

# 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 origi-

nal 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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