the South. Articles should be co-authored by all those engaged in the research, project, or programme.

In an era in which participatory approaches have often been viewed as a panacea to development problems or where acquiring funds for projects has depended on the use of such methodologies, it is vital to pay attention to the quality of the methods and process of participation. Whilst we will continue to publish experiences of innovation in the field, we would like to emphasise the need to analyse the limitations as well as the successes of participation.

*Participatory Learning and Action* is still a series whose focus is methodological, but it is important to give more importance to issues of power in the process and to the impact of participation, asking ourselves who sets the agenda for participatory practice. It is only with critical analysis that we can further develop our thinking around participatory learning and action.

We particularly favour articles which contain one or more of the following elements:

- an **innovative** angle to the concepts of participatory approaches or their application;
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- an attempt to develop **new methods**, or innovative adaptations of existing ones;
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Please try to keep contributions clear and accessible. Sentences should be short and simple. Avoid jargon, theoretical terminology, and overly academic language. Explain any specialist terms that you do use and spell out acronyms in full.

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Please ensure that photos/drawings are scanned at a high enough resolution for print (300 dpi) and include a short caption and credit(s).

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## Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) Network

Since June 2002, the IIED Resource Centre for Participatory Learning and Action has been housed by the Institute of Development Studies, UK. Practical information and support on participation in development is also available from the various members of the RCPLA Network.

This initiative is a global network of organisations, committed to information sharing and networking on participatory approaches.

More information, including regular updates on RCPLA activities, can be found in the In Touch section of *Participatory Learning and Action*, or by visiting [www.rcpla.org](http://www.rcpla.org), or contacting the network coordinator: Ali Mokhtar, CDS, Near East Foundation, 4 Ahmed Pasha Street, 10th Floor, Garden City, Cairo, Egypt.

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## Participation at IDS

Participatory approaches and methodologies are also a focus for the Participation, Power and Social Change Team at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK. This group of researchers and practitioners is involved in sharing knowledge, in strengthening capacity to support quality participatory approaches, and in deepening understanding of participatory methods, principles, and ethics. For further information please contact: Jane Stevens, IDS, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK.

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Do you work with or in an international or northern office of an international non-governmental organisation (INGO)? Do you facilitate participatory processes at the grassroots? Have you ever wondered how wide an impact the process might have?

When a pebble is thrown in the water it creates ripples. But just as the ripples fade as they lose momentum, the strong local impact of good quality participatory grassroots processes also weakens as it gets further away from the original context. Yet the insight and analysis, evidence and stories generated and documented during participatory processes are just the kinds of information which are needed to inform good development policy and planning.

This issue shares reflections and experiences of bringing grassroots knowledge and information from participatory processes to bear at international level. It examines the possibilities and challenges involved – as well as strategies for strengthening practice. It aims to inspire other empowered activists working with INGOs to be a conscious and active part of change: to bring about more accountable, equitable and participatory development.

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