Collaboration and dialog key for using visual storytelling for women's empowerment

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Communicators who work with photography and video in the development context know the power visuals can have in bearing witness to the reality people living in poverty face. When contextualized, visuals can transcend distance and create a global dialog around topics in need of deeper understanding and action for social change.

One such area deserving more focus is chronic food insecurity in Africa, where greater visibility of those most impacted is vital in ensuring that global dialog continues towards workable solutions. In addition to journalists, non-government organisations (NGOs) working in affected areas are often on the frontlines of generating stories and images about the challenges people and their families face. The stories and images are often are presented through the pen and lens of NGO staff by means of case studies, reports, campaigns and media releases.

While such media is valuable in highlighting the vast challenges people living in poverty face in securing food, there is a growing interest within the NGO sector in telling such stories through the voice of the people they are working with. This is especially true with the rise of more affordable and accessible photography and video equipment in developing countries.

However, while the action of "handing over the cameras" sounds simple for those raised in a technologically driven culture, the process of how to do so in the development context is much more complex if NGOs aim to also ensure the storytelling process itself not only shows the reality of food insecurity, but does so in a manner that is sustainable, empowering and supportive of social change. This is the basis for both participatory photography and participatory video approaches that collaboratively use visual storytelling with communities to create spaces for learning and dialog from the grassroots upwards.

Towards such efforts, it is important that an enabling environment for applying visual storytelling exists within the context of how NGOs are implementing their various projects and programs, which differs depending upon the NGO's theory of change, the political economy, photographic and visual literacy of the people involved, the culture and context, staff capacity, resources and a host of additional factors.

One challenge too is that in many NGOs a knowledge gap exists between communication teams who use visual storytelling for external awareness-raising (for funders, potential donors and the public) and the programming team who work directly with the community towards specific development goals. Due to their different areas of expertise and use of communications, tensions can arise if expectations of the visual storytelling process and resulting products are not defined from the start.

To better ensure community-driven visual storytelling supports and empowers sustainable work at the community level, communicators promoting visual storytelling need to recognize that program staff have used pen-and-paper participatory visual communications consistently in their work for years – through hazard maps, Venn diagrams, problem trees, etc. From this base, processes of using participatory photography and video can be appropriately co-created to add value as additional tools in their visual methods toolbox aimed at fostering local knowledge, promoting dialog and bringing about social change.

A collaborative workshop

Based on this collaborative lens, CARE Australia hosted a five-day visual storytelling workshop in May 2013 with programming and partner staff from Ethiopia, Malawi and Tanzania within a food security program funded by AusAID. The program's goal was "to improve the quality of life for chronically food insecure rural women... in areas experiencing chronic food insecurity resulting from changing and erratic weather patterns, limited agricultural resources and inputs, and where institutions, practices and norms disadvantage and limit the participation and opportunities of women, especially single and widowed women" (CARE 2011: 1).

The workshop focused in particular on determining how to incorporate visual storytelling into qualitative monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities for the five-year program, as well as to support women's empowerment efforts.

Because the visual storytelling methodology builds on the belief that empowerment is strengthened by people constructing their own knowledge through a process of dialog, reflection and action, it was important the method fit each country's context, staff capacity, implementation modality and women's empowerment processes. Thus the workshop was designed using a train-the-trainer approach whereby a visual storytelling facilitator not only built staff capacity in photography composition and ethics, basic photo storytelling and community digital storytelling (CDST),[1] but incorporated space for on-going dialog about how each country team could use the visual methods to support women's empowerment, M&E and advocacy.

Such flexibility and collaboration in using the method, rather than a more common approach where the specific application or topic is pre-designed by a visual storytelling facilitator or the donor, allowed for context-specific uses designed by those working directly with community members. As well, they recognized that the photo stories and CDST videos – with the permission of the storytellers – have value as communications products for wider dissemination. As such, the teams discussed the importance of ensuring that the people telling their stories and those in the photographs understand such use and give their informed consent (or parental consent when working with children).

Malawi: Participatory visual evidence by women farmers

One factor that can exacerbate chronic food insecurity is when people's rights to goods and services from the state and/or local government are limited or not provided. Thus, as part of the women's empowerment program in Malawi, CARE uses a tool called the Community Scorecard that enhances dialog between service providers and diverse community groups – including marginalized and vulnerable women – aimed at improving accountability in delivering goods and services.[2]

During the workshop, CARE Malawi decided to use Photo Storytelling and Community Digital Storytelling video processes with rural women farmers in two districts within the Scorecard process to investigate, highlight and provide on-going evidence in support of topics prioritized by them for greater dialog and action. Because the Community Scorecard process itself is an empowering way to build women's agency – which includes "skills, knowledge, resources and aspirations" (CARE 2011: 17) – the team believes the Scorecard process will be enhanced through women having a visual and narrative medium that can support their efforts to track, voice, show and discuss their concerns at the district level. This is especially important as the majority of women in the program are illiterate.

Visual Storytelling can be an empowering medium for those who do not read and write as it allows them to share their understanding and concerns about food insecurity, and strategies they identify in their own voice. The resulting print and video stories can also be used by local communities, civil society organizations and CARE to more widely advocate for

the concerns of marginalized and vulnerable people who are most impacted by chronic food insecurity. This is done by creating spaces for dialog in ways that other materials in written text form with similar information might not. The visual nature and fact that the views and stories are directly from affected people themselves strengthen the message.

Tanzania: Women farmer educational videos

In Tanzania, CARE aims to improve the lives of chronically food insecure, predominantly Muslim women who – although they provide significant farming labor in the family – are subject to cultural norms that give them little control over their bodies, livelihoods and land (CARE 2011: 5). As part of the women's empowerment program, CARE and local partners are working with women who have joined farmer collectives that receive agriculture training from village-based agriculture paraprofessionals. The paraprofessionals are trained volunteers working through village-based Farmer Field and Business Schools established in the program. CARE Tanzania field staff and paraprofessionals will use Community Digital Storytelling to co-produce educational videos about the farming techniques for cassava and sesame production that the rural women are learning. The videos aim to show the planting, mid-season, and harvest and post-harvest handling seasonal activities.

While the videos are educational in nature, they also aim to support women's empowerment and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). For example, in the area where CARE is addressing food insecurity, gender norms often limit women's participation in the public sphere – including farmer extension programs and markets. Although some women have been allowed to attend Farmer Field and Business School trainings, the activities are not considered serious or important by the women's husbands or village society at large.

In this setting, CARE Tanzania hopes that the CDST videos will provide evidence of how new practices can improve agriculture yields to increase membership in the farmer collectives and uptake on the practices learned at the women's homes. As well – through dialog around the learnings – the CDST videos also support awareness-raising efforts towards the larger community recognizing the agency of the women farmers in contributing to community solutions to food insecurity. In regard to M&E, by creating videos in multiple districts by different farmer collectives during each cropping season, the community and CARE can visually monitor and evaluate the changes over time, as well as link such information to donor communications.

Ethiopia: Tackling gender-based violence

In Ethiopia, CARE is working with SOS Sahel to address gender-based violence in its many forms – which can particularly exacerbate poverty and chronic food insecurity for women due to the resulting physical and mental impacts. Gender violence in the Ethiopia context can include "hitting, sexual harassment, polygamy and female genital cutting", as well as the rare but known practice of kidnapping women for marriage (Gamer, Nelson and Starr 2012: 58).

In response, one approach being implemented in the Ethiopia program is training female community members as paralegals who educate communities on the rights of men and women who suffer gender-based violence. They work with both men and women in raising awareness about the harmful effects of gender violence on society at large. The paralegals can offer support and help with legal grievances, but need stronger government support towards these efforts.

As a new program in the area with more than 200 women trained as paralegals in three *Woredas* (districts), the awareness of services and potential benefits is not yet widely known and realized at the local, regional and national level. Thus, CARE and SOS aim to use visual storytelling as a means for those who have been impacted and found solutions to share their

stories to bring into community dialog with larger group meetings, with the intent to gather a collection of stories to support on-going participatory M&E of changes over time. Through such dialog using visual storytelling, the stories can be used to support efforts of community-driven awareness-raising, to strengthen the confidence of the paralegals and the people they are supporting, and for advocacy.

Conclusion

The diversity of approaches to using visual storytelling for awareness-raising, women's empowerment, monitoring and evaluation, and advocacy highlights the importance of a collaborative approach between the visual storytelling facilitator, communication teams and NGO programming staff. Such a process allows the power of visual storytelling to be used to qualitatively understand aspects driving the complexity of chronic food insecurity for rural women in a variety of contexts, in women's own perspectives and voice.

By means of an on-going process of incorporating visual storytelling over the duration of the program, the aim is that the stories will not only reveal deeper root causes of chronic food insecurity, but also spark wider dialog on the issues that help empower the storytellers and lead to potential solutions for social action.

References
CARE (2011). AACES/WE-RISE Program Design Document. CARE Australia.
Gamer, G., Nelson, S. and Starr, L. (2013). Consolidated Baseline Report: Tanzania, Malawi & Ethiopia. Technical Assistance to NGOs (TANGO).

Notes
1. CDST videos are short films made from photographs and narration. The CDST methodology uses free software to ensure their production is sustainable and replicable at the local level.
2. Evidence has shown that through dialogue using the Scorecard, a platform or formal mechanism has been provided within the community that makes it easy for members to question those in authority, investigate decisions made and obtain more information for decision making by the service provider. This accessibility to services, providers and decision makers addresses issues of corruption within communities and regarding service delivery' (CARE 2011: 17).

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