

Our time to be heard: youth, poverty forums and participatory video

4

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Poverty and corruption in Liberia

Since the end of its devastating thirteen-year civil war in 2003, Liberia has been focused on rebuilding and establishing institutions with increased transparency and accountability as important targets for reform. President Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf acted swiftly to support anti-corruption legislation, illustrating her strong determination to fight corruption. The public, however, remains skeptical about the commitment of other high level officials.

In this article we highlight how the Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia (CENTAL), a local non-governmental organisation and Transparency International's national chapter in Liberia, is supporting youth to demand accountability from government and service providers in local planning, budgeting and service delivery. We show how participatory processes like participatory video (PV) and dialogue forums can support youth to build skills required to voice their concerns and also serve to amplify these

Box 1: What are accountability and transparency?

Accountability refers to individuals and organisations (public, private and civil society) being held responsible for executing their powers properly. **Transparency** is the characteristic of government, companies, organisations and individuals being open in the clear disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes and actions. As a principle, public officials, managers, civil servants, directors and board trustees of companies and organisations have a duty to act visibly, predictably and understandably to promote participation and accountability.

Source: *The anti-corruption plain language guide*. Transparency International (2009).

concerns, leading to improvements in the country's development and in the daily lives of the poor.

When the elephants dance the grass suffers

Liberia's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) *Lift Liberia* aims to improve the overall living standard of the country's citizens. As part of this strategy, the Liberian govern-

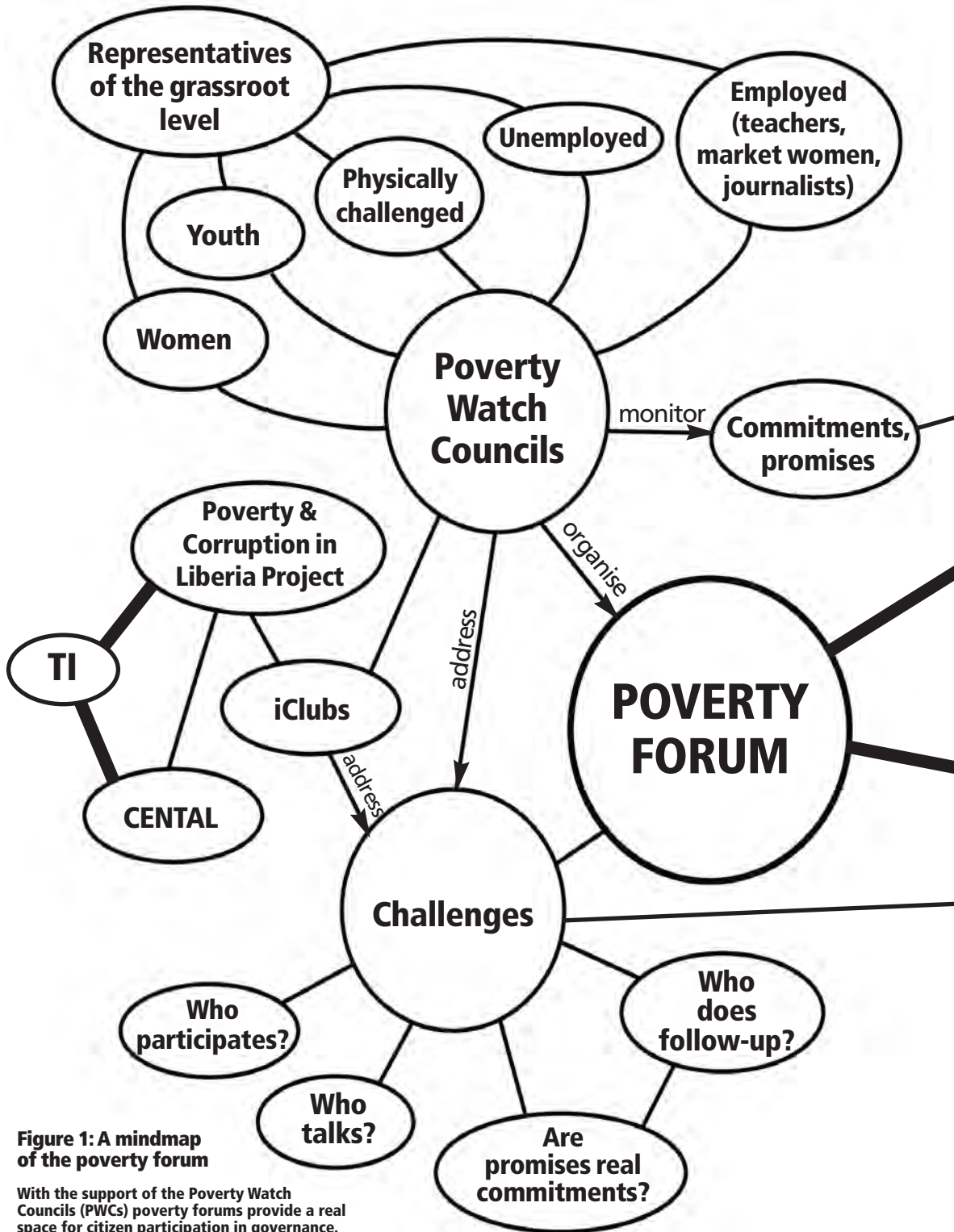
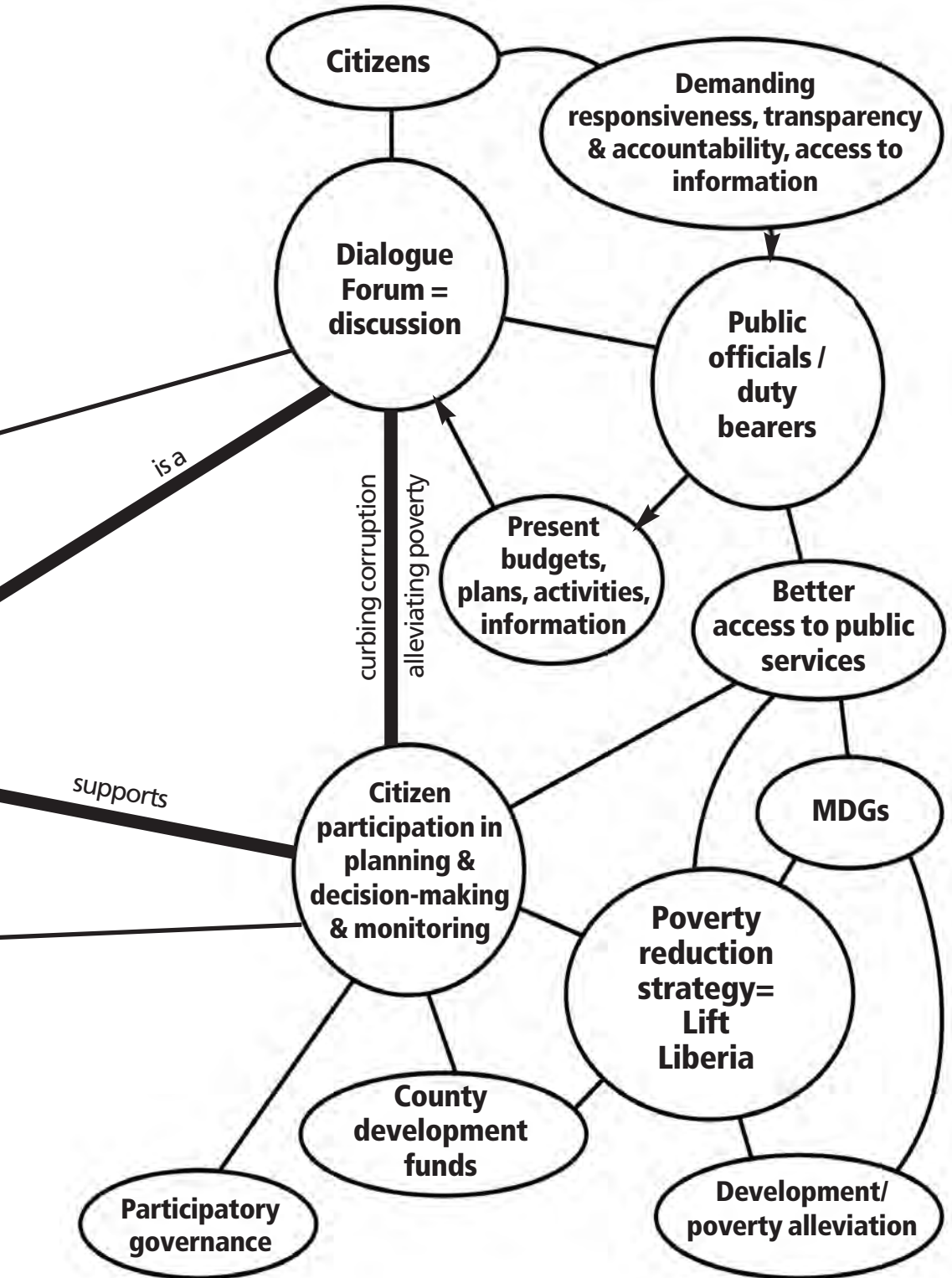


Figure 1: A mindmap of the poverty forum

With the support of the Poverty Watch Councils (PWCs) poverty forums provide a real space for citizen participation in governance. Cartoon: Regina Faul-Doyle. Devised by Annette Jaitner and Anderson Miamen



ment allocates at least US\$200,000 every year to implement development programmes in each county. County development funds (CDFs) are used for activities such as renovating and building schools and hospitals and improving roads. Planning and budgeting is supposed to be done in partnership with civil society. However, some people – including the very poor and youth – remain excluded. Many are highly critical of the PRS, identifying the exclusion of its main targets from its design and implementation as one of the key reasons for its limited effectiveness. Corruption is also cited as one major challenge and is compelling communities to stand up and demand inclusion.

CENTAL's Poverty and Corruption in Liberia project (PCL) aims to empower citizens through awareness-raising and the use of participatory approaches like PV. It seeks to engage citizens with local government and service providers to ensure the needs of poor citizens are addressed in local planning, budgeting and service delivery. The project is being delivered through CENTAL's network of local groups called 'iClubs' (Integrity Clubs) which consist mainly of young community representatives.

Creating space for dialogue between citizens and government

Through the PCL, iClub members have helped to build Poverty Watch Councils (PWCs). Members are community-mandated representatives from various marginalised social groups, including youth, women, the unemployed and the physically challenged. PWCs also include teachers and journalists. iClubs and PWCs facilitate poverty forums – regular meetings at which youth and other citizens can engage in constructive dialogue with local government to ensure that district development plans and activities respond to their needs.

Poverty forums are structured so that all participants can freely express themselves in a responsible and constructive



Photo: CENTAL

Woman speaking out at a poverty forum in Nimba County.

way. Detailed presentations are given by the authorities responsible for basic services such as health, water and education. These presentations focus on activities they have carried out and those they plan to implement. There are no predetermined groups or individuals to speak on behalf of citizens. Anyone is allowed to voice their ideas and concerns. Once you signal your intention to speak by raising your hand before others, you are given the opportunity to voice your concerns.

After a poverty forum, iClubs and PWCs verify information provided at the gathering and follow up on the commitments made. For instance, following a forum in one community where the construction of a school annex was discussed, the PWC and iClub did a site visit. They found that the contractors were working as indicated at the forum. Had this been otherwise, the PWC would have taken up issue with the contractors.

Cross-checking information sometimes can be a challenge. For example, in another community a health official was seen transporting huge quantities of charcoal in his government assigned vehicle. This is a gross misuse of a government asset. When confronted at a poverty forum, the official argued that the charcoal was meant for his own use and not commercial purposes. The issue could not be followed up further as it had happened months before the meeting.

Photo: Neville Meyer, InsightShare Durban



Community having fun at the PV footage playback in Gbanchu.

Photo: CENTAL



The PV team discusses and decides on the storyboard for their film.

Despite these challenges, it is clear that citizens are beginning to demand explanations from their leaders, especially where public interest is concerned.

Youth take the lead through participatory video

Gbanchu is one community where citizens are beginning to make demands on government. Gbanchu is a rural community with a youthful population located on the outskirts of Gbarnga, the capital city of Bong County. As Gbanchu has no school, students have to walk many miles to other communities, crossing a highly frequented tar road.¹

It is very risky for children to cross the coal tar while cars and motorcycles are moving all around. They sometimes get hit in the process. I am convinced about this video making a difference in our community, in terms of getting our leaders to respond to our appeals for a school.

Comment from a youth leader.

CENTAL supported youth in Gbanchu to use participatory video (PV) to make their voices heard by local officials. PV is an intensive and iterative process owned by the community.² Knowledge acquired during training is used instantaneously to

produce a film that can then serve as an advocacy tool (see diagram on page 6 for further detail on the process).

To encourage the participation of everyone in the PV process, an all-community meeting involving men, women and youth was convened. Using participatory tools like problem trees and participatory ranking, community members identified and prioritised the community's problems. Many of the illustrations produced were of school-related materials like pens and pencils, copybooks and chalkboards. It was clear that the absence of a school was the priority. Having decided to focus on this issue, the community resolved to give the youth a leading role in the PV process.

During discussions, the community in Gbanchu agreed to take action to begin to address the problem of the lack of a school. Community leaders allocated land and youth manufactured bricks. The community filmed this process both as a way of collecting evidence and to advocate for change. Should the school be built, the film will also offer a useful record of the history of their advocacy campaign. The community also felt that the film could be used as a motivation for others.

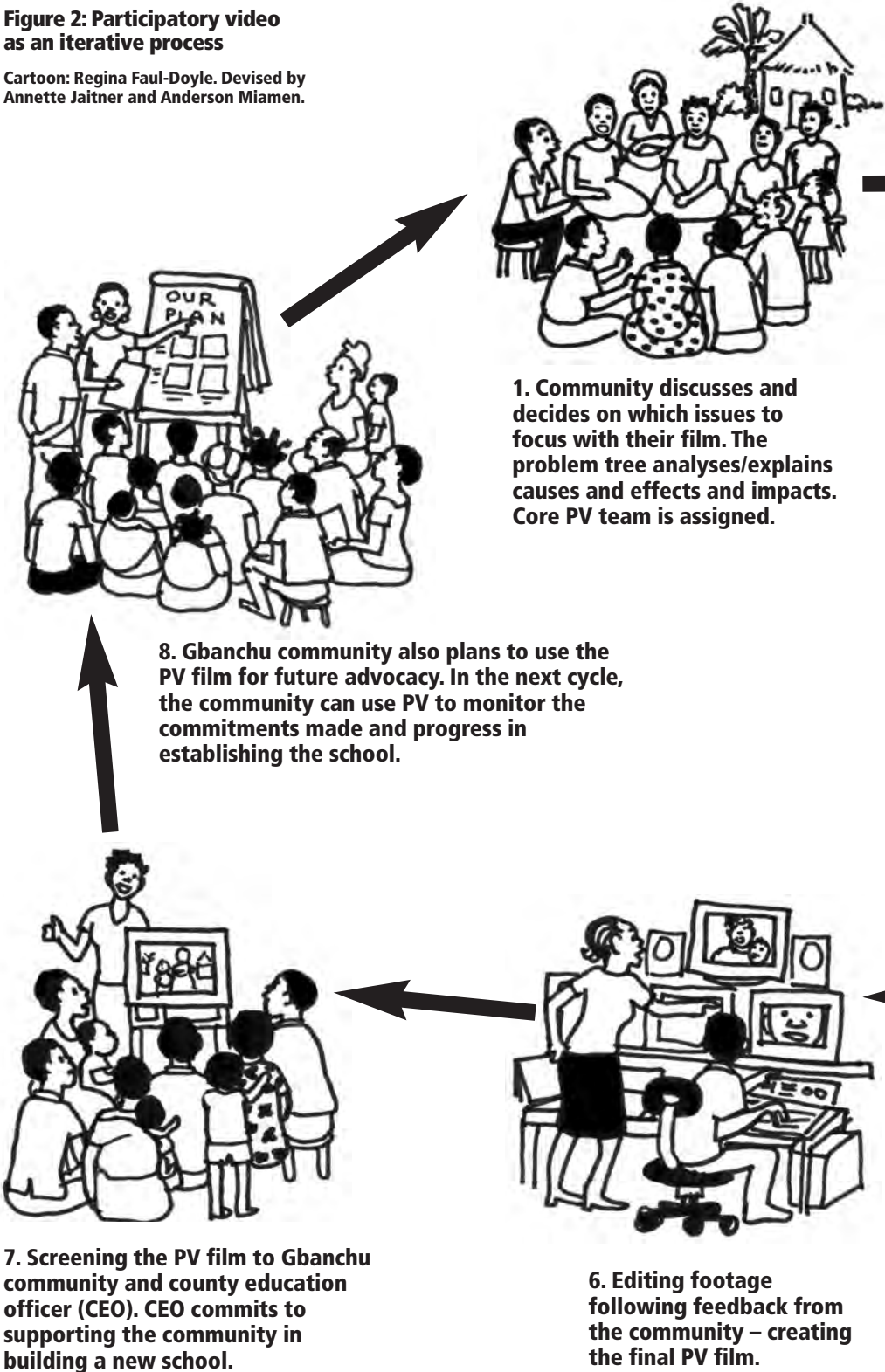
A community screening of the film was held and local officials were invited. The county education officer (CEO) of Bong

¹ 'Coal tar' is a local term for a paved road.

² See also Kamara and Swarray (this issue).

Figure 2: Participatory video as an iterative process

Cartoon: Regina Faul-Doyle. Devised by Annette Jaitner and Anderson Miamen.





2. Core PV team receives training in filmmaking and how to use the video equipment.



3. Core PV team discusses and decides on the film production process, distribution of roles and storyboard.



5. Playback of footage to the whole community. Participatory editing: everybody has a say in what should be in the final film. Community also decides how to use the PV film. Gbanchu community gave consent to show their film to any interested audiences.



4. PV film captures footage/raw film material.



Liberia participatory video photostory. This photostory shows the context of the PV film the youth of Gbanchu community made about access to education in their village.

Photos: CENTAL



The PV team plans the production of their film.



The PV team learning how to use the video camera.

County visited Gbanchu for the first time in three years. For most of the community members, this was their first opportunity to meet and interact with local officials. This created a sense of purpose and relevance. For the local officials, it was an opportunity to develop a better understanding of how development projects were sometimes being awarded to communities – i.e. often selectively and uninformed. After seeing the film and discussing with the community, the CEO was so moved that he committed to ensuring the construction of a local school in Gbanchu.

Achievements and challenges in bringing citizens and government together

The most significant achievement recognised by communities is that the poverty forums and PV processes have enabled youth – a constituency neglected for many years – to bring their concerns to the attention of local officials and access information. For example, in one community disabled youth explained at a poverty forum how a number of public buildings were difficult to access. Local authorities used this information to make buildings more disability-friendly. In another community, the poverty forum was used as a space to share information on services being provided at a local medical centre. Following this, demand for appropriate services from community members has increased.

Poverty forums and PV have not only created opportunities for dialogue but also, often through this engagement, enabled youth and other community members to build new skills and knowledge. Through PV youth and their communities have learnt how to use different participatory tools to identify collective problems and work together to solve these problems. Relationships within the community have also been strengthened. As part of the process, and for the first time in several years, the entire community assembled to discuss their concerns. Youth in Gbanchu have organised themselves and set up a leadership structure to collaborate with elders in advocating for better access to education and engage in local governance.

While they are separate activities, both the poverty forums and participatory video projects feed into one another. Poverty forums are ideal venues to screen participatory videos to a wide audience, as community representatives, other stakeholders and citizens' groups are present at the gatherings. In addition, poverty forums can be used to highlight issues that communities want to present to policy makers, which can then be used in future participatory video projects.

However, there have also been a number of challenges. Firstly, limited access to information has presented a significant barrier. Despite the poverty forums, key pieces of information are often



Photo: CENTAL

Bong County education officer at community PV screening ceremony in Gbanchu, interacting with community members.

withheld from citizens. Local officials sometimes conceal sensitive information because they are afraid of retaliatory actions from above or criticism from the public. Lack of self confidence amongst community members often prevents them from expressing themselves at poverty forums. Some citizens were apprehensive about being openly critical of individuals in power. Language barriers can also present challenges. For example, during the PV process the fact that CENTAL staff did not understand the local vernacular prolonged the process and highlighted the staff as outsiders.

The greatest challenge has been, and remains, following up on the commitments made by local officials. Officials at times make promises that don't come to pass or take a very long time to be fulfilled. iClubs and PWCs are meant to empower citizens so that they feel capable of following up on government commitments. Overall, we have learnt that participatory processes require long-term, continuous and iterative support to create an environment in which marginalised citizens and youth build trust and confidence to demand and claim more space in governance processes.

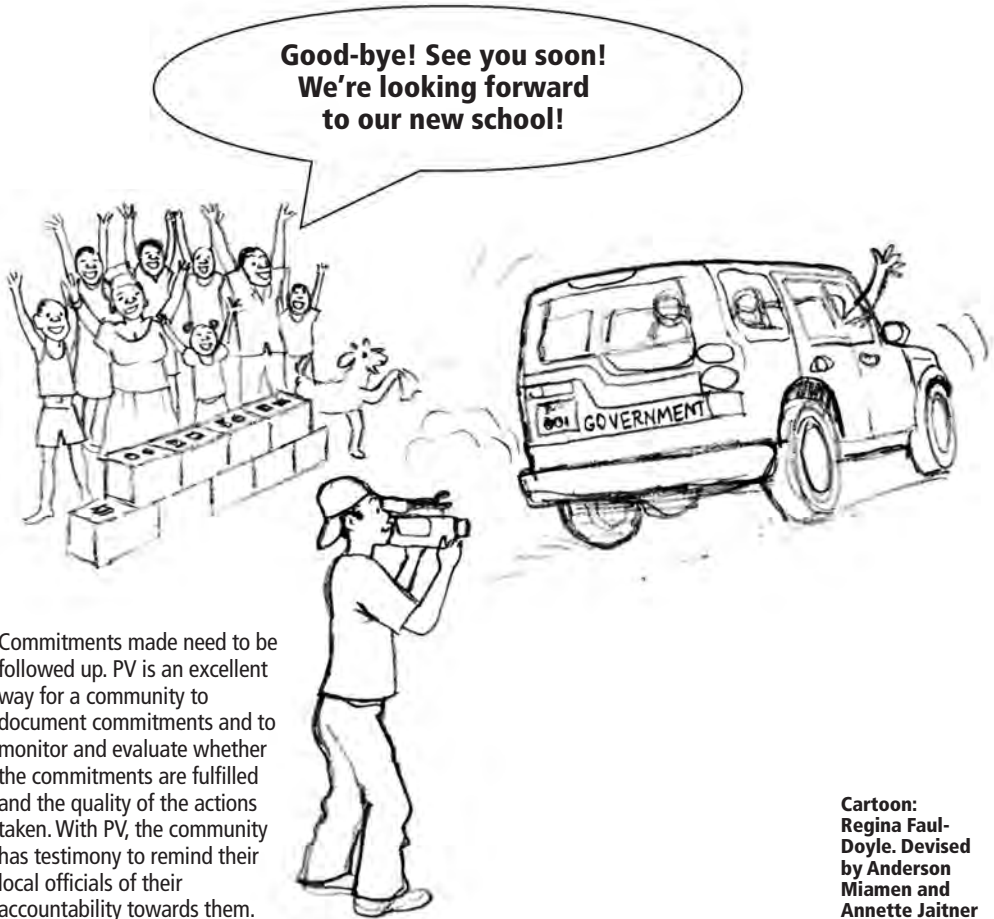
Time to learn: lessons from piloting poverty forums and PV

CENTAL has learnt a great deal about what is useful and necessary for youth and the wider community to amplify their voices and demand a response from government and service providers through participatory processes.

- Access to information is extremely essential. In some of the poverty forums, basic information on health and education services was made public to citizens for the very first time. This information is allowing communities to monitor and track government activities. Therefore, some local officials have become more mindful of their actions.

- Organisations supporting initiatives like poverty forums and PV projects with communities must establish close ties with government and service providers. Good relations between CENTAL's local chapter, the Bong Integrity Club, and local authorities meant officials stayed as late as 8pm in Gbanchu during the PV screening process. At the national level, CENTAL's relationship with key officials, such as staff of the Ministry of Education, helped to get the film screened and ensure follow-up action.

... And what comes next?



Commitments made need to be followed up. PV is an excellent way for a community to document commitments and to monitor and evaluate whether the commitments are fulfilled and the quality of the actions taken. With PV, the community has testimony to remind their local officials of their accountability towards them.

Cartoon:
Regina Faul-
Doyle. Devised
by Anderson
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- Processes like PV and poverty forums build capacity. PV in particular is an ideal tool for making young voices heard. Young people were very welcoming and receptive to this new approach. The marginalised Gbanchu community made their difficulties known to service providers and government instead of expecting others to plead on their behalf. The predominately youthful population of Gbanchu was resilient in their advocacy for a school and for inclusion in national decision-making processes.

- A monitoring strategy needs to be in place to follow up on commitments made by government. This can perhaps happen through continued engagement in poverty forums. PV

can also be used as a method to monitor the fulfilment – or not – of promises. PV films can be used as powerful evidence triggering further dialogue and response to concerns raised in poverty forums.

Conclusion

Local authorities and other public service providers are more likely to feel the need to be transparent and accountable to citizens when citizens have full knowledge of available resources for local development, and have the skills and confidence to make demands. Citizens also need the opportunity to engage and make these demands. Poverty forums and PV have provided platforms for youth and other community

members to access information, build confidence and participate in decision-making. Poverty forums in particular are spaces of information exchange and constructive dialogue. From our experiences it seems that when youth and other

community members are able to occupy and enlarge spaces for citizen participation in decision-making it improves governance and contributes to positive changes in community development and the livelihoods of the poor.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article could not have been written without the contribution of many people. We are glad to acknowledge firstly the contribution of God for granting us the energy and time to embark upon this worthwhile initiative. Heartfelt appreciation to Transparency International and Tides Foundation, sponsors of the Poverty and Corruption in Liberia (PCL) project; Thomas Doe Nah, CENTAL's Executive Director for allowing us contribute and providing guidance; Zeowheh Saywrayne, Saryyenneh Dickson and George Ebba in CENTAL's Programme Department; members of the iClubs, Poverty Watch Councils and communities; Neville Meyer and Jean-Luc Blakey from InsightShare; and Plan UK, IDS and IIED, particularly Jessica Greenhalf, Rosemary McGee and Holly Ashley for their editorial support. Thanks also to our peer review colleagues for their useful suggestions and feedback during the writeshop.

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