Empowering Community Voices Project: Research studies from South Africa and Bangladesh

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August 2014

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This research was made possible by an anonymous donation to the Oxfam–Monash Partnership.

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ISBN 0-9874652-2-8

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Introduction

Oxfam–Monash Partnership context

The two case studies discussed here—with Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action (PACSA) in South Africa, and Oxfam in Bangladesh—are part of the Empowering Community Voices project, which is supported by the Oxfam–Monash Partnership. The project is concerned with identifying how information and knowledge activities can result in community voices being more effectively presented and heard in an unimpeded and authentic way in international development initiatives.

From the perspective of research in the information technology field, such activity is closely related to what can be called inclusive and pluralistic forms of Information and Knowledge Management. The research is also aligned to the Oxfam–Monash Partnership's interests because the effective engagement of the information and knowledge of people "at the bottom" is vital for effective activity in each of the Partnership's three major themes:

- *Accountability*: How best to support communities to provide feedback to development agencies and governments and, in so doing, hold the latter two to account;
- *Climate change*: How best to support communities to adapt to climate change; and
- *Gender equality*: How best to support gender equality to positively impact women's lives, family wellbeing and community development.

The idea for the project came about in October 2011 after a workshop with the Centre for Community and Social Informatics in the Faculty of Information at Monash, in which personnel from the Oxfam–Monash Partnership participated. It was agreed that an investigation of Participatory Action Research processes in different country projects funded through the Partnership would be a very good means of investigating the suitability of Participatory Action Research for a future project. The project was also discussed at the Oxfam–Monash Partnership retreat in June 2013, where there was considerable interest in the methodologies being explored and potential outcomes for international development activity, including future funded action and research.

Ethics permission was obtained from the Monash Research Office, including an informed consent process for all participants.

Key research questions

Key research questions for the Empowering Community Voices project were identified as:

- *To what degree do principles associated with Participatory Action Research currently govern the collection, analysis, distribution and use of community Information and Knowledge Management in Oxfam–Monash Partnership–funded research?*
- *How, in the view of all stakeholders, can the outcomes of Participatory Action Research contribute to community voices being represented and heard in an unimpeded and authentic way in other international development initiatives?*
- *What do communities see as the most important problems associated with this challenge? How can they and those who work with them bring their voices to the fore? Which voices should be privileged?*
- *How do we ensure that inclusive, pluralistic, and community-oriented Information and Knowledge Management processes also result in community empowerment and self-determination, and do not subsume community knowledge, information, and the freedom to act independently to the world views or power of others? In each case study, the questions were modified for local circumstances.*

Projected case studies

Three case studies were originally intended for this research—in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and South Africa; however, after consultation with Oxfam Cambodia, research did not take place in that location. The projected case studies were as follows:

- *Developing a people's policy for health in South Africa*. This project aimed to ask the question of how communities participate in and use democratic processes to hold the South African government to account for the development and delivery of an effective and efficient health system. The team would map existing models of health accountability available to communities and assess the effectiveness of current accountability mechanisms used by community members to hold government to account for their promises.
- *Gendered impacts of climate change in Bangladesh.* The central aim of this project was to assess the gender-based impacts of climate change–related catastrophic and slow-onset events in Bangladesh. After consultation with Oxfam in Bangladesh, the project was modified in order to research the prospects of a new large-scale project focusing upon the information needs of poor and isolated rural communities, and, in particular, the opportunities for the utilization of mobile phone technology in community development.
- *Steering multi-level accountability systems from the ground up in Cambodia*. This project aimed to investigate barriers to community-driven accountability, and to provide recommendations and strategies to strengthen community-driven accountability systems. This would be pursued through analysis of a number of communities affected by externally-driven development projects, in each case observing the multi-layered stakeholders and accountability mechanisms at play.

Context

International development agencies work through a complex and multi-directional activity chain that is dependent on information and knowledge flows "with their ambitious goals, uncertain technologies, and unpredictable environments" (Watkins et al., 2012, p. 288). As examples, consider the global work of UNHCR, or Oxfam Australia (as a member of a global alliance of Oxfam affiliates).

In this regard, Justine Johnstone, in her study of AIDS-related NGO activity in KwaZulu-Natal, suggests that there is a "three-cornered" relationship between knowledge, international development and technology (Johnstone, 2005, p. 10). However, the dynamics are not well-understood, in part due to the use of ill-fitting conventional knowledge management models that do not take into account the particular culture and activities of NGOs. Furthermore, NGOs themselves, particularly at a management level, may not be aware of or need to have ways of understanding and managing technology as more than a "black box" in the way they work with different stakeholders.

There needs to be a better understanding of the processes and dynamics that occur with NGOs and their beneficiary communities, including new vocabularies and concepts to explain the interplay between information and knowledge, the way they are managed (created, stored, transmitted, shared), and technical affordances which are now available. The research reported on here offers some early insights into these issues.

While Oxfam is headquartered in Australia, it works via local offices with other agencies in Asia and Africa, which then work with smaller groups on the ground. There is a concern from development NGOs such as Oxfam Australia that the voices of communities on the ground are muted or distorted in the development chain, and that communities' information and knowledge are not well represented in decision-making, advocacy, implementation and accountability processes to different stakeholder communities (government, large and small donors, internally).

NGOs are particularly concerned about their reputation and accountability. They wish to demonstrate effective and real engagement with communities in a period when the donor dollar depends upon what has become known as "development effectiveness", the result of which "reduces poverty and builds capacity within communities, civil society and government to address their own development priorities" (Roche, 2009, p. 2).

NGOs also engage in a huge amount of internal and external talk about their work, and then not always effectively (Watkins et al., 2012, p. 299). The conversion of grand talk into practice is sometimes problematic, and empowerment from the bottom up is not realized. Innovative Participatory Action Research and Information and Knowledge Management in the context of development informatics could provide a new means of empowerment for "those with least power in the 'aid chain' to tell their story and potentially—perhaps for the first time—to sanction poorly performing aid agencies" (Roche, 2009, p. 24). In the context of the activity being outlined here, participants and stakeholders in Information and Knowledge Management and Participatory Action Research processes include communities and community members on the ground, in-country NGOs, NGOs and others involved in "head office" activity through to academic researchers and their constituencies, including funders and donors.

Current limitations

The Bangladesh chapter does not contain many direct citations from the consultations nor an extensive theoretical discussion, as is the case with the South African material. This means that the structure of the report does not parallel that of South Africa, which contains considerable detail about the two consultations.

There are two reasons for this absence of documentation: first, there has not yet been an opportunity to extensively translate material from Bangla; and second, the study should be much better integrated with Bangladeshi research studies. These can mostly only be accessed in that country.

However, from the data used so far, the literature that has been sourced, and the feedback received from Bangladesh, the study can be regarded as presenting a reasonable picture. It is hoped that future publications will feature more detailed analyses of the material gathered. Furthermore, academic research publications are also projected for the two case studies.

Choice of methodology

The two case studies in South Africa and Bangladesh have been strongly influenced by the writer's experience of interpretive and constructivist research and forms of inquiry (Charmaz, 2008; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Walsham, 2006). This includes a strong interest in participatory forms of research in indigenous and development settings, and situations in which class, power and gender are clearly at play and cannot be ignored. (Denison and Stillman, 2012; Stillman, 2005; Stillman and Craig, 2006). There is no one prescribed way to conduct such work (Walsham, 2006). Thus, the very process of writing and interpretation also brings the researcher as writer into the position of developing a rhetorical narrative about the intersection of different "frames of meaning" (Giddens, 1984, p. 286), competing social issues and structural forces that bring together theoretical and real-world on the basis of what others have said or experienced (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1997, p. 7).

Any researcher, particularly an outside foreign researcher in a very different cultural setting, needs to engage in considerable self-reflection about motivations and activities. What right do I have in the first place to assume that I have any right to conduct such research? Is it possible to get anything worthwhile out of a short visit or interview rather than longitudinal immersion in everyday, local life where the ordinary is often a fundamental clue as to what is going on (Douglas, 1971)?

Furthermore, while I have an empathetic academic and personal interest, I am very much an outsider to both South Africa and its struggle for social justice, and Bangladesh and its history and struggle to overcome extreme environmental and population challenges. This means that I have to be very sensitive to local needs and conditions, and I am constantly engaged in a self-dialogue around these sorts of questions: Am I responding the right way? Am I missing something? Do they understand me? Are the theories and ways I frame my research justified, or colonizing? To what degree are we mutually acting out roles and feeding off each other as we endeavor to

get each other's point of view (or not), even if we are not sure where things are going (Geertz, 2000)?

As part of this self-reflection, assumptions should not be made about the possibility of there being a way of capturing, "perfect knowledge". Thus, in the case of the work in South Africa with PACSA, I have only captured one part of the story through a relatively short visit and through more or less formal dialogue, and many other aspects of their experience can probably be told (for example, the community co-researcher's story about me). What I learned should be regarded as inspiring insight and action rather than actually depicting a fixed reality for PACSA, its community co-researchers, or Oxfam South Africa. However, I have felt more confident about making particular judgments about the situation in South Africa because I have been there on so many occasions in recent years.

In the case of the visit with Oxfam in Bangladesh and its partners and communities, I am only at the beginning of what I hope is a long Action Research journey with them, though I am a real outsider, culturally and linguistically. Thus, much of the information was provided to me only in translation from the Bangla language. At other times, the conversation was in English.

In both South Africa and Bangladesh, discussions were recorded (with the permission of participants) using a Livescribe® pen and notebook, which allows for simultaneous recording and note-taking. This results in much richer data being collected than is often the case with interviews because, as sessions are recorded, closer attention can be paid to the session ecology, including dynamics and non-verbal clues and more detailed transcriptions or notes made after the session when the audio is replayed.

It is surprising how much can be gained by careful listening and perusal of notes, even when the conversation has been translated. A characteristic of high quality interpretive research of this sort that is embedded or sensitive to local settings is that it seeks to reflect the voices of participants as much as possible (despite issues of language difference), while allowing the researcher to be on the alert for themes patterns, or gaps in the data.

Thus, what I have written down and interpreted through texts and diagrams is, to the best of my ability, a record of complex interaction in which the participant's words are a kind of partial authorship to the final document that is created. Hopefully, the processes used in filtering and interpreting their words also give the words authority.

However, such forms of writing are always provisional and can be corrected and improved upon as we gain further insights. And, of course, they are only a form of filtered snapshot at one point in time. A much better story might have been gained, or could be gained, by actively being part of the local environments, but due to resource constraints this has not been possible. In addition, I could spend more time analysing and incorporating documentation into my observations, but this would delay the reports. In a year's time, I could have other insights based on new experience, as could other readers based on their experiences. Others could come to different interpretations.

During interviews, I have tried to be as restrained as possible; that is, not interrupt people and give them a voice, even when I see a particular point that needs to be explored. Body language becomes very important, in being able to nod appropriately rather than interject, and so on. At times, this means that people talk more than they ordinarily might, but this is because I want to hear as much as possible. It is other people's voices that need to be heard, not mine. At times, I have probed when there is a pause.

By using a recorder, I have been able to capture quite a lot of conversation, but to make sense of different threads I have, at times, moved around fragments of the discussions conducted in South Africa (Stillman, 2008). While a straight transcript might seem more valuable and obvious as a tool, the fact that conversations can jump around—and at times be ungrammatical and repetitious—means that what I present is not a direct transcript but more an edited conversation that reflects, as much as possible, the original language and concepts.

However, particularly valuable statements are presented intact, in quotation marks or italics. On occasion, breaking my own rules, I have used my own statements to highlight a particular point that I hoped might be explored in conversations with others.

Acknowledgements

In South Africa, I am especially grateful to Varshi Rajcoomar and Alan Moolman of Oxfam Durban, and Mervyn Abrahams and Julie Smith of PACSA, for their assistance in making arrangements in their country. I also thank all community co-researchers for their enthusiasm, and their openness towards an outsider.

In Bangladesh, I would like to thank Oxfam Bangladesh; Snehal Soneji, Country Director; MB Akhter, Program Manager; and particularly Tapas Chakraborty, Program Officer (Partnership) for their extraordinary hospitality, their cooperation in organizing this trip, their translation skills and, generally, the opportunity to discuss these issues with Oxfam Bangladesh staff. Tapas must be also credited for his great skill in developing the time/space exercise and for preparing the outstanding diagrams that are based on the workshops featured in the report. Thanks must also be given for similar cooperation in partner organizations, to Mrs Shamim Ara Begum, Executive Director, and Md Salim Reza, Manager, Livelihood and Security, Pollisree NGO, Dinajpur District; and MA Jalil, Executive Director AKK NGO (Amra Kaj Kori), Faridpur district, for facilitating extensive contacts with their staff, local councilors and officials, and particularly local communities with whom they work. In addition, thanks must be given to local journalists in both communities in Dinajpur, as well as Tabiur Rahman Prodhan at Begum Rokeya University (Rangpur), Md Faruq Hasan at Hajee Md Danesh Science and Technology University (Dinajpur), Professor Mesbah Kamal University of Dhaka & Research and Development Collective, and Shameem Reza of the University of Dhaka.

There were also many other young and inspiring people working in other NGOs whom I met, and their interest, insight and friendliness to a foreigner has to be acknowledged.

I would also like to thank Tania Cass and Alex Kennedy of the Oxfam–Monash Partnership for their extensive support in organizing a complex trip. My colleague Professor Sue McKemmish must also be thanked for her insight and assistance in conceptualizing and supporting the project. Ethics permission was secured for the conduct of the research in both locations from the Monash Human Ethics Research Committee.

CASE STUDY 1

SOUTH AFRICA

“Everybody can think, and everybody can speak”

Overview

Research brief

This section of the report discusses two sets of conversations carried out in October 2013 with Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action (PACSA) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa, involving staff from PACSA as well as community co-researchers from three organizations and Oxfam South Africa. All were engaged in a project to develop a people's policy for health in South Africa, as detailed in the following agreement between Oxfam South Africa and Monash South Africa:

> *Through the Oxfam–Monash Partnership, a joint research proposal in collaboration with Oxfam's South Africa country office, the Global Health Unit at Monash in Melbourne and the School of Health Sciences at Monash South Africa (MSA) received funding for a project (2011-2113).*
>
> *This project, known as Governance and Accountability in the Health Sector: A people's policy for health in South Africa, aims to examine the capacity of communities to engage with government about their health needs and how this is translated into a responsive and effective health policy and will use the National Health Insurance (NHI) process that South Africa is proposing to implement as the context for the work.*
>
> *The project will explore and test a model of public policy engagement to increase awareness of, and accessibility to, policy at a local level. It is envisaged that the project will enhance citizen's capacity to actively participate in the process of policy development by demystifying the policy process and content.*

A number of different community-based organizations in South Africa were engaged to explore and test different forms of public policy arrangements, and further publications are forthcoming either through the Oxfam-Monash Partnership or elsewhere. According to the Oxfam-Monash Partnership mid-term review 2012-2013:

> [Activity was undertaken] *in three areas (HIV/AIDS Prevention Group in Bela-bela, Limpopo, Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action in Edendale, KwaZulu-Natal, and Sophakama in Port Elizabeth and Nelson Mandela Metro, Eastern Cape). Training sessions have been conducted with these partners and they have held community consultations on the materials and information generated*.

After detailed discussions with Oxfam South Africa, a research visit to KZN was set in place for 23-25 October 2013 to explore issues of participation and information and knowledge transfer, in order to construct a case study.

The story here is different to the story of the results of the NHI consultations, which are the subject of a separate project from the Oxfam–Monash Partnership through Monash South Africa and PACSA. Instead, the focus is upon understanding the type of Participatory Action Research used by PACSA and its relationship to broader issues of Information and Knowledge Management work and advocacy in NGOs.

PACSA uses a form of radical community-based or Participatory Action Research to maximize community engagement and learning. Based on community development principles and its own historical experience, its thinking appears similar to the teachings of Paolo Freire and others concerning the importance of critical pedagogy as a means of community consciousness-raising, education, and empowerment.

The work conducted by PACSA with the community co-researchers has enabled the development of particular understandings of the relationship between the lofty and abstract aims of the NHI and the reality of the life of people in great need in KZN. Through Participatory Action Research, PACSA has been able to develop a confident set of ideas, language, and actions with disempowered communities about how to work with the community on the NHI proposals.

Key factors which have enabled this kind of work with the community have included:

- Prioritizing of community voices in any activity so that PACSA follows, and does not lead the community.
- Recognition of the centrality of power, politics, and the state in advocacy work, and the need for critical consciousness about imbalances which Participatory Action Research seeks to redress.
- Developing a language for empowerment. In learning about the NHI, community co-researchers have gained a new capacity in advocacy and talking with the community.
- Recognition and provision of a safe psychological and physical space for the community to work on its project of gaining a voice. Effective use of two forms of leadership. First, via the critical pedagogical activity conducted by PACSA, and second, through the conscious activity of the co-researchers as skilled community leaders.
- A deep understanding of the debilitating effects of informational poverty, isolation and apathy. These effects can result in apparent resistance to change and engagement, and are part of the community development challenge.

For people who work with Information and Knowledge Management in development settings, learning about the kind of participatory research conducted by PACSA demands a transformation in how information and knowledge are created, managed, and transacted in the international development chain. A new form of Information and Knowledge Management directed with communities at the bottom, tentatively called Pluralistic Information and Knowledge Management, is the next challenge.

Addressing the research questions

How did the work with PACSA answer the following key research questions?

- To what degree do principles associated with Participatory Action Research currently govern the collection, analysis, distribution and use of community Information and Knowledge Management in Oxfam–Monash Partnership-funded research?

  PACSA has a very strong form of Participatory Action Research that can be modelled for future uptake and development.

- How, in the view of all stakeholders, can the outcomes of Participatory Action Research contribute to community voices being represented and heard in an unimpeded and authentic way in other development initiatives?

  PACSA's model is one for many different stakeholders to consider and learn from. It is clearly articulated in what they do, and it is based on a body of well-known theory and practice.

- What do communities see as the most important problems associated with this challenge? How can they and those who work with them bring their voices to the fore? Which voices should be privileged?

  The community co-researchers identified disempowering factors such as a lack of confidence, voice, alienation, distrust, and even shame as factors which downplay the relevance of external information to problem-solving. As well as supporting agency critical pedagogical support, community co-researchers are critical in supporting this process of change. The provision of a "space" for learning and change is also important for the community co-researchers.

- How to do we ensure that inclusive, pluralistic, and community-oriented Information and Knowledge Management processes also result in community empowerment and self-determination, and do not subsume community knowledge, information, and freedom to act to the world views or power of others?

  The *type* of Participatory Action Research used by PACSA is designed to prevent the privileging of *voices other* than those of the community. How they do this is a key to success. There is also the body of knowledge on critical information theory which can be used to sensitize a new model of what can be called pluralistic bottom-up Information and Knowledge Management.

Discussions: PACSA and Oxfam

Discussions were held with the PACSA Manager, PACSA Research and Advocacy Coordinator (PACSA Coordinator), and Oxfam Program Officer, with small contributions from other PACSA and Oxfam staff.

Oxfam is not involved in direct service implementation; rather, it supports local initiatives. Oxfam clearly recognizes the limits of its activity and where expertise lies with others in working with communities and informing Oxfam about new forms of practice. This is because local organizations, rather than Oxfam, have the local connections, knowledge and authority. As Oxfam states, "it is not for us to usurp this space, but instead, Oxfam is a learning organization, and learning through partners' experiences is what shapes our policy and practices, as well as the particular circumstances in each community, the power that resides in local context".

Oxfam has also come to realize that in post-apartheid democratic South Africa there is much work to be done around people's human rights and responsibilities. People are well-versed about their human rights, but education about what was called *"the full package"* hasn't cascaded down; when it comes to civil and political rights and taking action, they are not so well-versed.

Organizations like PACSA take these gaps seriously. In particular, in the new South Africa, there is a massive disjunction between the rhetoric and reality of service delivery. As one of the participants put it, "*in the new democracy everyone assumed the ANC would be able to do this, the government has promised this, while we sit back. The reality is that no government can roll out services that quickly, given the backlogs, being a new democracy".* This leads to a huge amount of cynicism, a credibility gap, anger, lack of confidence and despondency.

For PACSA, coming out of the apartheid era, there is a historical connection with communities over such issues. People know that and have an expectation that PACSA would *"stand with us"*. Consequently, PACSA has struggled for a long time about how to how do we make a link or sense of experiences of people on the ground. How do we make a link or sense of experiences of people on the ground? How do you support people rather than just speak for them and as a consequence disempower them?

PACSA said that the problem is that:

> *We are articulate professionals, we can engage with the media, pick up the phone, so it is all-too-easy for us to take over and speak for and over their voices.*
>
> *In PACSA we have a saying that: 'As soon as we begin to speak for the voiceless, we make them even more voiceless, we close them out. As soon as you open your mouth, your voice becomes dominant; their voice does not get heard. Why can't we say that that their voices should instead be our voice?'*

PACSA's role is therefore, to accompany communities on the ground in engagement, to support, to resource, to create a space, to let them find their answers. But what do we mean by space?

The concept of "*space*" in PACSA's community practice is explained in the following ways, as it affects both personal psychological space as well as the physical capacity to engage in activity:

> *We worked with the community on electricity pricing issues. We provided the safe space of a meeting room, something that may not be available to disadvantaged citizens as well as the resources to conduct a meeting:*
>
> *We mean this: here's a meeting room, come to us, we'll give you a taxi fare. Do you also need airtime? We'll give you airtime to connect with people.*

With a particular understanding of PACSA's role as a facilitator for community empowerment, we engaged in a dialogical process around the NHI. They explained:

> *Our role was to ask them: What do you think about that strategy or problem? What do you want to do about it? We'd suggest doing a submission on the flipcharts, but they said, 'How do you write on the flipcharts?' And we show them how. Do you agree or disagree with the viewpoints up on the flipchart? Then they started the process themselves.*

PACSA also noted that the communities don't always frame issues "*in the nicest language which for us is problematic because it can be excluded as valid but that is what we have to work with in community advocacy*".

This is a challenge because on the one hand, there is a need to communicate in a way that will be listened to. One the other hand, there continues to be the danger of the removal or dumbing down of true community voices. They are the people who suffer "*the burden*" of an issue and have the right to express themselves in the way that they do.

In fact, when speaking of how to incorporate community voices effectively into the Action Research cycle, it was stated quite strongly that it is not just a matter of including them in the research cycle, but that they are at the centre of the Action Research cycle. Everything else—how PACSA operates, how external agents are engaged, is an adjunct to this critical point about given priority and voice to the community. This idea was scribbled down as a diagram that has been re-drawn as below.

All too often, conventional Action Research, or research of any sort, can put communities at the side of a research problem, but in this case, the communities and their voices—the people themselves—are actually the main agents of acting on a problem. The communities and their organizations are actually the spiral, or research cycle, which was represented in the following diagrams during the conversation.

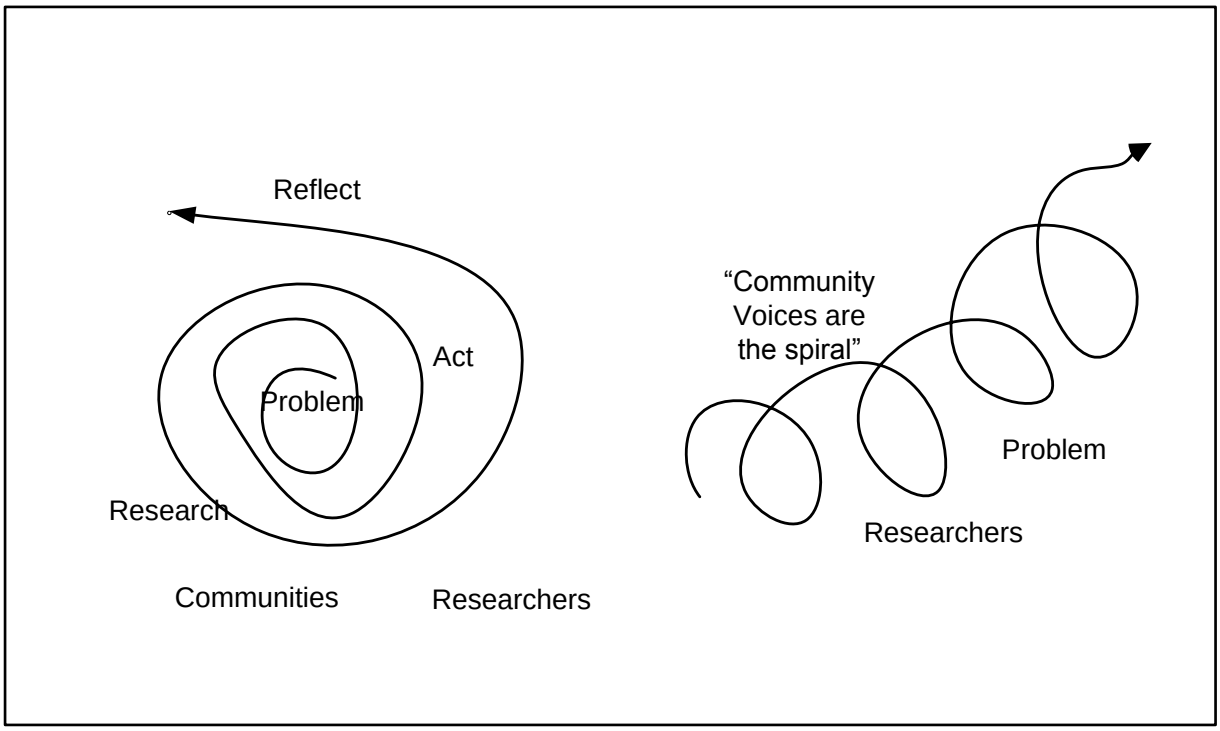


Figure 1. The Community Centered Research Cycle

This point also resulted in a discussion of the issue of community advocacy by PACSA which is intrinsically linked to concepts about the relationship between politics and power and what they referred to as *"a critical theory of the state*". Such insights are needed in order to take effective action. PACSA staff argue that there is a disjunction, as already noted, between people, particularly people at the bottom and the political elite, despite the democratic revolution of 1994. This has been particularly affected by the adoption of the neo-liberal economic and governance model by the ANC, and as PACSA put it:

> *This only benefits a few. If you want anything, you have to pay for it, what you need; they give you as little as possible. Poor people's experience is that you pay for what you need.*

In addition to this, there is increasing isolation between those who are within the system, and those outside, and the state *"keeps a lid*" on disruptions.

For example, the right to have a march has become extremely contained. You have to get not just permission, but a letter from the police that it will cause no violence. But in order to get that permission the police will contact the municipality to check, and this drags out the procedure and is illustrative of how the state with how it deals with the poor; it acts out different forms of repression, exclusion, and especially playing with a game called consultation, which is in fact consultation without a real reference point.

Thus, PACSA argues that consultation actually operates in the interests of the elite, and you go through all the games and processes, whether called participatory democracy or a consultation which actually excludes people. Indeed, effective advocacy is actually a contestation of power, and:

> *in order for that power to find its expression, it is about mobilization of people, it's about organization. It's not necessarily about words; it's about organization, organization. Through that power is led and maintained.*

Yet all this also depends on trust. When there is a lack of trust, despondency, anger, sarcasm and alienation, the community can explode (as in service delivery violence). But as an example, it was mentioned that during the community consultation, one of the participants talked about a "*bomb*" exploding when the NHI was raised with her community, because there were so many other frustrations and problems that the community has felt. The remoteness and complexity of the NHI only added to their sense of frustration. The frustration and distance from government affects the capacity of NGOs to work with communities.

The Oxfam Program Officer mentioned that this problem also affects the legitimacy of NGOs if they don't have a good connection with the community base. It leads to questions about who actually effectively represents the interests of civil society.

What is becoming very clear is that bigger NGOs have an influence on political processes. These NGOs have access to human and material resources to put their message across. Thus the question needs to be asked that if so-called civil society representation is made up of bigger NGOs' interests, then what happens to the voices of the people who don't have a voice? How does their voice filter into the process? These are very difficult questions, and this is why people are questioning the legitimacy of civil society in South Africa when it is not always seen to be representative.

At a workshop in 2012 someone spoke of the issue of *amplifying community voices,* and a session was about *"who is representing us?"* Whose voices are being represented? Am I being represented? It came out clearly that representation was becoming elitist, dominated by the more resourced organizations. In contrast, Oxfam's role is to strengthen civil society, a representation of people, working very hard towards this.

PACSA then went on to discuss a very subtle aspect of this contestation of power and representation:

> *It is a question of the power that we have vis-à-vis the power that they have. Somebody has to shift in this contestation of power. What often happens in the spaces for consultation is that you enter*

that space as individual, or as a junior partner.

When it comes to the question of "*can someone shift things in this space?"* they often can't because they don't have the organizational power behind them. Thus, PACSA, rather than speaking or taking over for people (as noted several times in the discussion), provides support so that authoritative power can become part of a community action, that they have credibility, leadership, a voice and so on. An interaction with ANC Minister Trevor Manuel was cited as an example of the need for this as a means of providing this *shift* or *tilt* in the balance of power:

Trevor Manuel was aware of this issue years ago. We were following the usual way of advocating he said 'well you know guys, I don't know about you, but I have 66 percent of South Africans behind me – where is your power!' On the basis of that, it is to the extent that people organize and mobilize, to the extent that groups have credibility in their community, to the extent that they themselves can exhibit democratic leadership. The extent to which people build power at the local level is critical. Once that is done, anything is possible, because then they can shift the policy agenda.

PACSA also provided critical insight into how this power shift can be achieved. The experience of the NHI consultation process was unpacked. The NHI documentation, coming *"from the top"* was complex and difficult to understand, even for professionals, because it was written in policyspeak. The way to being able to communicate what the NHI was meant to be to the communities themselves was for the PACSA Coordinator and the community co-researchers *to teach themselves* about the NHI.

The PACSA Coordinator had read a book about the ideas of Rancière, a French philosopher, who has long been interested in how people acquire knowledge. Rancière's views on education had been derived from a radical 18th century schoolmaster called Jacotot who was of the view that a teacher and students can teach themselves almost anything.[1] She took the view that:

You don't need to be able to know about a subject to teach it. So we pulled the boring NHI policies off the internet, and decided to read a document every week for four months and talk about it. We came up with questions not about gaps in our knowledge, but 'what does this mean for our work'. It was a phenomenal experience because we really started to understand what this thing was, to such a degree that every one of us can run the NHI training and consultations with communities now.

Even though not everyone was literate (in either English or Zulu), they worked together for a common understanding. *"I don't know how it worked exactly, it was a miracle!"* One of the things they realized as a group was the important of getting down to key question:

One of the main things we recognized was the question. If you pin down the question, so that anybody in the room is able to talk about something during a consultation, then the consultation becomes very rich. When you start pulling in all this technical language about the NHI, then you start losing people.

They therefore spent a lot of time talking and thinking about people's health experiences and how they related to the proposed NHI:

We spent a lot of time talking though people's experience so by the time we got to that training on the NHI, people could connect with what the NHI was to them. The kinds of things we wanted to know were: What is your experience of the public health system? How do people imagine the public health system? What do we envision? What do we want in a public health system? Then, but only then, could we bring in what the NHI says it was going to do so people could almost connect their experience and dreams with what the NHI

[1] "A perfectly ignorant schoolmaster can teach a discipline that he has not mastered himself, since his role in the educational process is not to provide any specific content, but mainly to mobilize the learners' will" DERANTY, J.-P. 2010. *Jacques Rancière : key concepts,* Durham, Acumen.

is. In all of this, the sequence of questions is critical; otherwise you shut down the space.

One issue that was raised by me was the problem of control by those engaged in community research, and I suggested that many people get nervous about loss of power and control. This affects academics as much as community managers and community development practitioners. What happens if things get out of control and the community takes over? The PACSA response was extraordinary: "*We'd be very happy. That's the learning process, I was no longer part of the learning process, and we all took responsibility.*" This was the whole point of working with a community, to give them the power, the capacity and the voice to be independent.

When the question was raised about unethical behaviour by the group being supported, or when they took off in a different direction to what your organization would support, what should the response be?

The answer is that if you take control of something, you have to be accountable to the organization supporting you like PACSA if it has certain values. If a member of the group treated somebody else in a very underhand way and didn't give them space to speak, we have to take a stand – you have a relationship with the partnership. If you work with a group of people who don't share your values, then you can't work with them. 'Sorry, it's not going to work'.

The other key issue that was discussed with PACSA was Information and Knowledge Management, though they did not conceive of their work as Information and Knowledge Management. In fact, Information and Knowledge Management is far too technical a term for everyday use. It is often hard to describe in very concrete terms, so I explained it in the following fashion. I drew a diagram of different levels and intersections of organizational interests, at the same time describing difficulty of getting community voices heard through the bottom up to be heard through the administrative and technical "*cloud*" when information and knowledge are managed or reformulated in different ways. I also mentioned that Duncan Green of Oxfam in *From Poverty to Power* speaks about the critical role of information and knowledge skills and their impact on effective citizenship, and this appears to be sufficient to clarify what was meant (See the full quote on p. 24). I also said that in academic work around Information and Knowledge Management the problem is directed at more conventional institutions and problems which make its translation to the environment of international community development work difficult. This can result in the blunting of voices from the bottom through the rationalizing and technical concepts used in management.

In response to this picture of Information and Knowledge Management, PACSA suggested that much as they want to engage with people at the bottom, because of the struggle in everyday life for people at the bottom, and even for community workers, they can't be expected to become Information and Knowledge Management specialists. The challenge is to engage such specialists in designing information flows and processes that let community voices be heard. But it is a political and cultural challenge to develop a system that brings in all the different players, policy, donors players, funders, and people at the bottom. How can we make it better so that the knowledge from the bottom isn't filtered or lost in that "*cloud*"? That's the task for the future.

PACSA were asked about the place of cell phones, messages, WhatsApp, Mixit in this movement of information. Have they been able to take advantage of the opportunities they offer? The PACSA Coordinator said she loved the idea of the cell phone software as a social research tool used in the survey work. As well as this, cell phones are widespread. They use WhatsApp, SMS and so on, as it is about connecting with the different groups they work with. The WhatsApp group is very effective with the NHI consultations; in fact:

It's amazing. People start messaging—people see the advertising stickers on trucks for the NHI consultations, and give feedback. It is about building power.

Oxfam is also doing a lot of work with this, with cell phones and SMS, and they find out that cell phones and Twitter are most effective for people to organize themselves. Another view put from PACSA was that:

> *Cell phones are about staying in touch, connecting, when people have to make choices about what is basis, to be human is to be in touch, and often that is the only way of doing it. You've got to make a choice between these things, perhaps that's more important than that….for some people if they are not in touch with what is happening somewhere else, the family, their children, the granny, they have to work far away, they need to know what is happening to the kids because of the society in which we live. Cellphones, airtime, take on a meaning that we don't have in other situations.*

This led to another significant observation by PACSA. There are actually two aspects to communication activity: the first is access to information; the other is how to package appropriate information. The NHI project was not so much to make the information available, because the information is there, but how do you *package the information* so it is appropriate for different educational levels. That is why PACSA has been so important as a filter, it packages information for the community to engage in.

Focus group: PACSA organizations

The community co-researchers who took part in this focus group came from several different organizations supported by PACSA.

Upinti is an autonomous men's issues group that is concerned with safety in our society as a whole. It is a registered NGO, with its own committee. Its objectives and goals *"are what bring us together. Whatever we do, we decide on it".* It conducts workshops and dialogues with men and 389 men are part of the network. PACSA provides them with space and support. They get no funding.

> *We share information by talking to each other, by phoning, by SMS, some people use Facebook, some people have email, some have WhatsApp. As an example of the sort of work we do, on Wednesday we are having a march about Sugar Daddies* [men who support women and then sexually exploit them]*. This is about transactional relationships in the context of our society. We also go to the taxi ranks to raise consciousness. If you help someone innocently, don't expect anything in response.*

Abanqobi, which translates as "The Conquerors" in Zulu, is another organization involved with the NHI consultations. It is a men's group dealing with HIV and gender-based violence. They engage in condom demonstrations, World AIDS Day action, domestic violence campaigns, and other awareness campaigns, some similar to Springs of Hope. The difference is they work with men.

Springs of Hope is a group for HIV-positive women. It provides support and assistance to the community and clinics and they meet monthly. The organization started in 2003. It is the passion that they have that is a force for good. People the Love Springs of Hope. They want to make a difference.

> *We get new members, they have beneficiaries. They want to give a helping hand; we give seeds, plants, so people come to the organization.*
>
> *We have our safe space at PACSA. PACSA helps with meetings and transport money. We also do food gardening amongst each other to help members and also annual events and women's day events. We also have a day for testing men, they are stubborn [this got some laughter]. We get invited to different churches. We also have their own World AIDS Day and Memorial Quilt for a sister or a friend. Last year wanted to have a festival of Help to show people that HIV is manageable.*
>
> *We are so well networked because we saw the need to help each other, and a little space each month helps a lot. People use SMS, WhatsApp, the group meets monthly, PACSA have workshops that meet, and people come to share information from the workshop. Most of us have cell phones, but*

nobody has a landline anymore, they are too expensive.

I also asked about the meaning of advocacy and what it means at the provincial or municipal level, and they responded in the following ways.

> Springs of Hope have started to advocate to the Department of Health. For example medication is distributed, or clinics and hospitals, but they [organizations] haven't heard anything back. The advisors just don't turn up, even to our events. It's not about not having the right business suits for us. They will call up NGOs, ask the NGOs to appoint people, we will attend they will call for workshops and so on. But when we come and complain, they just don't care.

I then asked about getting your point of view valued by government, your point of view valued—you seem to be saying nobody listens, nobody cares. What are other effective ways of getting things done if governments are not paying attention?

One answer was that you "*force your point of view"*, through demonstrations. Another answer was that they should be the ones talking, and they should keep on trying, but they don't have enough political allies. They think they are just local organizers, not working politically, and they don't have that skill or orientation.

They also said that they gained a lot of understanding about the NHI by learning with the NHI working with the PACSA Coordinator. With her help, they got to understand the NHI information. This is not the same as simply handling information, and the important thing to know is that groups get information that they have never had. It has changed them and such information changes also changes others' ways of seeing things. They just can't be fed and told the next day, the NHI is with you—they must know early on what it actually means—and "*this is the role that we have, of helping people to understand*."

Participants in the focus group also said that they needed advocacy training:

> *We don't get noticed at the moment. We need training in how to speak, but as well, everyone needs to be able to come together and compile views and information on an issue.*

In addition, they added that it was very important that they give the community information that can be trusted. But they are also aware that information changes, and it is difficult to convey complex things in a simple fashion, including doing survey work as part of the NHI project. This makes talking to people difficult because, for most of the people in the community:

> *It was the first time in their lives to hear about NHI, they don't know what is this thing called the NHI. They were very interested. It was very hard at first with the way that the cell phones were structured for the survey work that we did.*

I asked how you can talk to people if they are angry or confused about a lot of issues. People find it hard to focus on a particular issue that seems very abstract, particularly when there is so is so much else going on in their lives:

> *It is very hard to talk about something specific sometimes, when people don't know much about it. The moment the people hear that phrase, 'there is a promise that the government is going to give them something' that's when they explode because they have heard this too many times before with no result. When we did the baseline survey, the questions were set for us. When we had our first consultation, that's when the 'bomb' started and all sorts of anger and issues surfaced. We also knew how hard it would be amongst ourselves to discuss the NHI. You wouldn't even want to know more about the NHI if you were angry about other things, you'd be just pissed off that the government is doing this thing and you know how things are.*

The co-researchers said that "*everyone was complaining, they say that this thing was not going to work"*. They tried to set questions to attract them. They made sure to get them involved so they would not walk away:

It was very hard to do the survey. The cell phone survey had the questions and we ticked the boxes through that. We got trained, but questions were too long, not always straight to the point. People were suspicious of us coming to do a survey—you've come from the government they would say and too convince them to give the time was hard and the time was very short. Some people will in fact chase you away when you do such work.

It became very clear from discussions with the co-researchers that designing baseline research with such communities was incredibly difficult. For example, I raised the issue of designing a project where the government was going to install solar hot water on houses for a very low cost.

One person said that it would be difficult to install solar "*on a shack where you know that nobody's working, so how will that person even pay for hot water*?" Most people would prefer it was free if it was a need, even if it might save money in the long-term to make people pay. Another person said that you can't even assume that they even want water in the first place. Another person said:

Consult nicely. First ask them how they would feel, you don't just come and tell them that is something that you need to pay for. Get to know where they are at, have a certain understanding.

I then asked them: If you were asked to write a report for the municipality, what sort of report do you think would have the most impact? Would it be good to make a video? A meeting with councilors? A document? What is the most effective way of representing the voices of people?

One of the suggestions made was that they could get some training in making films. It was also said that if we are going to be advising other organizations, you have to lower your personal expectations. You are not doing it for yourself; you are doing it for the community. Sometimes you don't see leadership in what you do, but others do. You need to have a strong relationship with traditional leaders, political leaders, change-leaders in order for information to pass to the community. To take the example of the NHI, you can't just go door-to-door, and not know the community structure. For example, if you are coming to do HIV awareness, you've got to use the councilor or the church. If a person says "*no*" to you, then that is the person who you have to influence. But in some communities, the council is like a "*zero thing*", that means nothing to them. In fact, some people are only renters and they don't even know who the councilor is, so that they don't even know about the politics in town. The Oxfam participant observed that:

You know your community, you know how to do the work, how to go around certain individuals, even if they are the smallest little thing in your community. You have certain skills, and something has changed in you because of the NHI project, even though there was a level of distrust about the NHI, and it enabled you to carry on.

Key findings

Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research is often referred to in other contexts under names such as participatory research, community-based-research, collaborative or empowerment research and so on, but for our purposes these differences are more academic than practical. What we are really speaking of is a *deeply collaborative form of research action* which prioritizes community needs and voices through different forms of action (Denison and Stillman, 2012).

In reality, Participatory Action Research can be seen as a continuum, ranging from limited or participative opportunities for the community in researcher-controlled activity, to total engagement with the community in the design of the research, including choice of problem to be solved, questions to be asked, implementation of research, management and presentation of research data, and so on. This form of research is believed to be important because, as I have written elsewhere, "the richness of the processes that take place can best be captured through collaborative participative research that is

valued by communities, rather than through less engaged approaches" (Stillman, 2005, p. 80). It leaves behind something of value to the community, resulting in empowerment, something that is axiomatic in community development practice: increased confidence and capacity in self-assessment, knowledge, research methods, and advocacy, resulting in less reliance on outsiders to "present" the community.

Based on this assessment, PACSA and its co-researchers engage in a radical form of participatory research, which aims for grassroots representation, shared decision-making, the community creation of knowledge, and structural social change. (Tinkler, 2010). Furthermore, what is also significant about the interviews at PACSA is that rather than speaking in generalities about its activity, or their activity remaining tacit and unarticulated, they have a very specific language and theory of engagement that can be transferred to others.

PACSA thus provides powerful insights to others about how to practice radical CBR, particularly around the critical role of the community educator and community facilitators or co-researchers. PACSA wants to hand over power and responsibility to the community, and thus the following comments were made in the interview. The PACSA response was extraordinary: *"We'd be very happy. That's the learning process, I was no longer part of the learning process, and we all took responsibility*". This was the whole point of working with a community, to give them the power, the capacity and the voice to be independent. Some other key insights follow.

Voices

PACSA is aware that its efforts to bridge that gap and give communities the facilitator's voice has an inbuilt danger of privileging the already privileged over the disempowered, a key point made in other studies into different forms of Participatory Action Research. Activity is not intended to result in capacity building that privileges PACSA. The beneficiaries are those in the community, and this can only occur by privileging their voices and interests. As was stated in the interviews:

> *Because people came to us and there was an expectation that they would 'stand with us'. PACSA has struggled for a long time about how to how do we make a link or sense of experiences of people on the ground.*

This has resulted in their hard work to engage in transference of "*voice*" from themselves to the community, difficult as this is to achieve. Thus:

> *As soon as we begin to speak for the voiceless, we make them even more voiceless, we close them out. As soon as you open your mouth, your voice becomes dominant; their voice does not get heard. Can we say that that voice should not be our voice?*

In PACSA's opinion, there is no argument for not privileging community voices.

Power, politics & the state

PACSA locates its Participatory Action Research practice within a political context involving the history of post-apartheid South Africa, and the continuing structural effects of that imbalance today. That imbalance includes the huge gap between those with material resources and social and political capital, and those who do not have them. In light of this, PACSA lives in and through its experience, heritage and history and what it does today, and into the future. In this struggle, PACSA draws upon decades of history of its membership in the struggle against apartheid, including a non-partisan but religiously-based conviction about the possibility of their being a better society.

The question of community voices is inherently linked to the question of *power, and how to give the community power.* As captured in the interview with PACSA, effective advocacy is actually a contestation of power:

> *In order for that power to find its expression, it is about mobilization of people, it's about organization. It's not necessarily about words, it's about organization, organization. Through that, power is led and maintained.*

PACSA works with community organizations to enable a shift in power relations:

> *It is a question of the power we have vis-à-vis the power that they have. Somebody has to shift in this contestation of power. What often happens in the spaces for consultation is that you enter that space as individual, or as a junior partner.*

This is a viewpoint learned from the hard experience of the apartheid era and post-1994 where structural inequalities continue (Marais, 2011). PACSA is thus sympathetic to a critical and even confrontational or oppositional attitude towards state power because there is still an abiding inequity in the country. PACSA speaks of the need for a *"critical theory of the state",* but according to them, it is a challenge to develop a system that brings in all the different players, policy, donors players, funders, people at the bottom. How can we make it better that the knowledge from the bottom doesn't have to be filtered or lost in through that system cloud? That's the task for the future.

The community co-researchers are also very aware of this inequity in power and resources relations. The lack of power results in apathy and despondency, as well as outbreaks of anger and violence. Because of the lack of power, and in fact, lack of knowledge or connection with the ways communicating and interacting with the wider world of advocacy and ways of doing things, there is little trust, and this includes little trust in new initiatives such as the NHI because of past experience, that apparently nothing can be done to change things. The "*bomb*" goes off as discussed earlier (see p. 17).

Furthermore, government or other agencies *"will call up NGOs, ask the NGOs to appoint people, we will attend they will call for workshops and so on. But when we come and complain, they just don't care"*. How to bring communities around not to assume that governments or others "just don't care" is not always the case is very difficult. What exists here is a form of learned helplessness, often in the face of justifiable experiences.

But at the same time, the co-researchers appear to have had a limited understanding of how to conducted political campaigns, admitting that they were community rather than politically-oriented. When asked about how to push a point of view, demonstrations were seen as a key method, and the use of other forms of advocacy, such as meetings or written submissions was not mentioned. This would appear to reflect the background of alienation from power structures and means of working through them that PACSA has spoken about. Consequently, part of PACSA's task is to bring community organizations to a much higher degree of consciousness and capacity so that demonstrations and "*bombs*" are not the only means of expressing their frustrations. Having the capacity to express a community voice through political process is just as important and in the long run, may be more impressive and effective.

Space

As a practical means of giving priority to that missing voice, PACSA speaks a lot about "*space"* and as a kind of practical theory and method, a means of empowering people to come together to *think and work.* Space is not just the provision of a physical place by PACSA such as a meeting room, it is also a head space, a time and space for safe reflection and activity and knowing how to use such spaces and the resources which are associated with them.

It is a critical and perhaps unanticipated resource need for such communities, and its many dimensions need to be taken into account when engaging in community development. For people coming from situations of deprivation, space is a rich benefit, because they may lack the physical space to meet in safety, and related resources such as the cost of a bus or taxi fare to that safe space, butchers' paper, pens, and so on. The three different community groups that were part of the consultation all speak about the importance of such spaces and places.

Language for empowerment

PACSA is very aware of the power of language, and this goes right back to a key understanding of the problem of voices that has already been cited:

> *As soon as we begin to speak for the voiceless, we make them even more voiceless, we close them out. As soon as you open your mouth, your voice becomes dominant; their voice does not get heard. To what extent can we say that that voice should not be our voice?*

Thus their (co)-learning and action, informed by the work of Rancière and others, is focused on the transformation it provides. They have learned to ask questions, and to question their answers, rather than merely answer the questions. This language transformation is also based on a political understanding of language, for example, that consultation is not a passive activity, but one in which the community should and must have a strong voice, rather than being subservient to other dominant interests. Furthermore, one of the community co-researchers referred to "*transactional relationships*". This is not everyday language, but reflects the learning of a specific politicized vocabulary to describe a form of prostitution. This language was clearly understood by others. In addition, the conditions provided by the "*space*" that they work in helps to build that capacity, for example, by helping them to learn how to document their viewpoints, to confidently transfer their spoken language to a whiteboard or butcher's paper, and then develop a submission. This transformative process may seem obvious to an educated outsider for whom literacy is second nature, but not at all to a person whose interactive experience has been totally oral.

Thus, while the community co-researchers often talk of the help they received from PACSA, they are quite expert at discussing the particulars of the NHI informational process and its strengths and weaknesses.

Leadership

The community co-researchers recognize they have leadership roles in their communities, yet this leadership is also a form of privilege that has to be earned by relating well to different groups in the community. Leadership qualities are only recognized by others: *"you are not doing it for yourself; you are doing it for the community. Sometimes you don't see leadership in what you do, but others do",* and self-realization about the potential and responsibilities of being a leader is a significant step in gaining authority. This includes increasing one's own knowledge. By becoming knowledgeable about the NHI, leaders became information- and process-brokers to the community, and were recognized as fundamental players in the informational process by Oxfam:

> *You know your community, you know how to do the work, how to go around certain individuals, even if they are the smallest little thing in your community. You have certain skills, and something has changed in you because of the NHI project, even though there was a level of distrust about the NHI, and it enabled you to carry on.*

By "*something has changed in you*", the Oxfam worker was referring to the empowerment that the community co-researchers have received through participation in the self-educational process about the NHI.

As for the role played by the PACSA Advocacy worker, even though the organization downplays hierarchical leadership because of its preference for engaging in non-hierarchical community facilitation, there is still a powerful leadership and moral authority role emanating from PACSA. The form of leadership offered by the community educator can be identified as "critical pedagogy", coming out of Freire's work. Ledwith says that "critical pedagogy refers to education that is situated within an analysis of ideological and structural power". Everything that we have heard from PACSA reflects this perspective, and furthermore, as Ledwith argues, "Freire's approach exposes the power and authority of the educator in perpetuating domination. A popular educator is a critical pedagogue, working in community with values of humility and compassion, seeing the educational relationship as one of mutual humanization with a loving commitment to people at its core" (Ledwith, 2011, p. 54).

This approach to community development is historically related to the influential ideas of the Italian Marxist theorist and activist

Antonio Gramsci, who spoke of "organic intellectuals", that is people with skills who identify with the situation (originally) of the working class in their struggle for liberation. More generally, this theory has been extended to include what have become known as "intellectual workers" in supporting liberating activity against hegemonic forces of domination and oppression.

As Gramsci wrote, such intellectuals conduct activity "'as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator", as a person who helps the oppressed gain new forms of consciousness and empowerment (cited in Jones, 2006, p. 85). This is certainly the case at PACSA.

The practice of community development thus becomes a form of collaborative practice that is highly self-reflective, dialogical, and prefaced on working with, and not upon communities. The insights and practices of Freire and others are very important for anyone interested in activist community or participatory research that is to move beyond slogans.

The "small worlds" perspective and "information poverty"

The community facilitator works with critical pedagogy to bring people out of their silence and marginalization, which can manifest itself as an apparent lack of awareness or reluctance to take action for change. Freire referred to the process of turning this situation around as "naming the culture of silence" (Ledwith, 2011, p. 55). However, "silence" or other forms of apparent quiescence need a more detailed explanation, because people do not always remain silent. In fact, they can be vocal, violent, and destructive, as is often the case in South Africa.

An explanation of this apparent silence, invisibility, or lack of receptiveness to information that can help change one's life can be found in the idea of "small worlds" and "information poverty" as developed by Chatman in her sensitive detailed descriptions of the life of people in difficult circumstances and low-skills employment (Chatman, 1999).

The ethical or moral context for using her work is critical, because it uses concepts that can appear negative and judgmental, to be used against people in great need. However, as Chatman argues, by exploring the deficits of a particular community we are not judging it as primitive or inferior in comparison to others. All we are trying to do is describe and analyse a particular community in order to understand its dynamics with outsiders or outside ideas, information, and possibilities. The labels that are applied, such as "alienated" or "apathetic" or having a lack of trust, can be applied to many different sorts of communities, not such communities in poverty (think of youth culture).

Rather than detailing all the particulars of her studies, which range from the life of prisoners, to low-paid caretakers, poor single mothers and elderly women in a housing complex, to feminist booksellers and online communities, I prefer to use an "ideal type"[2] based on her ideas as an overall explanatory context for the experience of people in difficult circumstances such as those found for poor people in South Africa.

"Small worlds" are ones in which "things are viewed on a small scale" (Chatman, 1999: 209), and that scale is the micro-level of everyday life, particularly in poverty or some form of restriction. In isolated circumstances caused by poverty, including geographic isolation from the broader community, one's world can be very limited despite apparent connections with the outside through things such as mobile phones (Stillman, 2014).

[2] Weber's highly influential model of the 'ideal type' can be considered to be an exemplar of the theoretical model, in that it exaggerates ideal conditions, intended towards the identification of real world characteristics and problems. As Weber put it: "An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct. It is a utopia." WEBER, M., SHILS, E. & FINCH, H. A. 1949. *The methodology of the social sciences,* New York, The Free Press.

By and large, people work with what Chatman calls insider codes in these small worlds. "[Codes] connect[s] us to other members of our world, while at the same time separating us from the world of outsiders", and this is a point well developed by other sociologists and will be discussed elsewhere in the future. Thus it provides a *worldview* through this lens, and Chatman is particularly interested in the "information needs of people who live precariously within [a] brutal, marginalized world" (Chatman, 1999, p. 197). Furthermore, people in isolation can "reinforce information poverty by neglecting to accept sources of information not created by themselves (Chatman, 1996, p. 193).

To be able to cope with particular circumstances, such as being in jail, or living in extreme poverty, all sorts of rationalizations take place, and they can choose to exclude certain forms of information or knowledge as irrelevant, or in fact too painful to bear. People may not want to know about certain things when incarcerated because they can do nothing, and the pain and discord with their total powerlessness is too great to bear; for example, knowing about a sick child but being able to do nothing. People may have total distrust in government or other organizations from a learned or transmitted experience that nothing can be done to improve their lives.

The world outside thus assumes a secondary importance or even a purposed invisibility to the day-to-day struggle of getting by. They have learned to become apathetic through bad experiences and self-preservation and powerlessness. As Ledwith also observes, overcoming apathy is a crucial skill; the relevance of opportunities and information to change is one way of overcoming it (Ledwith, 2011, p. 76).

Consequently, many people who have distrust, experience ongoing social pain or total disconnection with the outside cannot make sense of information presented to them, or engage in various rationalizations as to why they should not accept outside information. Outside information can carry little meaning because it is embedded in a completely different set of assumptions to that known and experienced at the "small world" level. It is seen as "situationally irrelevant", and in fact, accepting outside information or advice can be seen as too risky. Thus Chatman says that "the lived experience of poor people is the *ne plus ultra* of the shielding of needed information from outsiders" (Chatman, 1999: 207). The community co-researchers expressed their awareness of this problem in their own way:

> *The important thing to know is that groups got information that they have never had before. It has changed them. That information changes their information and ways of seeing things.*

The word "information" here can be unpacked in a variety of ways: it is code for useful information, for knowledge to take action and feel competent, to have not just personal, but collective energy, and have the capacity to do something relevant.

Chatman also argues that within the "small world", there may in fact be a reluctance to share between each other because of the fear of shame, discord or failure. There may also be a considerable degree of distrust of each other, which is a great challenge to any activity in community development. We thus engage in any number of self-protective behaviours to prevent others knowing our pain. We all do this, but for people who are marginalized, the price paid in the capacity to life in comfort is obviously much higher, but "we engage in self-protective behaviours to keep others sensing our need. These efforts are meant to hide our true crisis in an effort to appear normal and to exhibit acceptable coping behaviours" (op. cit.). Obviously, sexual violence, gang violence, drinking and drugs can all be seen as linked to this self-protection and breaking through this is the great challenge.

One clear message from the interviews with the co-researchers is that they are critical intermediaries for the receptivity of new information, such as that about the NHI. But they themselves have had to go through a process of internal learning and receptivity to gain a knowledge and acceptance that this new information has something of worth for them. That has then helped them to overcome that learned barrier of resistance,

defensiveness or angry expectation of help from the outside that is found in deprived communities which results in violence. They were able to knowledgeably talk about their experiences with the NHI. I am sure that with further research, many of the factors that affect informationally isolated cultures as identified by Chatman would be found to be relevant in the South African situation. Notice how the community researchers spoke of how difficult it is to frame information when communities are so disrupted. Once again, the discussion of unmet expectations is relevant:

> *It is very hard to talk about something specific sometimes, when people don't know much about it. The moment the people hear that phrase, 'there is a promise that the government is going to give them something' that's when they explode because they have heard this too many times before with no result. When we did the baseline survey, the questions were set for us. When we had our first consultation, that's when the 'bomb' started and all sorts of anger and issues surfaced. We also knew how hard it would be amongst ourselves to discuss the NHI. You wouldn't even want to know more about the NHI if you were angry about other things, you'd be just pissed off that the government is doing this thing and you know how things are.*

PACSA also said:

> *We spent a lot of time talking though people's experience so by the time we got to that training on the NHI, people could connect with what the NHI was to them.*

That "*talking through*" was called a "*miracle*" by PACSA, because the focus was on action, not documentation and analysis. However, in reality, PACSA is practicing a consciousness-raising facilitation process based on critical pedagogy, as discussed previously. This process of intensive dialogue and self-learning which broke down many of the barriers named by Ledwith: the fear of risk, the sense that the information was completely irrelevant to an outside work, shame at being exposed, and so on. They have learned to overcome "the apathy or anger generated by social exclusion", and the self-esteem which is gained so that it harnesses "the dignity, hope, and passion for change that community activists [here, the community co-researchers] bring to the process" (Ledwith, 2011: 76).

Once they started getting to the core of the questions and the problems that were of complete relevance to them, a new shared vocabulary and understanding was learned—thus the many senses of the word "*information*". The community co-researchers became capable and enabled to deal with the pain and emotional bombs and explosions from the community that were a learned response to what could be called informational refusal. They were able to put their voice to the problem and use this in positive ways because of their new understanding of the world around them.

Social relations of information production perspective

The observations at this point may seem more "technical" and less directly relevant to PACSA's day-to-day work (as well as Oxfam's), but they are of particular interest to those interested developing a new way of working with enabling technologies such as mobile phones or the internet in the international development information chain.

Duncan Green of Oxfam (UK) made the very clear point in his book *From Poverty to Power* that information—and particularly electronic information—are forms of power:

> Access to information is no abstract debate; it is an essential tool of citizenship. Knowledge expands horizons, allows people to make informed choices, and strengthens their ability to demand their rights. Ensuring access to knowledge and information is integral to enabling poor people to tackle the deep inequalities of power and voice that entrench inequality across the world. At a national level, the ability to absorb, adapt, and generate knowledge and turn it into technology increasingly determines an economy's prospect (Green, 2012, p. 53).

To explain how this works in practice, I quote the work of my colleague Randy Stoecker:

> [The] first goal of the overall participatory and action-oriented research process is to support action on a specific issue—the first form of social change …. [The] second form of social change ... is to transform the social relations of knowledge production so that people who have only been passive recipients of knowledge become participatory knowledge producers whose knowledge can inform action and build power (Stoecker, 2012, pp. 91-92).

So what are "social relations of knowledge production"? Again, quoting Stoecker, based on the work of John Gaventa and his colleagues (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001) "we are talking about the way that people are organized to produce knowledge".

While the world "knowledge" is used here, for the sake of simplicity, it can be taken to be much the same as information, but in more of an applied sense rather than something passively handled or received. In public policy circumstances, there are the "experts" such as professors, consultants, professionals or public servants who specialize in public policy, and there are consumers or clients, but as well there are people who create and manage the flow of information in organizations.

In the case of PACSA, there has been an attempt to completely change these relations of knowledge production, to engage in a fundamental power shift in the production of knowledge. The community's interests become primary in the construction of information and knowledge systems, and that includes highlighting their voices.

The community co-researchers are aware they are engaged in this turnaround process, which comes out in statements such as this:

> *It was the information that we could understand about the NHI working with the PACSA Coordinator. This is not the same as just handling information. The thing that stands out is that groups get information that they have never had. It has changed them. That information that changes their information and ways of seeing things. They just can't be fed and told the next day, the NHI is with you—they must know early on.*

Furthermore, the PACSA worker observed that effective advocacy is actually a contestation of power, and:

> *In order for that power to find its expression, it is about mobilization of people, it's about organization. It's not necessarily about words, it's about organization, organization. Through that power is led and maintained.*

In this case, she is addressing the first goal of Stoecker's participatory and action-oriented research process for supporting community action. She also knows the power of words (that is, the application of information and knowledge) in new relationships where people have moved from being in a situation of dependency or lack of power to one in which they are the ones increasingly in control of the situation.

When we approach the problem from a critical Information and Knowledge Management perspective, the problem now can be interpreted as one in which the informational challenge is to move away from a traditional situation control in the hands of "experts", to one in which communities themselves are far more in charge of the knowledge and information process, or at least into which their concerns are given serious consideration in the Information and Knowledge Management process.

A key problem with conventional, business-oriented Information and Knowledge Management, even in international development, is that it replicates the same narrowly expert way of analysing and doing with a focus on problem-solving for management, as can be seen in Corfield et al. (2013). This orientation can keep disempowered and marginalized community information and knowledge invisible and outside the realm of its special discourse and problem-solving activity, if it is aware of it at all. Consequently, in developing effective Information and Knowledge Management systems, there is a need to incorporate the kinds of issues and participatory practices that

have been raised in this report to in order to create an inclusive, pluralistic form of Information and Knowledge Management. Once again, we can refer to Stoecker, though there are many variations of the theme (Tinkler, 2010). Stoecker suggests that there are four key stages in community-based research, and these can be incorporated in a new form of what I call Pluralistic Information and Knowledge Management Design (Stoecker, 2005).

Stoecker's stages of community activity for problem-solving is summarized as follows:

- Diagnosis of a problem by the community: they take over the process, not the experts
- Prescription of a solution by the community: they take over the process, not the experts
- Implementation: the community, or those with their authority implement the plan
- Evaluation: a community-run and focused evaluation of what happened, why, and so on.

The challenge in adapting this model is to more strongly represent community interests in in all stages of Information and Knowledge Management so that community voices are well represented without losing authenticity. Thus the work with PACSA and the community co-researchers alerts us to many factors that need to be taken into account into developing a pluralistic process based on effective community-based research principles. Each of these principles, as outlined below, needs to be incorporated into a process that takes account of the four stages of diagnosis through to implementation noted as above.

- The incorporation of community voices
- The need to acknowledge political realities
- Space and capacity building
- The language of empowerment
- Leadership by facilitators and community people
- The incorporation of critical pedagogy in Information and Knowledge Management processes
- Small worlds and information poverty
- The social relations of information production

The framework developed by colleagues at Monash, developed out of knowledge management development activity in Asia with NGOs, could effectively incorporate many of these observations. At present, the Monash model, derived from what they called Task-based Knowledge Management (TbKM), "is designed to support policy work by addressing both the structural and functional dimensions of policy-making tasks and by integrating different forms of knowledge, including traditional wisdom, across multiple levels of activity and decision-making". It is "strongly process-oriented", is sensitized to the importance of collaboration, and "challenges that are intrinsically multi-disciplinary, and involve diverse stakeholders" (Burstein and Linger, 2011, Linger et al., 2013, p. 1).

Modification of the model would therefore include a stronger bottom-up leadership role for communities and its *"traditional wisdom"* in developing the information and knowledge agenda (including knowledge management for advocacy, policy development, and other relevant tasks). There would also need to be a strong feedback mechanism which directly represents community voices and interests at a policy (or other, such as political, cross-NGO or cross-community levels).

The point of view expressed in the information and knowledge empowerment work based upon critical pedagogical methods conducted by PACSA could be incorporated into a new form of participatory and inclusive Information and Knowledge Management activity with the community, by giving them a key responsibility in articulating a language and problem-set of relevance to them. Information and policy professionals could also become part of a co-learning process, which could result in a transformation in the relationships of information and knowledge production between communities at the bottom and supporting NGOs and agencies higher up the development chain.

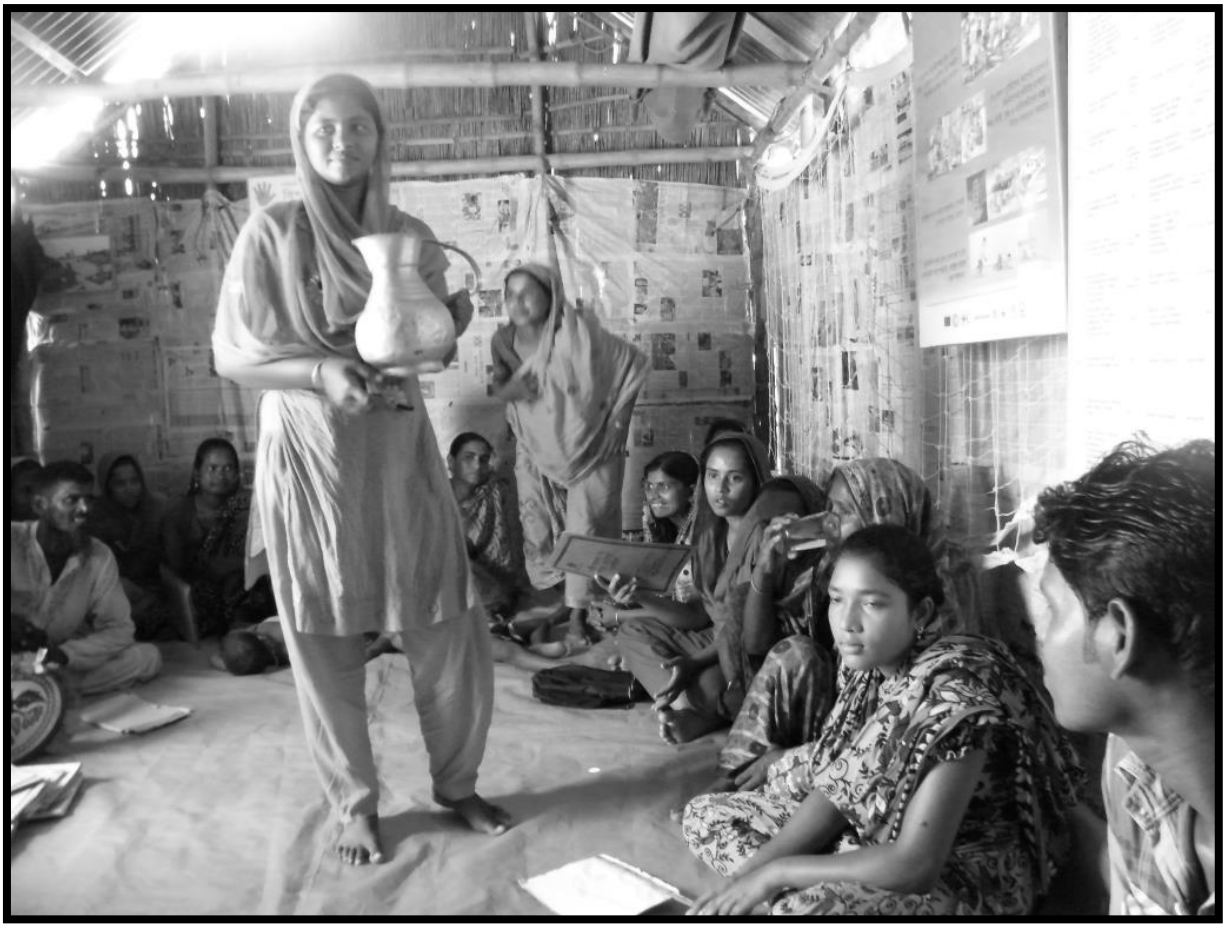
Of course, to get technically-focused designers trained to focus on narrow technical issues to incorporate a more political and radical view of the world of information rather than seeing it as a "black box" is an

enormous challenge, but if such a transformation is possible with relatively disempowered communities, it should be possible with professionals. One important step would be for a joint process to be developed with community researchers and community facilitators so that they too both became an active part of this transformational process, ensuring the broadcast and incorporation of community information and knowledge at levels beyond that of the community itself.

Of course, this may be very complex, though there are suggestions about how to set in place ways of developing shared and productive linguistic metaphors, stories, pictures and dialogue for Information and Knowledge Management and systems design to ensure community voice (de Moor and di Cindio, 2007, de Moor and Weigand, 2006). These issues have been partly addressed by the writer and Linger in other research activity about Information Systems Design, and will be elaborated upon in further publications (Stillman and Linger, 2009).

CASE STUDY 2
BANGLADESH

"Everybody will be doing this in ten years' time."



Overview

Research brief

As noted earlier (p. 4), the research brief for Bangladesh was modified after consultation with Oxfam in Australia and in Bangladesh:

> *The aim of this research is to conduct a prospective evaluation of current understandings and capacities concerning the use of Information and Communications Technologies (mobile phones, SMS, internet, radio, etc.) around the following issues, as developed in conjunction with Oxfam Bangladesh:*
>
> - *How messages and information impact on large numbers of people to change their mind-set, particularly in the following dimensions: in coastal areas where poor people do not believe in Early Warning Systems for disasters, rather depending on what they believe is God's will; and in changing masculine attitudes that justify injustice and violence against women.*
> - *How an information, knowledge experience can transform practices in a variable climate and disaster-prone situation.*
> - *To what degree can participatory activity be used to answer these questions and as well be used for advocacy, reporting, and policy development in what is known as the 'development chain'.*
>
> *Answers to these questions will help to develop effective communication and messaging strategies and projects for long-term development programs especially targeting marginalized communities.*

Interview design

Unlike the research in South Africa, interview work was conducted in three locations: Dhaka, with Oxfam staff and representatives of NGOs and universities; Dinajpur (Rangpur Division) and Faridpur (Dhaka Division) with NGOs, universities and journalists, and the local government; and in two remote village settings in the Dinajpur and Faridpur Districts. As noted earlier, there has not been time to translate and consolidate all the material, but it is hoped this will be achieved in the future.

Five key questions were developed, with opportunities to open up to other issues. In response to these questions, in each setting the conversation was naturally fluid, and not all questions were relevant to all people and some topics were discussed more than others. The intended questions for discussion were:

- *What are the major challenges to empowering community voices?*
- *Which of these drivers are most important to getting messages across with communities?*
- *How do we evaluate the success or failure of such initiatives to bring about changes in knowledge and attitudes and actions?*
- *What are the key indicators for indicating success or failure?*
- *How do we best encourage and engage the voice of individual households with national policy on issues such as disaster management or gender violence?*

Underlying these questions was an interest in the capacity of organizations to undertake Participatory Action Research, and information was also captured about this during the discussions. Furthermore, it was simpler to refer to Participatory Action Research by the short name of "Action Research". There was also no discussion of longer and potentially confusing (though accurate) terms and practices as participatory research, participatory action research, community-based-research, collaborative or empowerment research, or so on. These differences are more academic than what is needed on the ground. On the ground, there is the need for a method which is an easy to understand, teach, and implement.

Other observations

Due to the need for timely reporting, this report focuses upon the practical rather than research implications of the research visit, and the use of quotations is limited due to the time taken to prepare adequate translations and summaries from the Bangla originals. As a consequence, research implications and data analysis will be covered in other publications.

Recent research and practice also back up the findings of this report concerning the potential for mobile technologies to be used in innovative ways for community development in international development settings. A recent report from Canada concludes that availability of mobile phones has been identified as making “a difference to the livelihood of the poor and … contribute towards reducing both financial and non-financial dimensions of poverty” for the very poor in many countries. (Elder et al., 2013).

The work of the Frontline NGO is relevant since pilot work with mobile technologies has been conducted in Pakistan and elsewhere, and fruitful personal contact has been made with a director of the Frontline project (Walker, 2013). Further innovations involving mobile technology could also take place with research specialists in the Faculty of Information Technology at Monash University, should future funding for joint work with Oxfam in Bangladesh become available.

It is hoped that the priorities for activity expressed by Oxfam in Bangladesh and its community partners will be the basis for such innovation.

Key findings

Community information

Community information is commonly understood in library and welfare practice in countries like Australia, the UK or the US as information for everyday living, and with some refinement to local conditions, is probably also applicable for practical purposes in Bangladesh (Victorian Community Information Network, 1991). The practice of community information or community information literacy is different from a more scattershot approach of providing information in an uncoordinated fashion. It assumes that people are able to understand what they are receiving, but at the same time, they have "the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand.[3] Community information practice also assumes that good information provision relies upon effective networking of information providers, whether through formal or informal arrangements and that a systematic and coordinated approach to community information is a positive activity with demonstrable community benefit.

However, unlike the situation in developed countries, community information provision lies outside the public library system in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, NGOs have a key role in community information provision, and even local government information centres are in their infancy and under-resourced. The means for providing community information are highly variable: word of mouth, leaflets, billboards, flipcharts, brochures, TV, radio, community street drama based on real life experiences, and village committee meetings.

Community information, including information made available via mobile phones, should not be separated from activities that are already undertaken in international development, but it is the conscious adoption of the principles of currency, accuracy, trustworthiness and comprehensiveness applied to community-oriented Information and Knowledge Management strategies in different projects that could result in new insights and practices. Additionally, effective networking and coordination of information efforts between agencies is different from media campaigning in general, because rather than being concerned with external public relations, it is a form of community development and activity with beneficiaries.

Furthermore, as discussed above in the South African case study (see p. 22), the question of trust and confidence in information agencies, and their mediators and managers is critical. The relevant passage from the work of Chatman can be considered again, because it is just as relevant to the case of isolated villagers in Bangladesh. Unless there is trust in the source of information, and it is meaningful and relevant to the life needs

[3] (http://infolit.org/about-the-nfil/what-is-the-nfil/).

and the things that are valuable in their lives, people in isolation can "reinforce information poverty by neglecting to accept sources of information not created by themselves" (Chatman, 1996, p. 193.)

Community information practice as an explicit form of knowledgeable and skilled community development practice should thus be highlighted in a future project, as part of the skills that are relevant to community engagement, community empowerment community education, and so on. Furthermore, on an institutional level in NGOs, a conscious awareness of community information as a subsidiary aspect of Information and Knowledge Management in NGOs could be used to improve the quality of informational use, including increased community participation in information activity that highlights their collective voice, activity, and perspective. This appears to be an entirely feasible expectation in a new project, because village communities that work with partner agencies have a high degree of skills in documenting and articulating their activity.

Furthermore, the role of the local branch NGO or community organizations who use community information for community development comes with certain ethical responsibilities to allow the individual or household beneficiary to make informed choices or be empowered to take action, rather than be in a state of informational dependency.

At the same time, throughout the consultations, the significance of *collective voices* (taking into account the effects of gender and village social structures) in traditional settings as found in Bangladesh cannot be ignored. This is in contrast to a more traditional interpretation of community information (or Information and Knowledge Management for that matter), where the emphasis is upon individual action. In the Bangladesh situation, as in many societies, collective interests often take precedence.

Information issues in common for Rangpur and Faridpur

Because of patriarchy and authority in a traditional, rural society, women can be isolated. Traditional leadership means that men may be reluctant to pass authority on to women or reluctant to let them participate in initiatives they cannot control, or do not understand. Likewise, for men, deference to traditional authority is evidenced through the political system. Thus, the endorsement of key figures of authority, such as the local Union (local government authority) member is important for men to be led to activity that supports the empowerment of women. The Union members we met in Rangpur and Faridpur endorsed a future project and agreed to promote it.

Issues that were raised, particularly in village consultations, included:

- Lack of knowledge of legal rights and how to challenge decisions and actions
- Identified need for information in the areas of food security (seeds, crops, pesticides, changing crops and need for different forms of knowledge and relationships to traditional farming knowledge, seasonal knowledge)
- Animal husbandry (such as information about vaccinations or expiry dates)
- Health, including personal and family health issues, medicine expiry dates, vaccination notices
- Market and commercial information (something that has already been of interest in other commercial mobile projects)
- Domestic violence
- Climate change
- Emergency warnings. Government may issue warnings on radio or TV, it isn't available in other formats
- Education information, such as payments or attendance alerts, absences

There will also be particular local issues, and these can be found out only through active participation of the communities themselves in project research and design and evaluation processes.

Citizen science

Depending on one's point of view, citizen science is a method, or a movement. It has become of increasing interest in western countries for the large-scale collection of field-research data, particularly to do with environmental issues. Citizen scientists "can be defined as non-professional volunteers who collect, analyse and share natural data, using some technologies" (Johanson et al., 2011, p. 4).

During the consultations, it quickly became clear that there was interest in citizen science. Although this was not the term used in the discussions, its meaning was very obvious to all, including the villagers who saw its immediate relevance to everyday problem-solving. Citizen science thus appears ripe for application in the work that Oxfam's community partners conduct in Bangladesh. The idea would be to use beneficiaries to proactively engage with experts to collect data on particular issues such as agricultural practices, weather, pests, animals, or particular problems for scientists and students under supervision to analyse and problem solve. Tests could be set up by scientists for the villagers to report on, possibly using different equipment provided through the project. Geographic and other locational data measures would be enhanced by working with Monash University's Faculty of Information Technology specialists in conjunction with their Bangladeshi colleagues. This would allow for the creation of large datasets based on localized data that might otherwise be almost impossible to collect. Rich data-mining could occur for both quantitative and "natural language" material. At the same time, it serves as an educational exercise for awareness-raising.

The collection of scientific data, mediated by scientists would also add considerable academic and international credibility to any policy or advocacy work conducted with government and others, and highlight the voices, capabilities and knowledge of the communities to be key players in solving their problems. Of course, a community itself may come up with particular projects as its scientific literacy increases, and part of the challenge is to develop a shared language and process between the different groups involved in the project (villagers, local NGOs, Oxfam, local and international academics).

Citizen journalism

Citizen journalism occurs where people take advantage of low-cost technologies to tell stories about themselves, their lives, and their problems or successes. They are "people formerly known as the audience" (Rhinesmith et al., 2011, p. 2), but they are now the creators of news and data. This activity is also given labels such as participatory journalism or activist journalism, though while, for example, it has been a feature of activism in the Arab Spring, it has also been a tool in disaster situations in Italy where communities have used social media to counter the absence of government information (Farinosi and Trere, 2014).

In Bangladesh, because the mobile phone is so pervasive, the idea is allow the community to provide and retrieve information via the mobile phone. Instead of being confined to a particular time (as on the radio), the user could tune in and also provide feedback, also potentially creating her own story for broadcast. Such activity could be extended to any number of informational areas, as well as emergency broadcasting.

As a community development tool, it gives people the opportunity to become more information literate, have a voice, collect information and opinions and broadcast them. Given the tradition of community story-telling, this use of technology has huge potential, including the preservation of indigenous knowledge.

It is a known issue that traditional local farming knowledge is being lost as cash crops are planted, and citizen journalism may be one way of preserving and transmitting this knowledge. There is strong interest in working on this aspect of the project from potential university and NGO partners.

Different media: an evaluation

The following strengths and weaknesses of the different media were identified:

- *Print literacy and general communication and information literacy* is a continuing problem, despite there being an increasing percentage of people who are literate in the country. Oral communication, networks, recommendations and trust are important in giving credibility to information, and the reliable imprimatur of an NGO or Oxfam is critical in this regard.
- *Any new information campaigning needs to be integrated with current activity* with billboards, flipcharts, posters, street drama (at least in Rangpur where this is very common), community meetings, and particularly the work of village-based community intermediaries. While the intermediaries (infomediaries) may be NGO workers, they can also be key people in village committees who play a critical leadership role in such areas as reporting on domestic violence.
- In both communities, *the current effectiveness of community radio as an information mechanism* was seen as a moot point, despite awareness that more stations are coming on line, or that broadcast signals may be boosted in the future. Future developments in community radio need to be researched and evaluated carefully for any future project. Likewise, developments in commercial radio also need to be watched, though there is no assurance that the non-commercial information the communities require will become available via this medium.
- *TV as an informational medium is currently irrelevant for nearly all villagers*: they are without power. While they may come on the grid in future, the cost of TVs (and perhaps subscriptions) will continue to be a disincentive. Even streaming on a mobile is a prohibitive cost for them (bandwidth), and they tend to have older 2G phones.
- *Newspapers are limited in effectiveness* for two core reasons: cost and literacy, even though items can be read out. Newspapers are also time-bound, though more and more are published online, but the literacy issue still has to be considered (and their suitability on small-screen, 2G phones).

These observations point to the potential power of the mobile phone for interactive community information activity. Bangladesh has a high penetration of mobile phones (estimated at 120 million in a population of 160 million), either through personal or family ownership. Mobile phones are seen as a convenient and at hand mechanism to be in touch and get in touch with others. Of course, access to mobiles can still be gendered, with women less likely than men to have one, or for it to be controlled by the husband. If the husband is out fishing, the woman may not have access to the phone. But at certain times of the day (such as the afternoon), the phone may be "at home" and available. Phones are also a popular means of storing and playing portable music, so people know that sound files can be stored on their phone and the use of spoken word would not be an innovation.

It may be that if barriers can be overcome (cost, patriarchy, suspicion), a community project could increase the personal ownership of phones among isolated women. Still, it may be that women would not be prepared to use their own or a spouse's phone to either send messages or call on sensitive issues (numbers and messages could be checked). On the other hand, networks of women could have access to phones (such as in domestic violence campaigning) through trusted village intermediaries which did not require male knowledge or permission. However, while there is great interest in SMS being used for alerting people to information, or being able to send voice information (and receive either at the project management end), concerns were raised about people's literacy and their capacity to use/read or send SMS, even in Bangla. Linking messages to icons (with an educational campaign and information sheets and flipcharts) was seen as a partial solution, but *voice messaging* and *prompts* and effective and timely and relevant *interactivity and feedback* may be far more powerful tools with the population. On the other hand, such a system must not become an endless series of prompts and choices, but something that is immediately relevant. Additionally, we must be very careful to develop what communities actually want based on their needs. There is

one key question above all that needs to be answered*: why will they want to use this service?,* and this question needs to be part of the "sell" and rationale for any future project.

Care needs to be taken with the form of content delivered and the capacity of users to engage in interaction. Often the phones are basic models, or cheaper "China phones". For any future project, the cost of access needs to be carefully considered so that no beneficiary is excluded because she can't afford or has no skills to access or send information. Even very cheap phones may not be the best option, though currently expensive phones with more functionality (such as the capacity to display colour icons on larger screens) will inevitably drop in price. As well, in villages without power, people need to be able to charge a phone so batteries or solar chargers need to be provided for any project.

Time and space mapping

We also discussed how people used their time in the villages, to gain an indication of when they might be most receptive to messages and "community radio by phone". People are actually very busy, either in the fields, fishing, at market, or domestic activity. They are also very place-bound: women tend to go no more than 2 km from the village; men 7 km. Likewise, asking villagers to participate in a particular activity such as citizen science will have to be programmed to fit in with their existing time and physical commitments.

In each village session, an interactive process was used to get people to map their lives. By getting people to draw a clock or timeline, we saw that the late afternoon tends to be a better time, though there is a gender and place variation. An example of clock and timeline activity is summarized below.

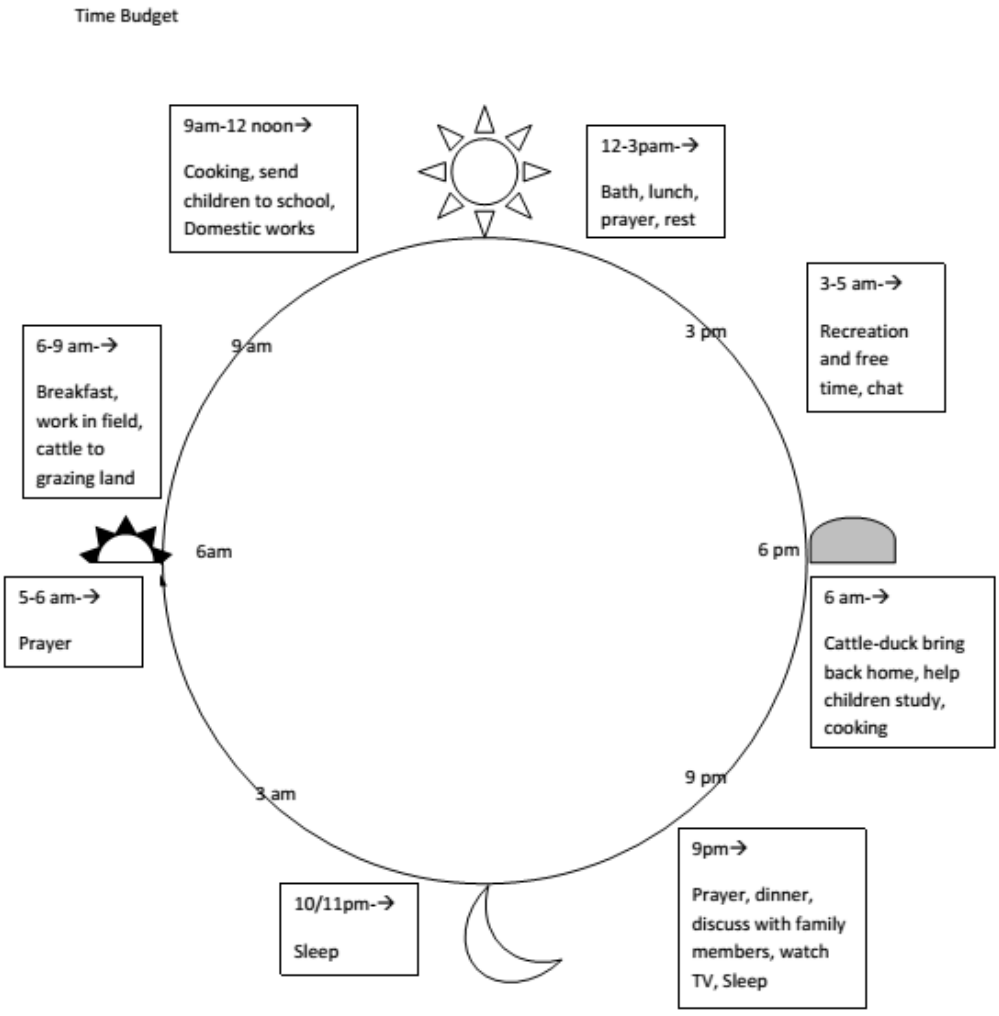


Figure 2: Daily activity (Diagram by Tapas Chakraborty ©)

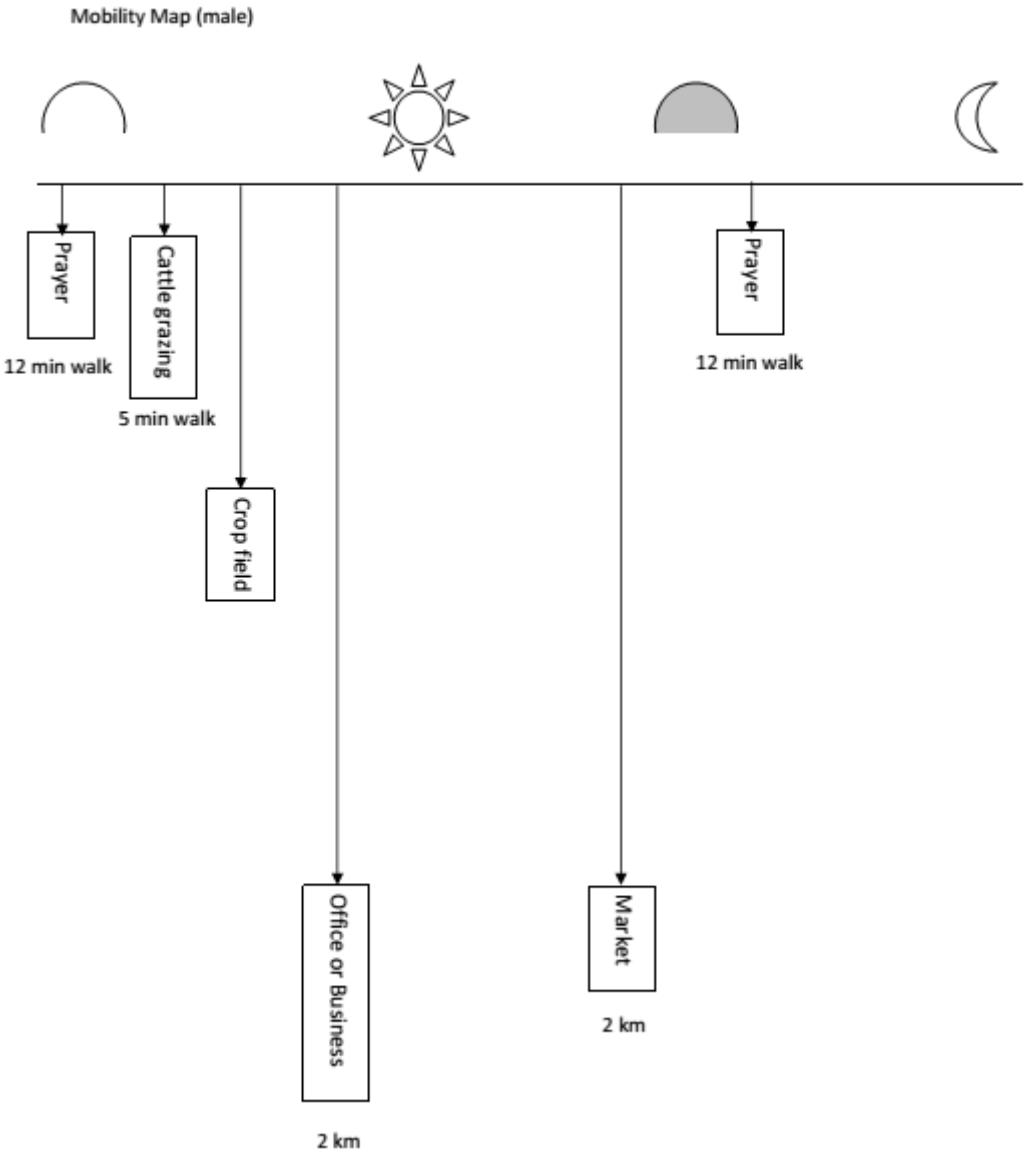


Figure 3: Time and Space activity (Diagram by Tapas Chakraborty ©)

The exercise also made it very clear that Oxfam, the other NGOs and the villagers themselves have considerable local knowledge that they can articulate and write down and then theorize about. This information and knowledge, and the capacity to abstract from it are of high value for a complex project.

There may also be issues about which of the communities in their "small worlds" (as discussed in the South Africa case study, p. 22) are resistant or unaware, and this is where the skill of community development and participatory activity in introducing new information, activity and so on will be critical.

Community radio via mobile phones

As noted, the future project could even be considered as a form of community radio via the mobile phone since the phone has

become the most portable, familiar, and used device for people. People will be able to message in or phone up and have questions answered on the spot or followed up by project staff. The technical system, like that used in Pakistan and elsewhere (and with commercial services), will also allow for the collection of hard data about the numbers of messages sent out, text and oral (recorded) responses to messages, or conversations with infomediaries.

Analysis of feedback will provide powerful qualitative and quantitative information for different purposes such as advocacy and policy development, as well as the implementation or development of new mobile phone based applications that will provide critical assistance or information.

While it was observed by one participant that what we were talking about was something that *"everybody will be doing … in ten years' time*", the point is that Oxfam and its partners could be trendsetters and have a key leadership role in this area in Bangladesh, particularly when there is a danger that commercial interests could triumph over public interest information campaigns. Furthermore, as one community worker observed, "*For national issues we need to develop the voice of the community. They can speak ten words but this can mean nothing*". However, ten words each from hundreds or thousands of people or families is a strong collective indicator on an issue. Being able to actually play the audio of those voices will also reinforce the message.

Of course, the medium may change to other devices or systems over time (for example, low-cost wireless-enabled multi-function tablets), but the intention is that the community will become smarter about information, information choices, and the use of technology. Based on discussions held in Dhaka, it is likely that a coordinated information system would be managed via a Dhaka-based hub in conjunction with the partner agencies and Oxfam.

Participatory Action Research

In discussions with Oxfam, community partners, and the villagers, the principle of Participatory Action Research was given in principle support, though it was pointed out by NGOs that implementing it will require ongoing training and support.

Figure 1 (p. 12), developed in South Africa, was shown to NGO participants, and it became clear that Action Research with a bottom-up focus is something of an innovation for Oxfam Bangladesh, its partners, and community beneficiaries. They are accustomed to more conventional and directed forms of program implementation, monitoring and evaluation for accountability purposes, where program goals and outcomes are researched and set beforehand, and implementation of a project is carried out according to these criteria.

Consequently, the idea of an ongoing process actually being a means for determining the trajectory of the project as well as a process for conducting an evaluation that is developed as the project develops is probably of a different quality and quantity of what NGOs are used to, but at the same time, they are very open to it as a new means of doing work.

However, this is not to say that Oxfam's community partners and the village committees and their leaders do not have an extraordinary range of experience and tools in areas such as social mapping, group work, and collective documentation, working with the gendered nature of community activity and so on, but these skills and insights will be applied in a new way.

It is likely that one of the differences between Participatory Action Research as it is conceived in developed countries and in Bangladesh is that there is already considerable structure in relationships between communities and NGOs, and that these arrangements will continue into the future, but it is the relationships of knowledge and action production that will change.

As further example of the complexity of Action Research, a recent study of NGOs in Bangladesh notes the difficulties of reconciling the goal of mass participation, often coming from a top-down perspective, versus community empowerment and community mobilization, which requires a

more organic bottom-up approach (Islam and Morgan, 2012).

Just what mobilization or information and knowledge power-shifts (Gaventa, 1993) mean in an in a large-scaled Participatory Action Research context needs to be carefully unpacked in the planning for any large-scale project and then carefully evaluated and researched during the life of the project.

Summary

- A future project involving the use of the interactive feature of mobile phones (SMS, voice) integrated with other forms of community media and information has support in partner organizations and communities.
- Mobile phone access and use is widespread, notwithstanding traditional power and gender relations. Because so much of Oxfam and its partners' activities involve women's rights, and bringing forth their voices, ensuring that such a project (including availability of mobile phones) effectively engages women is critical to its success.
- The planning and implementation phases of a future Action Research project will need to be highly responsive to the particular conditions found in the relationship between NGOs and communities in Bangladesh. This could include innovation in citizen science and citizen journalism activities. Providing a new opportunity for the emergence of community voices at all stages of the Action Research project is part of this challenge.
- Close collaboration and training with all partners will be required to develop an ongoing and shared understanding of the aims and methods of Action Research as an innovation in the way in which projects are planned, implemented, and evaluated.
- The project will also have implications for Oxfam Bangladesh and other organizations in the way in which what is known as community information is understood as an activity within current processes, both within communities and within NGOs. This also has implications for knowledge management cultures in Oxfam and NGOs and their variety of experiences of dealing with different forms of information at many different levels of activity.
- An information project needs to be able to demonstrate benefit to the community and answer a basic question "why should I use this service", not just once, but many times throughout the life of the project, and then to actively engage users as interactive participants.
- In addition, given that it is inevitable that there will be changes in technology and information platforms during the life of the project, as well as changes in community and NGO capacity, the project will have to build in the means for assessing its direction and choosing to undertake different and responsive activity.
- The question of long-term sustainability for a future large-scale project was not discussed in the research. If funding is secured for a project, this question will need to be investigated.

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