

Research summary

Voice to the People

February 2017

Introduction

This paper shares findings from a [review](#) of Christian Aid's work using communications for development (C4D) approaches to strengthen the voice of programme participants and aid recipients in programme learning and communications. It draws on documentation and interviews with Christian Aid staff and consultants involved in the work, as well as some research with other development organisations, to explore how C4D can be more integrated into Christian Aid's work to promote more direct communications from programmes.

The sources of data were limited, with only one existing evaluation (PhotoVoice) to provide data on the experience of partners and communities. The report reflects the positive response of all interviewees, recognising that this has not been substantiated with further research, and any bias has not been counterbalanced. However, it is hoped that the information and learning shared can feed into critical discussion of how the approaches can best be replicated and developed to support Christian Aid's strategy and vision.

Part I: Christian Aid's experience

Christian Aid have implemented a number of C4D projects since 2014, mostly within large donor funded programmes such as the PPA:

- **C4D projects with programme objectives:** The [Community Correspondents' Network](#) in India and [SMS Voices](#) in Sierra Leone and Kenya, support people to identify local issues and communicate them to authorities via video or SMS.
- **Participatory photography projects for M&E:** First in partnership with independent NGO [PhotoVoice](#) and later with its own methodology [Picture Power](#), participatory photography projects were used to enable programme participants in Ghana, Ethiopia and Kenya to document key issues to support monitoring and outcome assessments. [Picture Power](#) was also used to explore changes in power in the occupied Palestinian territories, and the impact of the ECRP programme in Malawi.
- **Video projects to capture feedback and outcomes:** The [Truth Truck](#) took a specially equipped bus around villages in Nepal to gather people's opinions on the aid received after the earthquake, resulting in a short film used to inform future responses, and to highlight the need to listen to affected people. In Central America, documentary film-makers developed a short video with

What is participatory photography?

Participants are trained in photography techniques and supported to identify key issues they wish to document. They take photographs, and write captions for a selection of the images for a community exhibition. This allows the wider community to view the images and share their own views on the issues. The photographs become an entry point for discussion, uncovering different perceptions, for example between men and women, unexpected outcomes which may not be monitored and the ripple effects of change.

the input of programme participants as part of the governance impact assessment.

This review focuses on C4D initiatives which support participants to communicate *with Christian Aid and partners*, for reporting, learning or communications, rather than *with local decision-makers* for programme objectives such as advocacy or active citizenship. There is some crossover between the two, but at this stage it is important for Christian Aid to identify how C4D can promote direct communication from programmes, and strengthen its C4D methodologies and capacity to this end. What's more, research into the sector uncovered very few examples of C4D being used for organisational learning or communications, suggesting that there is an opportunity for Christian Aid to promote the practice, building on its own work and learning.

The added value of communications for development C4D

The project documentation and interviews suggested that these approaches have had significant value for programmes and communications. While lighter processes such as the Truth Truck enabled CA staff and partners to gather anonymous feedback on emergency aid, or the documentary-style video provided staff and partners with a useful view of their work, it was the participatory photography approaches which yielded the greatest added value (for the greatest investment in capacity of partners and community participants).

The review found that such approaches not only build capacity and confidence, but also provide valuable insights and outputs.

- When applied to M&E processes, the discussions generated by the images can respond to the complexity of the work and changes, uncovering softer or unexpected impacts which might not show up on routine monitoring, and differentiating the experiences of different people and groups.
- The outputs can provide rich material to better understand the context for CA's interventions and express less tangible issues and outcomes, for programme learning or in communications to "*help people to understand why and how the programmes are implemented as they are.*" As communications outputs they were considered less extractive.
- The outputs have also had value locally, for sharing experiences and good practice between participating communities, and for local authorities to see what local partners are doing. The social process of C4D has strengthened the capacity and confidence of participants to communicate and engage in local development processes. Reports showed that:
 - Enabling people to represent themselves and frame discussions in their own realities is in itself a form of empowerment.
 - The experience of defining, illustrating and discussing key issues has strengthened local awareness and understanding of the programme and local development, and built their confidence to constructively engage. A district official in Ethiopia noted that participants "*... have become analytical and critical in their description of the images and their captions, using them to propose solutions and promote behaviour change.*"
 - PhotoVoice participants reported increased confidence in speaking to, and for, their communities. One female participant in Ghana explained that: "*I never had any political voice in my community... but after I had been doing this project, the people of my community started to value me more because I was always photographing all the issues*

that were affecting us.”

- Some communities have continued to use the skills and cameras to document local problems and seek solutions, raise awareness or share good practice.
- Partners involved in Picture Power have strengthened their capacity to support local communications work, and have gained visibility and strengthened relationships with local actors and authorities. Partners in Opt were also able to strengthen their accountability through the process, recognising from feedback the need for outreach and communication.

Learning about the methodologies

From these experiences, several issues have arisen to be considered in designing any future approach:

- **Setting the agenda:** These types of processes can be focused on questions or outputs to meet specific organisational needs, or allow participants more freedom to select the messages and issues most relevant to them.
- **Tools and media:** It is important to ensure that the medium is appropriate to the type of use and audience, whether for communication outputs or data for partners and staff to use. Video footage can be hard to use effectively for learning or reporting, for example, whereas some partners may not have the capacity to organise and store lots of photos.
- **Discussion, analysis and feedback:** At the heart of the participatory photography approaches is the opportunity for wider community and partners to discuss and analyse the images and issues represented. Even in ‘lighter’ approaches, such as the Truth Truck, feedback loops are important to allow communities to review and discuss the outputs. This also helps to ensure that the meaning of the images is defined by the participants, one element of avoiding misrepresentation and misinterpretation in their later use. This makes facilitation an essential element of any C4D approach.
- **Triangulation and validation:** These approaches provide an important strand of data, but may need to be complemented by and triangulated against other sources of evidence if they are used to show what is happening on the ground.
- **Partnership:** These approaches require collaboration between local partners, Christian Aid local staff, and the communications or programme teams. Each partner brings something different and essential to the project and it is important to ensure that they have the capacity, motivation and resources to fulfil that role.
- **Local benefits:** In C4D, the transformative nature of the process is an objective in itself, bringing valuable skills, confidence, capacity, voice, relationships etc. Maximise local benefits through investing in capacity, supporting participants to continue to use photography, and supporting partners to analyse the information and implications for their work.
- **Inclusive and representative:** Careful selection of participants is necessary to ensure that it is not just the strongest or loudest voices which are heard. What’s more, meaningful participation depends not only on facilitation, but also on access to safe spaces to share ideas, ask questions and express opinions.
- **Evaluation and innovation:** It would be good to evaluate some of the participatory communications work to understand the use and impact of the outputs, the impact of the process on participants and partners, how inclusive and participatory the process has been and to get a sense of the capacity and resources needed to implement such processes.

Part II: Where from here?

This section explores how C4D processes and outputs might fit with Christian Aid’s aims and ways of working, to what end they might be applied, and the practical and ethical implications.

Why include more 'authentic voices' in your programming?

Christian Aid aims to 'amplify authentic voices' and 'narrow the gap' between programme participants and supporters, with more direct communication from the programmes. C4D approaches fit into this vision, supporting people to communicate their own stories in their own way, generating more accurate, more contextualised and more authentic communications with donors and supporters. They have the potential to (contribute to) transforming relationships between communities and development actors, including Christian Aid and partners, supporting local people to be more active agents in development and change. This could be an important tool in implementing Vision 2020, depending on the extent to which Christian Aid is able to respond to what is being communicated, and how much control it needs over the messages being communicated through, or about, the organisation.

How do we want to define or focus 'participatory communications'?

C4D projects all have a physical communications output, generated by (or at least including) the voices of people directly or indirectly affected by CA/partner interventions. This could include a wide range of work, and a sharper definition would enable more focused methodologies and help to make the work more visible, but also strengthen the opportunities to share good practice or integrate key elements across the organisation. The bulk of the work has been in participatory photography, with an in-house methodology already piloted and use in different contexts. This might be a good basis for strengthening this area of work, or a broader range of work including less participatory feedback processes such as the Truth Truck may be preferred.

What will the outputs be used for?

The principal objectives of any C4D process, and intended uses of the outputs, have a big influence on the design of the methodology. There may be different expectations of outputs intended for supporter communications, than for outcome assessments or partner learning and planning, and the process will reflect this. In particular, the freedom allowed participants to set the agenda and define the messages may be different.

As Christian Aid aims to move towards more direct communications from partners and communities to its different audiences this raises important questions about the role of Christian Aid in mediating this information flow, to keep it within the bounds of the organisation's identity, principles, or brand. This requires careful thought as to the parameters and principles for any 'direct communication' flowing through the organisation. It may also require changes to structures and capacity, with more local capacity to support meaningful communication from communities.

How can we support good practice in C4D?

There is much to build on from the experiences of using C4D approaches, particularly photography. How that is done depends on the priorities, resources and will of the organisation. Some basic principles for sharing and promoting good practice would include: ensuring appropriate **capacity and structures** throughout CA and partners to facilitate C4D approaches and use the outputs effectively and appropriately; raising **awareness and visibility** of what has been done and the value for different objectives; and **co-ordinating expertise** and documenting lessons learned, so that people know where to find advice and tools.

Beyond these, some issues emerged specific to this review:

- **How long-term and integrated?** To date, the C4D work has been stand-alone projects taking a 'snap-shot' of issues or changes at a specific time. On-going participatory communications processes, built into programme design, may have more potential to meet the learning and communication needs of Christian Aid and partners more effectively, creating permanent communication channels and feedback loops with communities. *This would require sufficient resources and capacity, as well as sufficient programme flexibility to meaningfully use and respond to what is being communicated.*

- **What kinds of capacity do CA and partners need?** Within Christian Aid, local communications capacity could generate more localised, sustainable and locally owned communications processes, in turn helping to ensure that outputs are relevant and well-used and that outcomes are followed up. What's more, investment in capacity to integrate participatory methods, and facilitate meaningful participation and inclusion would strengthen these and other core approaches. Partner capacity is key, not only to manage the process, but to facilitate discussion and analysis, and respond to what is being said and learned. There needs to be budget and country office support not just to train partners in the technical aspects of the work, but also to support them to integrate the process fits into their longer-term community development approach.
- **How can we use the outputs ethically and effectively?** The outputs from participatory communications processes may be different in quality, style and content from professional communications material. They are different also in that they are owned by the person who created them, with implications for how they are used and how consent is obtained. The audience need to understand where they come from and what they mean to the author, to avoid misrepresentation or misinterpretation. A consent and usage policy will need to be built into any approach or methodology used, taking into account the nature of the outputs.

Read the full report here: [Voice to the People Full report](#)