

# How wide are the ripples?

*The management and use of information  
generated from participatory processes in  
international non-governmental development  
organizations*

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## About IKM Emergent

In April 2007, a five-year research programme was approved for funding by the Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS), part of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The programme, Emergent Issues in Information and Knowledge Management (IKM) and International Development, will be known as the IKM Emergent Research Programme.

The objective of the programme is to improve development practice by promoting change in the way the development sector approaches the selection, management and use of knowledge in the formation and implementation of its policies and programmes. It aims to achieve this by:

- raising awareness of the importance of knowledge to development work and its contested nature;
- promoting investment in and use of Southern knowledge production of all types and origins;
- creating an environment for innovation, supported by research on existing and emergent practice, for people working in the development sector to raise and discuss means of addressing these issues; and
- finding, creating, testing and documenting ideas for processes and tools which will illustrate the range of issues which affect how knowledge is used in development work and stimulate thought around possible solutions.

## Colophon

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## Foreword

IKM Emergent is a research and communication programme founded on a critical analysis of current practice in the creation, handling and use of all forms of knowledge, including formal research, within the international development sector. IKM Emergent believes that historically the sector has adopted a too linear and simplistic understanding of how development takes place and therefore of how it needs to act to try and make change happen. As a result, the sector has generally based its work on too limited a range of knowledges from too limited a range of sources. IKM's starting point is therefore that: *'Understanding relevant multiple knowledges and having the capacity to identify, express, handle, use and share them are central to any effective development practice'*

From this starting point, the programme is looking at how agencies can or could improve their practice on the basis of improving their knowledge about their work. Such a process should involve information from a variety of sources: networks and other agencies, academic or consultancy-based research, operational information such as monitoring and evaluation, the communities in which they work. It seems that the process of finding out, listening and learning has its challenges in each case.

This working paper is one of two which IKM has commissioned to look at what happens to information derived from the participatory methodologies for project planning, implementation and evaluation, which an increasing number of agencies seek to employ. The working papers are not an end in themselves but the first step in a process of working, together with those who have participated in the research and others who may be interested, in learning about current practice, reflecting on it and seeking to improve it. Participative methodologies demand money from those who pay for them and time from those who contribute to them. If applied well, they contribute strongly to the empowerment of the communities involved and to the success of development initiatives with which they may be associated. They can also offer unique and often detailed information upon local realities and perspectives which can deepen our understanding of the processes in which we are involved. However, as this paper demonstrates, such learning does not place automatically and much of this expensively acquired and valuable resource is currently wasted. If you would like to be involved in the process of how to understand and apply the lessons from these papers, please get in touch with the authors directly or with myself.

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## **Executive Summary**

The use of participatory approaches and methods has become ever more widespread in development organizations of all types and sizes, as they seek to transform their relationships, and contextualize their programmes and priorities with strong local input. There is a good and growing body of literature exploring the quality, effectiveness and scope of such approaches. However, the research that does exist tends to focus on the application or impact within its original context. Whatever the fundamental merits or difficulties with participatory methodologies, failure to make full and efficient use of information is a genuine knowledge management issue, and one which has implications for institutional relationships and structures.

As part of the IKM Emergent programme, we undertook a research and reflection process to explore how widely the information generated through participatory processes, especially at grassroots level, is recognized and used – whether in neighbouring programmes and parallel projects, or contributing to the body of knowledge which the wider organization draws on for learning, planning and policymaking. In other words, when you ask people to contribute their opinions and insights - how far do their voices travel? To what extent do they influence or add to the organization's own knowledge, decisions and policies? And, in turn how do they add to wider understandings of development across the spectrum of development actors?

We conducted a literature review, spoke to people working in the field of international development, and facilitated focused reflection processes with staff from several international NGOs with a presence in the UK. We learned about how people, teams and organizations are working to amplify different and marginalized voices in policy and decision-making. We discovered that there is a constituency of people trying to improve the flow of information from the grassroots within their organizations.

However, we found a distinct lack of actual policies and procedures for strengthening and broadening the use of information generated through participatory processes in international development organisations. In fact, we found that some of the fundamental questions: What could this type of information be used for? Who should be using it, or paying it attention? How could it be stored, packaged or disseminated in order to have more influence? are in practice rarely being asked, let alone answered.

## **Abbreviations and acronyms**

ALPS	Accountability, Learning and Planning System
CCCD	Child-Centred Community Development
CoP	Community of Practice
DGIS	Directorate-General for International Cooperation (Netherlands)
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IKM Emergent Programme	Information and Knowledge Management Emergent Research Programme
INGOs	International non-governmental (development) organizations
KI	The Knowledge Initiative
PALS	Planning, Accountability and Learning System

## About the authors

**Hannah Beardon** works as a consultant with a variety of organizations, to explore and strengthen the role of information and communication in international development. Hannah has a decade of experience working on participatory methodologies, including the Reflect approach to adult literacy. This has fed into an understanding of how processes such as reflection and facilitated engagement can transform development organizations and relationships, an understanding which is at the root of Hannah's approach to her work. This work has included evaluations of development projects and processes using participatory techniques, design of knowledge management and shared learning tools and strategies, and the facilitation of multidisciplinary research teams. Hannah has also specialized in researching the potential of ICTs, including mobile technologies, to strengthen the communication capacity and information access of poor and marginalized people, and developed frameworks and methods for people to engage fully in planning for their use. She has published several papers in this field. [Hannahbeardon@hotmail.com](mailto:Hannahbeardon@hotmail.com)

**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 communication in development. Since leaving 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 currently completing a PhD which explores the tensions, challenges and opportunities presented when international NGOs work with a global human rights-based vision and organizational strategies, while also having a commitment to bottom-up development processes. [kate.a.newman@googlemail.com](mailto:kate.a.newman@googlemail.com)

## **Background: participation and development**

International non-governmental (development) organizations (INGOs) have for some time been transforming the way they relate to the communities they wish to serve and assist, supporting the fight against poverty through partnerships, policy influence and capacity building as well as the more traditional means of donations and services. Participatory approaches in development emphasize the importance of local knowledge, experiences and skills, supporting people to design, plan and act for their own development, and as such are widely used by INGOs from planning processes to impact assessment, auditing and other organizational procedures.

The outcomes of engagement with people to elicit their views, insights and knowledge should be of great interest and use to the organization carrying out the process, and, managed well, can improve the accountability and responsiveness of the organizations in question to their stakeholders. To broaden and diversify the knowledge base for development thinking and policy is a fundamental part of any transformative participatory process. Does this mean that international organisations managing participatory processes have not only the organizational imperative to manage and use this information well, but an ethical responsibility to ensure that the opinions, insights and knowledge they elicit are heard and acted on?

The roots of participatory theory and practice are in radical approaches from South Asia, Latin America and Europe which promote endogenous processes of development and social transformation. However, as these approaches have become absorbed into the heart of development orthodoxy, many claim they have lost their overtly political and transformative edge and as such become ineffective, as they cannot allow questioning of the premises on which development is based (see Waisbord 2008, for example). However, in our own experience and analysis, most INGOs really *do* want to respond to the voices of the poorest and most marginalized, they *do* understand the value of local knowledge and capacity, and they *do not* want to reproduce and strengthen existing power relations. So this research not only aims to understand the obstacles which get in the way of this type of relationship and process, but also to gather examples, large and small, of products and systems which try to overcome or address them.

## **Initial analysis and questions**

In order to draw together people with experience dealing with these issues, we reviewed the relevant literature, and presented our analysis of some of the main issues as we saw them. On the one hand, we identified management and accountability issues, which affect the ways in which organizations can or do elicit and use information. International non-governmental (development) organizations (INGOs) have dual accountabilities, to donors and communities, often requiring different or even conflicting approaches to planning and reporting.

Downwards accountability, and bottom-up learning (as explained by Power et al.), requires organizations not only listen, but to respond to the issues, concerns and recommendations raised. This entails letting go of the control of development, and this can be hard to square not only with the organization's own objectives and approach, but with the needs of their donors to ensure specific outcomes and financial accountability.

On the other hand there are issues of language and culture. The work of INGOs is wide reaching; working directly with poor communities and local organizations and also with national governments and at international forums. While a range of perspectives and opinions may be sought to feed into work within a particular context, there are differences in language and culture between local and international, and between programme and policy which can be difficult to breach. As international NGOs strengthen their presence in international policy arenas, they are required to present their analysis in more exclusive, technical policy language, and employ people who can intervene powerfully in that domain. This requires, at best, the translation of poor people's agendas into policy speak, and at worst a detachment of policy from grassroots analysis. In addition, there is a tendency amongst international development NGOs to represent the issues, needs and stories of change in positive and simplistic ways for their donors and sponsors, obscuring the complexities and political decisions and alignments that are a necessary part of the development process.

All of these are tensions which interfere in the free flow of information from grassroots participatory processes through international organizations to policy influence and decision-making. On top of which there are knowledge management issues of data storage and organization, and ethical questions which accompany them.

### Box 1: Questions for Reflection

In order to explore the relevance of these issues with the people presenting case studies for the research, we developed a set of participatory tools, questions and reflection exercises, which could be adapted for more general use within their organizations. These were designed to provoke and facilitate personal and institutional analysis of how participatory approaches are used, how information flows, and what types of knowledge are valued for internal policy and decision-making.

A first reflection looked at how knowledge is valued and how information flows within an organization. We included questions such as:

- What kinds/sources of information do you rely on in decision-making processes? Is it different for different types of decisions?
- Where do you access information? What criteria do you use to assess whether it is reliable, useful, relevant, etc?
- What are the points in the organization where information is generated, stored and accessed? (suggesting the use of a systems diagram to visualize this, to show the linkages and flows and enable further analysis)
- Who controls these points, inputs into them, accesses them? What power relations influence them?
- What kind of information feeds into the organization's understanding of the issues it works on (poverty, climate change, HIV, women's rights, etc.).
- Where are major decisions made? Who are the key actors in this process? What information do they have access to, or consider relevant to inform these decisions?

The second reflection looked at how participation is used and conceived within the organization:

- What has been your experience with participatory approaches in relation to your work? What types of participatory processes are used for what purposes throughout the organization?
- What is considered as good quality participatory practice? According to what/whose criteria?
- Where does information generated by participatory processes (you have been involved in) sit in the information system discussed in the previous reflection?

We asked people to look at a specific participatory process, or a grassroots information product (perhaps using a tree diagram to analyse the roots and fruits of this experience) and to explore how the process was developed, for what purpose, and how it was situated within the broader organizational context and goals. And then to look at the impacts, learning and communication and dissemination of the process, and in particular how closely controlled this was. This allowed group reflection on a healthy environment for upwards information flows, as well as the types of products or strategies which can make it happen.

In conclusion, the groups were asked to link the analysis from the two sessions, and identify lessons relating to how information is valued and packaged. And to address the following questions:

- What key issues and opportunities have been identified in the reflection process?
- How can you build on this within your organization? Who else do you need to involve and how?

## **The Case Studies**

The issues we identified through the literature review resonated with the experience and objectives of a large number of organizations and individuals working in international development. To capture this range of experience, the research process has been open and inclusive, and various practitioners and researchers, including individual consultants, small organizations and large non-governmental or academic institutions contributed insights and examples. However, we also focused on in-depth consideration of the use of information generated through participatory processes in specific international NGOs, and more specifically the strategies and products developed to enhance this.

The organizations involved were Healthlink Worldwide, Plan International, ActionAid International, Concern and Panos, all of whom volunteered to participate in the research in order to increase their own learning as well as share their relevant experiences. The issues vary depending on the size and structure of each organization and so do the responses. While some of the strategies are at institutional level, such as Plan's and ActionAid's learning, accountability and planning systems, or Concern's accountability framework, others are much more focused and concrete, such as Panos' oral testimonies, Healthlink's communication for social change or ActionAid's qualitative scenarios.

The case studies were developed based on the questions for reflection (Box 1), in some cases through a participatory reflection process, notably in the case of Healthlink who dedicated a day to the exercise, and Plan who developed a reflection across teams. In other cases, the questions were explored through more informal conversations. In all cases, the process was designed not only to understand what the organizations themselves were doing, but to link them to others with relevant experiences, and encourage them to think further about the issues and their strategy for dealing with them. All of the people and teams involved planned to follow up on or extend the reflection process, for example, a lunchtime talk to staff in Panos, and a deeper reflection using our questions in Plan Philippines at the end of their current planning process.

The case studies as presented here were written up by us based on our notes from the meetings and reflection sessions and shared with those involved for approval before including them in this report. We have focused exclusively on the issues we felt were most relevant for this specific piece of research.

### **ActionAid: Knowledge Initiative**

ActionAid International is a large international NGO, and works with local partners in 42 countries in a broad range of anti-poverty activities. Since 2003, the organization's head

office has been in South Africa, and they are in the process of transforming their governance structure to make all country programmes equal partners in organizational decision-making.

The organization's Accountability Learning and Planning System (ALPS), provides a coherent structure for all of the obligatory planning and reporting processes, and makes participation of diverse stakeholders central to the learning and planning process. The Accountability Learning and Planning System (ALPS) provides the systems, principles and values, and demonstrates political will, to include grassroots voices in the organization's decision-making processes<sup>1</sup>.

The *Knowledge Initiative* in ActionAid supports the organization to deepen and broaden existing organizational knowledge and make it more available and useful to a wider range of people. This involves identifying knowledge and understanding on specific issues generated directly through ActionAid's work as well as from the wider development community. The Knowledge Initiative promotes linkages and connections, involves communities in analysis, and promotes constructive, progressive and critical thinking, grounded in practical work and opportunities. To do this, they have employed a variety of mechanisms and tools, including fellowships, action research, courses, immersions and discussion forums. We spoke to Jorge Romano and Kate Carroll, from the Knowledge Initiative, about the issues and the innovative approaches they have been testing to diversify organizational knowledge about poverty.

### **Information and knowledge in ActionAid**

Knowledge is a key organizational resource, but while information can be easily transferred, knowledge is only created once information is analysed. This is an intellectual learning process which allows for new ideas to be generated. However, most of ActionAid staff are activists; it is an organization of action. As such, there is little transfer of actual knowledge in the normal working culture of ActionAid. *This means that information generated through participatory processes will not be translated into new organizational knowledge without a deliberate and facilitated process.*

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, due to time constraints we were not able to have an in-depth conversation or reflection with those responsible for shared learning, the key ALPS custodians, but they signalled their interest to participate in ongoing research in this area. Of particular relevance is ActionAid's work on grounded advocacy which looks specifically at how diverse perspectives, experiences and voices can generate policy and advocacy initiatives at the national level. However, while those working in shared learning can identify many interesting products used to strengthen these knowledge flows they also emphasize the wider struggle they have to create the necessary systems and culture to enable ALPS processes to reach their full potential.

The Knowledge Initiative aims to change the institutional culture so that knowledge is more valued, and part of this is looking at how knowledge helps us to understand poverty, linking it directly to the achievement of the organization's mission. The Knowledge Initiative (KI) works to broaden the sources of information and knowledge on key issues, to satisfy the information needs of the organization. This involves mapping existing knowledge inside and outside the organization, and linking to information flows within the organization such as the annual reviews and plans. *There are challenges regarding the time and space to listen and respond to people, within the framework of the wider organizational priorities, capacity and expertise.*

### **Governance structures and knowledge flows**

The governance structure of ActionAid, while allowing a large degree of national autonomy, has been quite centralized internationally. The international secretariat makes decisions which affect the whole organization, including the national affiliates, and while these may participate in decision-making process, they might not have the time and capacity to do so, especially at what is often very short notice. This is because issues are generated from the secretariat and the country programmes are invited to participate, but the issues or timing may not be appropriate. So participation from the national programme is based on their identification of the issue as relevant. It would be a more international model if issues were generated from the country programmes and internationalized, rather than starting at the centre. This should happen with the consolidation of the confederation model, which will increase the role of national affiliates in decision-making processes, and experience on the ground will be a much stronger element of the information flows and decision-making processes.

The current situation means that knowledge gained from grassroots experiences gets weaker along the chain, and is unlikely to reach international domains. Furthermore, many of the people working at international level do not have any country level experience, which complicates communication between national and international staff.

However, there are examples of how local and national experiences can inform and transform organizational approaches and understandings. This is clear through an examination of the transformation of ActionAid's approach to child sponsorship. In a break from the traditional model, ActionAid Brazil began to implement child sponsorship together with rural unions and pastoral groups to ensure that decisions and plans around the allocation of sponsorship funds were made locally. This had the outcome of making the model, and the work implemented, more political and accountable. Other staff and partners in ActionAid Brazil visited, learnt about the approach and outcomes, and developed this into new knowledge and approaches. This spiralled, as the experience was written up and shared internationally to support a review of the traditional child sponsorship model.

There were many reasons why the work at the local level was able to have such a wide impact. The structure of the newly established country programme was key as child sponsorship information was an integral part of several areas of work, from finance, planning and management to communications and fundraising. This enabled information to flow, and be integrated into new knowledge and approaches in different fields. Furthermore, ActionAid Brazil made a lot of effort to link to international processes and contribute to organizational debates, seeing their role as translators of international debates to the Brazilian context, and vice versa. There was a policy that a range of staff should attend international meetings (rather than it always being the country director who attended), and each staff member was encouraged to work on international issues and develop their own plans in relation to international plans and strategies. *This shows how an intentional process with strong leadership can facilitate a greater flow of information from participatory processes and from the grassroots, but it also illustrates the organizational implications of this.*

### **Packaging different voices into organizational knowledge**

One of the key products the Knowledge Initiative will be working on is 'qualitative scenarios', developed from interviews with key social change and development actors in different countries, such as leaders of social movements and civil society organizations, ActionAid staff, academics and journalists, and different communities. These scenarios will be drawn on to illustrate key issues around poverty and people's struggles. They are designed to influence and ground policy within and outside ActionAid. Another tool the Knowledge Initiative has used is the 'critical story of change', which seeks to give a narrative of how change happens where ActionAid is active in particular themes or issues. A perceived success story is analysed through a participatory process which provides an opportunity to explore the complexities of relationships and dynamics which come into play where ActionAid is working and contribute to change. *The knowledge initiative recognise that they need to work with the organization as it is currently structured, and adapt their work to match the organizational culture. They are therefore using specific strategies and products to capture diverse voices from across the range of actors, and ensuring these are relevant to wider organizational interests and processes.*

### **Healthlink Worldwide**

Healthlink Worldwide works with over 50 long-term partners in more than 30 countries to provide health information, and enable active participation in health policy and development. The topic of this research, participation and the promotion of the knowledge and information generated or captured by it, is fundamental and central to Healthlink's work and approach. They champion participatory approaches to improving access to knowledge and promote inclusive development dialogue to improve health and wellbeing. They develop innovative

knowledge and communication processes which empower people to voice their health needs and have those voices heard. This includes creating resources, supporting resource centres, helping organizations to evaluate what they have learned, communication training, providing access to information, and promoting advocacy. We spent a day with Healthlink staff in London facilitating an exploration of the questions in Box 1, as part of their annual review process.

### **Partners as intermediaries**

The whole culture of work in Healthlink is participatory, and all of their programmes and workshops are designed with partner participation. There is also an emphasis on linking between partners, so that they can learn from each other, contribute to reviews of each others' work and so on. However, as all of Healthlink's work is done through partners at national or local level, the issues of how grassroots participation processes function or influence other work is inevitably tied up with organizational and partnership issues. Healthlink's own staff find out about programme-related activities through partners, and while after-action reviews are held to assess the effectiveness of work done, the nature and extent of participation by community members depends on the partner's own working culture and values. *This suggests that an interesting discussion could be had on partners that are chosen, and the types of partnership which facilitate good information flows from participatory practice.*

### **Knowledge-seeking cultures**

Healthlink's mission is to facilitate the sharing of learning and knowledge, and within their offices they also have a strong culture of learning. Staff consider that knowledge-seeking behaviour is central to how people are recruited to the organization, how their work load and priorities are managed, and how they relate to each other. As Healthlink is a relatively small organization, sharing of learning and ideas through personal relationships and informal conversations is fairly easy. Staff reflected that while the organization does have formal knowledge management and information sharing systems which they all use, they often find that knowledge and information is shared informally.

However, this knowledge seeking and sharing culture and approach is not necessarily shared by the partners on whom they are dependent for access to information generated through programme activities, and in particular grassroots participation. In practice, this means that more of the learning is about methodologies and how to use particular participatory processes, than about community perspectives and analysis, for example 'What are good health solutions in practice?' Furthermore, the organization's focus on health, while giving a strong focus to the work and common ground with partners, limits the space available to respond to the range of issues emerging through partners and the participatory processes

that they facilitate. However, in general, staff reflected that shared values and strong, honest communication were based on trust and confidence, which itself is developed over long-term relationships with partners. *Relationships which continue over several different projects, tend to create deeper and richer learning partnerships; and therefore greater knowledge transfer.*

## **Plan International**

Plan International is one of the largest INGOs working on development, and since 2003 has adopted an approach called Child Centred Community Development, to which participation of children and their communities in setting the plans and objectives of local work is central. The approach evolved out of the practice of various Plan offices in Asia and has a strong focus on rights. In order to support and deepen the approach, a new planning, accountability and learning system (PALS) has been designed, which is currently being rolled out. While locally, participatory techniques and approaches have long been used in planning activities, PALS supports their use in setting broader and longer-term programme objectives, as well as implementation and monitoring. Annual participatory programme reviews ensure the inclusion of perspectives of different stakeholders in the continual reassessment of objectives and plans.

Plan is starting to identify a need on the ground to use information better, and link this to global level processes around embedding the Child Centred Community Development (CCCD) approach. They have conducted a knowledge audit, looking at where information comes from, how groups share, what information and knowledge resources exist and how they can be managed and used well. However, the issue relating to the use of information generated through participatory processes is considered most relevant at local to national level, with the linkages to international decision and policy-making not so clear. We spoke to Simon Early and Elsebeth Elo from the Programme Effectiveness Team, who also fed in reflections of colleagues undertaking participatory processes for their planning in the Philippines.

## **Organizational implications of rights and participation**

With a transition to a rights-based approach, staff need to be able to identify and analyse different sources of insight and perspectives on how rights are lived and felt on the ground<sup>2</sup>. The application of participatory approaches, and the effective use of the information generated, is closely tied into this. While staff of the organization are behind the transition,

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<sup>2</sup> Methodologies and understandings regarding working with human rights are as wide-reaching and controversial as participatory approaches themselves; and individual INGOs have taken different paths in engaging with the discourse and practice of human rights. An analysis of this is beyond the scope of this paper but it is important to note that different interpretations of a rights-based approach will have different organizational implications for engaging with questions of 'How wide are the ripples?'; dependent on how much value is placed on the process of defining and securing human rights.

they are sometimes unclear about what needs to be done differently and how. This requires a lot of institutional support and resources, as often the people who are required to do it have not been hired with that in mind, and issues such as the value given to personal knowledge, and the tyranny of deadlines, can affect how well information from communities is managed and used. Internationally, the organization is committed to building strategies and policies based on 'evidence'. *It would be interesting to consider to what extent the information generated by grassroots participatory exercises is, or could be, considered reliable or robust evidence, and for what purposes.*

### **Capacity to consolidate and analyse data**

Plan Philippines is one of the first country programmes to adopt the PALS system, and is currently developing a new strategy and long-term plan. The Planning, Accountability and Learning System (PALS) requires that this be based on an analysis of the local context and situation in communities from a child-rights perspective. Staff from the Philippines have collected data on the situation of child rights, and in particular education, through engagement with many different stakeholder groups including government, service providers, schools and community groups. The discussions were based on focused questions and provided a lot of relevant information which fed into a national workshop to set country objectives and strategies, and was fed back into local level planning.

However, the information collected has not yet been used beyond the original purpose, but has remained in the programme unit of the national office. Pressure to develop the situation analysis and strategy meant that insufficient time was available to properly consolidate the information and there is still not a full overview of what is there. Plan Philippines staff do view this wealth of information as a resource that could be drawn on to inform other types of decisions and processes, but it is so broad that it is difficult to know how to manage and use it well. The current plan is to review the information more comprehensively and explore how it could be used for learning, to share with stakeholders, improve analysis and evidence-based practice, and for use in decision-making. However, there is no clear link between national data and information and international level processes.

To make sense of this information requires capacity and time for good data analysis. This is a skilled job, but easier when data is destined to inform a particular process, such as the country office's objectives, strategy or plans. In order to be stored and made available to other processes or areas this capacity needs to be intentionally built and valued. *The programmes need to work out how the information can be structured as a proper knowledge asset. Awareness of the need for this type of analytical capacity is strong at local and country level and this has been part of the discussions surrounding the implementation of PALS. It is*

*an issue of training and performance management as well as recruitment, and it is important that this is also recognized to be a worthwhile investment by the wider organization.*

## **Concern**

Concern is an international development NGO based in Ireland. We spoke to Robyn Wilford, from Concern's Policy Evaluation and Development Directorate, who shared the experience of developing and piloting Listen First, a pilot project to develop systematic ways to manage downward accountability. Listen First intends to enable communities to systematically feedback on how accountable Concern is to them, and how satisfied they are with the work. It emerged from a research project, which involved over 500 people in exploring how downwards accountability is perceived and conducted in development, and in developing, piloting and refining the practical tools. The tools focus on working with NGO staff to develop strong relationships and dialogue with the communities and partners with whom they work.

The Listen First Framework focuses on four principles at the heart of listening and accountability: public availability of information; participation in decision-making; listening; and staff behaviour and relationships. By reflecting on these areas, and inviting communities, partners and groups to give structured feedback, it is anticipated that the NGO can improve its effectiveness as well as its accountability. The approach also emphasizes the importance of developing quantifiable and comparable data, as well as qualitative feedback. The research on the framework found that having a standardised tool does allow building of shared understanding and facilitate learning, but also identified challenges in contextualising and applying generic frameworks. *It was also found that comparable quantified results from different projects and processes can provide robust data and rich insights which can be useful to inform wider debate in the organization, suggesting strong linkages to the our work.*

## **Skills and attitudes**

Although staff and communities indicated that they found the experience, and the framework, helpful and relevant, it was very challenging. Listening is a skill, and unequal power relations between NGOs and community members, or even partners, can be difficult to overcome, requiring a high level of skill in facilitation. The Listen First research report noted a lot of learning on the pitfalls and nuances of facilitating participatory processes which acknowledge diversity in communities and groups.

The issues we had identified of dual accountabilities and conflicting reporting requirements were also brought up as challenges to the process. *With Concern suggesting that the most important factors for improving this accountability were the attitudes of field staff and managers. This includes the belief in the right and ability of local people to contribute*

*meaningfully to decision-making and a respect for their views, as well as flexibility and openness in planning in order to allow for appropriate responses to the feedback received.*

### **Politics and power**

Concern's research and the Listen First framework recognize that downward accountability is a deep and sensitive process, which involves challenging and transforming power relations and influence over decision-making. While they state that "[downward accountability] is widely seen as one of the foundation stones of effective NGO work", they also point out that managers had no incentive to prioritize it, were not accountable for making sure it happened, and that in reality downwards accountability was often actually in conflict with other priorities and more centralized decision-making processes. *The report from Concern's research recommends that relationships between head office and field offices, and between field staff and partners, need to actively model and reward downward accountability, and prioritize listening and responsive behaviour.*

This work also showed that the NGO staff were "more comfortable considering partners' downward accountability than their own." This implies that there is more to downward accountability than just listening. There is also the issue of how we respond to criticism and feedback. And this is especially true considering the pressures that NGOs face of internal systems and procedures for planning and reporting, which can make it very difficult to change direction. International NGOs such as Concern are very aware of the need to strengthen downward accountability through systems and structures to elicit the opinions and perspectives of communities and stakeholders. *However, the actual political and organizational implications are very far reaching. It will take a significant amount of political will, and organizational flexibility, to be able to follow this through to its logical conclusion.*

### **Panos**

Panos promotes the participation of poor and marginalized people in national and international development debates through media and communication projects. They work in an international network to ensure that information is used more effectively to foster debate, pluralism and democracy. As such, the questions of this research are central to the purpose of Panos. We spoke to Siobhan Warrington, head of their Oral Testimony Programme, who questioned whether the information and perspectives which Panos generates, collects or puts out there, could be used more effectively for their own learning and to inform their internal decision-making processes. Panos are intending to spend more time considering the reflection questions (Box 1) to explore exactly how, and what sort of knowledge might be relevant for their own organizational learning. The notes shared here are drawn from our initial conversation and form the basis of their further work and analysis; and illustrate a

specific product which links grassroots knowledge to wider development discourse and specific debates.

### **The potential of oral testimonies to broaden organizational knowledge**

Panos have been supporting the production of oral testimonies as high quality information outputs for local, national and international audiences for a number of years. For example, recent work has aimed to amplify the voices of women living with HIV and AIDS into national, regional and international coverage and debates. The processes of capacity building, listening, and of developing, telling and capturing the testimonies, are important in themselves. But the outputs are also designed to strengthen the diversity of perspectives on development issues in the media. Underlying the oral testimony work is the question of what information, perspectives or opinions are valid in national or high-level debates.

Oral testimony work attempts to elevate marginalized voices of people with direct experience of development issues into the media, and to be taken seriously in policy debates. An evaluation of the oral testimony work by partners in Pakistan asked: 'How do we know that our voices will be taken seriously?' This illustrates that engagement with people to tell their stories, or supply their opinions, knowledge or insights, implies a level of accountability and responsibility to influence the way this is perceived and used, to ensure that they can be taken seriously. Panos has been working on this, integrating oral testimony methodologies into the media toolkit they produce, developing dramas from community discussions, and developing plans to increase the reach of the testimonies, including the academic audience.

However, the potential for systematic use of the knowledge contained in Panos' stock of oral testimonies to inform the organization's own planning, outputs and strategies has been largely overlooked. There is the will in the organization to look at ways of encouraging this to happen. A step towards this will be to make the oral testimony and voices more accessible throughout the organization by mapping them and providing information about their location, the issues covered and partners. This would also enable people throughout the organization to make use of the relationships generated through the oral testimony work, as well as the outputs.

### **Issues emerging**

While the case studies and reflections gathered have underpinned the relevance of the research topic, throughout our research process the focus has also been refined. We began the research to look at whether the output of participatory processes was as widely and well used as it could be in international development NGOs. Throughout our discussions and analysis we began to realise that by participatory processes we were all talking about engagement with stakeholders at the grassroots, albeit implicitly, and that the crux of the

issue was the extent to which those receiving development assistance actually influence the thinking and decision-making of the international NGOs working to serve them. So perhaps the most fundamental question underpinning the whole of this research, and future explorations of the issues, could be:

*How can, or should, grassroots voices systematically feed into the knowledge used within international development organizations - for identifying issues and messages, for planning and policy-making, to understand impact etc.?*

And, of course:

*What learning and examples are there of ways of how to make this happen?*

Much of the analysis we began with was reconfirmed by the research and reflection process. Some issues emerged strongly throughout all of the different experiences, such as the tensions between organizational processes and requirements and the space needed to respond to opportunities, criticisms or insights coming from the grassroots. Some practical issues also emerged, including a strong emphasis on capacity and skills, especially at the grassroots, as well as the systems and behaviours necessary to ensure good flows of relevant information.

### **Making ripples in different pools**

One recurring theme was that of context. The experiences shared by people working at national level showed that there is an awareness of the value of the data generated through grassroots participatory engagement, although the nature and extent of its use varied. In the Listen First research carried out by Concern, and in reflections from Plan Philippines and ActionAid Brazil, there were examples of national staff integrating grassroots perspectives in their work, or at least being influenced by them.

Personal proximity to the source of the data or information certainly makes recognizing and using it a lot easier, although there are still skills in identification, analysis and management of information which are key to good practice. It can be difficult to consolidate and analyse information from grassroots processes in a way to make it systematically available and useful to national decision-making, planning and reporting. But personal experience and informal communication help to ensure that this information is recognized and used. Where there is commitment to participatory principles, and vertical and horizontal sharing of learning are **intentionally promoted**, such as in the case of ActionAid Brazil, voices and ideas from the grassroots can be much more influential.

However, the gap between the national context and international structures is much more difficult for this type of information to overcome. Apart from the lack of personal experience and proximity, which enables the transformation of information into learning, and the difference in context and applicability, there are practical and ethical issues of storage, transfer and access. Many of the organizations have to deal with a further complication, which came out clearly in the reflection with Healthlink: that much of their connection with the grassroots is mediated by partners. This means that they are not only dealing with different contexts, but different organizational structures, systems and values. This is one of the reasons Healthlink gave for their commitment to long-lasting partnerships, which go beyond the duration of specific projects to a wider vision of tackling poverty, and spending time to overcome the complex nature of such relationships.

Panos and ActionAid both gave interesting examples of participatory processes which are designed to produce information products to influence broader development thinking, including oral testimonies, qualitative scenarios and critical stories of change. However, during this process no examples have emerged of information generated by other participatory processes at the grassroots, needs assessments or evaluation processes for example, being packaged and fed into institutional knowledge management systems. In fact, rather than solutions or examples there were questions:

*What is, or could be, the value of information generated from community, local or national participatory processes to the wider, international organization?*

And:

*How could information be made more widely available, accessible or influential? Is it in the form of raw data, or as packaged, analysed and focused information and communication products?*

## **Making it happen**

The reflections also brought to light the range of requirements, both in terms of organizational structures and individual capacity, in order to make information useful and influential. Often these skills are held by specialist communications staff, while those people who are facilitating, or exposed to, grassroots participatory processes are not necessarily expected or trained to consolidate and analyse the resulting data. Plan mentioned that a rights-based community development approach requires staff to know **not only how to listen to voices on the ground, but how to analyse and react** to these from a rights-based perspective, and they pointed out that this requires investment in training and support.

The research by Concern suggested that **listening to people at the grassroots needs to be prioritised, and rewarded**, in order for it to happen systematically. This is linked to

awareness of the important role of senior management: in backing others to strengthen the flow and influence of voices from the grassroots, providing the systems and structures and allowing for flexibility and timeliness in response; but also in accepting the challenge this makes to the power and influence of their own voices and opinions. The ActionAid Knowledge Initiative reflection highlighted the importance of **intentionality**: that these types of changes in the flow and direction of information need to be planned and supported. Plan Philippines also noted that in order to turn all of the interviews and workshops held to elicit opinions into a useful knowledge asset they needed not only skills in analysis, but **time**. And Healthlink emphasized how it is not enough for the INGOs to promote this in their own work but all these initiatives need to be reinforced and translated through partnerships. **Again, this is a question of prioritisation, and of attitudes.**

There is also the key issue of how different organisations deal with and respond to information and knowledge that does not fit neatly within their organizational priorities. Where the framing of the participatory work is tightly focused on a specific topic, for example health management, it is likely to generate information most relevant to this topic. However, increasingly INGOs are broadening their participatory practice to facilitate discussion on a whole range of issues, for example looking at gender relations or governance. Here the content of the discussion is likely to touch on a wide range of development issues, some of which do not fit with current organizational expertise or priorities. The question here is:

*To what extent should we expect organizations to respond to, or manage information on the range of issues that go beyond their central mission?*

Which inevitably gives rise to a discussion of the different types of partnership and organizational linkages which need to be developed to ensure fuller knowledge flows.

The issue also arose in discussions as to what kinds or sources of information are considered 'robust', or could be considered to be 'evidence' on which to base policies. Again, this is a question of values and attitudes as it can be argued that all information is subjective and context-specific. The reflection with Plan raised the question most clearly:

*What kinds of knowledge and perspectives are, and could be, considered reliable and useful evidence for organizational decision-making?*

And this leads us to ask:

*How can we create a rigorous process to systematically feed more information from the grassroots into qualitative monitoring?*

And:

*Does information generated through participatory methods require different methods for sharing, learning and accountability than other types of information or knowledge?*

### **Flexibility and openness**

There is a tension recurring throughout this paper, the case studies and the research in general. In general, international development NGOs are adopting more rights-based and bottom-up approaches to understanding and responding to development. And yet, so many of the structures and systems they employ strengthen or reinforce existing power relations, based on wealth and notions of scientific or expert knowledge. Many of the interviews and reflections brought up the extent of the organizational implications of taking bottom-up learning, or downwards accountability, or just listening to the grassroots, seriously. The extent of the implications are neatly captured in an article by Power et al, who state that accountability to the people requires organizations

*“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, including even the choice not to be ‘developed’. ... to let go of the controls in community development.”*

As the Listen First example from Concern shows, accountability and listening can not be one-off, self-contained processes. They require changes in the way an organization works, where power is located and how it is exercised. This requires political will, and it is easy to see how getting those with power to give their full backing to challenges to that same decision-making power is fraught with difficulties and tensions. In the conversations with Plan and Concern, the issue of institutional support for accountability or bottom-up processes was highlighted. ActionAid and other organizations have attempted to deal with this by setting up whole organizational systems to infuse grassroots participation throughout learning, planning and reporting. Yet issues of capacity, and the question of power, can still weaken the effectiveness or depth of these processes in practice. This raises the question:

*Is there a difference between being informed about realities on the ground, but ultimately focused on accountability to donors, and being oriented towards downward accountability?*

And:

*(How) can you encourage the kind of culture and systems which respect grassroots perspectives on development, and on our work, without direct and complete support from senior managers?*

Or:

*Is it unrealistic to try to change the culture and practice of a whole organization, made up of so many individuals and with such long histories and traditions? Is it perhaps more effective to provide constructive and useful alternatives to current models and practices?*

## **Finding practical solutions**

The research was intended to be practical and constructive. Everyone who works in international development is aware of challenges and tensions. Those of us who have been working on participatory approaches know how difficult it is to deal with power issues, to deepen and strengthen participation without alienating ourselves from our wider organization, and in particular the activists and pragmatists who just want to get on with solving problems. We have identified lots of challenges and issues which hinder the flow of information generated through participatory processes, and most of these are huge:

- How can a huge organization be managed so as to be flexible and responsive to people at the grassroots, while ensuring the confidence of donors that it is doing what it promised?
- How can people feel safe and secure enough to let go of their own power and the control of the situations they are managing?
- How can organizations create cultures which value different perspectives, and go against the huge tradition of western academic and expert knowledge?

We set ourselves the task at the beginning of this research not to dwell on the reasons why it cannot be done, but to identify the ways – small or large – in which people and organizations have been managing to promote the flow of information from grassroots participatory processes. Organizations such as ActionAid, Concern and Plan are to be commended for introducing structures which use routine participatory processes to systematically feed grassroots voices into their organizational processes of planning and evaluation. However, our discussions have suggested that, while these large organizational structures are necessary, they are not sufficient to change the culture and power of development knowledge, or to tackle the tension between accountability to donors, with its restrictions on flexibility in planning and responsiveness to what is being said on the ground. Furthermore, it was clear from the case studies that there is still a real problem of capacity for effective analysis, capturing and sharing of the outcomes of participatory processes. And this requires not only skills and time at the grassroots, but attention to recruitment criteria and performance management across the board.

The types of opportunities provided by systems such as ALPS and PALS need to be seized, and others need to be created, in order to make participatory processes transformative not

only for those directly involved, but for those who are at the listening end too. The case studies suggest that the strategic use of products such as Panos' oral testimonies, or ActionAid's critical stories or change and qualitative scenarios, could greatly increase the reach and scope of voices from the grassroots. This may require including dissemination strategies in the planning of participatory processes, and paying attention to the capacity of people managing these processes to write up the outcomes and share them strategically. This may be a constructive and realistic way of increasing the diversity of the body of development knowledge on which organizations and their staff base their plans, decisions and policies.

We hope to explore the issues and questions identified in this research further.

- What kinds of products and strategies can effectively increase and extend the flow of information generated by participatory processes?
- How can relationships between staff and managers, and organizations and donors, be transformed so as to afford more influence to the grassroots?
- What are the different knowledge management needs or issues for participatory processes, compared to other organizational information flows?
- What is an appropriate balance between responding to all knowledge generated through participatory processes and valuing organizational focus and priorities, and how can these decisions be made? and
- Do international development NGOs have a responsibility to facilitate the flow of information from the grassroots into wider development debates?

We hope that the reflection tools we developed as part of this research will continue to be helpful to organizations committed to strengthening the influence and use of information generated through participatory processes. Furthermore, we are continuing to work with the organizations who contributed experiences to develop their own reflections, and clarify the questions and share experiences on how to resolve some of these questions, and the bigger issues of culture and power which impede the effective use of this rich and valuable source of development knowledge.

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## Case Studies

**ActionAid:** Interview with Jorge Romano and Kate Carroll from the Knowledge Initiative. Thanks also to Samantha Hargreaves of the Impact Assessment and Shared Learning team for contributions.

**Concern:** interview with Robyn Wilford from the Policy Evaluation and Development Directorate.

**HealthLink:** one day reflection session with staff in London.

**Panos:** telephone interview with Siobhan Warrington, of the Oral Testimony Programme.

**Plan International:** interview with Elsebeth Elo and Simon Early from the programme effectiveness team, based on a reflection they held with Plan Philippines.

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