Small group discussion to promote reflection and social change: A case study of a Half the Sky intervention in India

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Abstract

An important sub-discipline within the field of Communication and Social Change addresses how meaningful participation can be practically implemented. This article presents the case of an intervention developed by the NGO 'Half the Sky Movement' and reflects upon how participation took shape within a primarily top-down program model. The design of the project bridges traditional, outsider-led and participatory, bottom-up design. The project accomplishes this by focusing on *small group discussion and short videos* as catalysts for reflection. In addition, the data suggest that *storytelling* may be particularly helpful for promoting engaged discussion and critical reflection.

Keywords: communication and social change; communication for development; participatory communication; evaluation; gender empowerment; small group discussion

Introduction

There is widespread acknowledgement that development projects have not produced the landslide of social welfare improvements that one might hope for after decades of intervention (Easterly, 2009). Incorporating project beneficiaries into project design has been one way the field has responded to claims that traditional, top-down attempts to impose change from without have fallen short. Such incorporation takes a variety of forms, from minimal interaction with beneficiaries (e.g. soliciting feedback on materials) to projects in which beneficiaries wholly control decision-making. Strategies that involve at least some degree of participation are increasingly being incorporated into the change models used by the world's major donors, including the World Bank (Melkote and Steeves, 2015) and the UN (Tufte and Mefalopulos, 2009).

Within the field of Communication and Social Change (CSC), participatory approaches have become well accepted (Lennie and Tacchi, 2014). Yet questions remain regarding what genuine 'participation' looks like, as well as whether and how traditional top-down design can be usefully combined with more participatory, bottom-up approaches. Manyozo (2012) and others advocate avoiding binaries which '[position] diffusionist and participatory approaches as being antagonistic' (p. 1), yet many have warned that such combinations often serve simply to legitimize top-down strategies (Plastow, 2014; Servaes, 1996, p. 23).

Furthermore, if we consider the foundation of participatory design to be *critical reflection* by project beneficiaries upon their circumstances (as contended by Paolo Freire, upon whose work much of participatory design is based), there is also insufficient understanding of how to implement critical reflection in the field (Chiu, 2006). There is a need, therefore, for further

analysis of 1) how to practically implement critical reflection, and 2) under what circumstances meaningful participation can occur through traditional, top-down funding mechanisms.

The case presented here offers the opportunity to address these questions, and thus contributes to the growing base of CSC literature demonstrating the use of media to promote critical reflection and community-driven social change (e.g. Baú, 2015; Rodríguez, 1994; Wang and Burris, 1997). Specifically, the model discussed here, based on a flexible media 'toolkit,' offered a bridge between traditional design and more bottom-up models by allowing communities to adapt the tools to local needs as they saw fit. This was accomplished by focusing on *small group discussion inspired by media* as a catalyst for reflection and empowerment.

The project was developed by the NGO 'Half the Sky Movement,' following the best-selling book by Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn, and was meant to promote women's empowerment in India and Kenya. The project was carried out in two communities in each country, though this analysis is limited to one location in India only.

The data used for this analysis include notes taken by the author through the project, in-depth interviews with project stakeholders, and the project's pre-, post-, and follow up-test data.

Communication and Social Change

Communication and Social Change (CSC) is an evolving sub-discipline within communication studies. With respect to 'communication' I use Lennie and Tacchi's (2014) broad understanding of the term as dealing with 'community dialogue processes' (p. 13); I use Waisbord's (2015) understanding of 'social change' as referring to 'the activation of institutional and social networks to promote transformations at individual, community and structural levels towards social justice' (p. 146).

Yet even with these definitions, many still see the field as vague. This is in part because almost *all* development work employs 'communication' in some sense, and seeks some sort of social change when social change is interpreted as something vaguely akin to 'improving lives.' The crux of CSC as a sub-discipline, however, lies in the focus on communication *by* beneficiaries and other stakeholders. In other words, CSC assumes that meaningful and long-lasting social change occurs when those who are at the heart of social change are the ones doing the communicating.

One foundational ideology of most CSC work is that it ought to be *participatory*, meaning that stakeholders with the most to gain from interventions ought to be intimately involved in project design, implementation, and evaluation (Lennie and Tacchi, 2014). Meaningful participation privileges the knowledge, desires, and goals of communities seeking social change over the assumptions of outsiders.

The degree to which stakeholders are integrated into projects, however, varies widely. Fully 'participatory' communication places beneficiaries as equal partners or even as leaders in project design and implementation. Proponents of participatory communication argue that without this arrangement, positive change is unsustainable (Melkote and Steeves, 2015, p. 372). This is to some degree evidenced by the fact that externally driven grants often terminate after the grant period has ended and funding disappears (Oakley, 1991, p. 18).

The philosophies behind CSC and participatory project design stem from the work of Paolo Freire and his argument that change can never come from 'explaining' (almost always by an elite outsider to the oppressed object of development), but must come instead through *dialogue* (1970/2005, p. 53). True dialogue, according to Freire, requires that outside interveners truly believe that those they are helping are knowledgeable and at the centre of their own social

change. It also requires that the oppressed engage in critical reflection ('conscientization,' or consciousness raising) upon their context and daily lives so that they can better understand oppression, and then actively resist it (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 65). According to Freire, this practice of critical reflection requires that beneficiaries begin to 'believe in themselves' (p. 65) and in the weaknesses of the oppressor, and must begin to 'see themselves as… engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human' (pp. 65-66). In other words, Freire's foundational concern is that beneficiaries begin to understand themselves in relation to their community and the forces that have left them oppressed and disempowered.

Tensions between traditional and participatory designs

Freire's notion of critical reflection poses some problems for present day development work. Participatory designs that fully embrace Freirian sensibilities toward the Other are time-consuming and unpredictable, and many funders are unwilling to cede this degree of control (Servaes, 1996, p. 23).

Additionally, it is unclear how critical reflection can be practically promoted. What, exactly, is the appropriate role of outsiders in instigating critical reflection? If the outsider is best positioned as a facilitator of social change, serving to 'illuminate' the actions of the masses instead of 'explain[ing]' them (Freire, 1970, p. 53), how does such facilitation work? Freire argues it occurs through true dialogue between outsider and oppressed, yet it is difficult to find examples of this in modern interventions.

Within the field of CSC, participatory video (PV) projects serve as prime examples of incorporating critical reflection into social change interventions (e.g., Bau, 2015; Rodriguez, 1994; Saifoloi et al., 2016). In PV work, community members come together to create videos that 'allow people to see themselves in relation to the community and become conscientized

about personal and community needs' (White, 2003, p. 64). PV projects promote critical

awareness by using video production (and screening) to both discuss community problems and

'engage in a profound process of self-investigation' (Rodriguez, 1994, p. 6). In these projects,

the very act of *making* media encourages self-reflection because, as Rodriguez (1994, p. 6)

explains: 'since groups have to create an image of their members' own selves… within this

process, they encounter aspects, feelings, characters, and landscapes previously unimaginable.'

There have also been traditional, top-down mass media interventions that seek to promote

behaviour change through persuasion, but which include a 'reflective' bent by encouraging

discussion among viewers (Papa et al., 2000; Waisbord, 2001). Most of these projects do not

explicitly seek out Freirian-style self-reflection, yet their claims of mass media spurring

interpersonal discussion could be used to suggest this potential. However, meta-analyses indicate

that these mass media attempts to promote small group discussion have overall produced mixed

results (Bertrand et al, 2006; Waisbord, 2001). Additionally, these projects are often more about

reinforcing top-down behaviour change through psychological models of persuasion, rather than

through bottom up self-reflection (Plastow, 2014; Waisbord, 2001). Overall few concrete

examples exist regarding how critical reflection is practically implemented through either mass

or small group media, aside from several excellent PV case studies. (For a review of the lack of

clarity in critical reflection projects, see Chiu, 2006).

Like the term "reflection," "participation" has also taken on multiple meanings. Freirian

notions of participation would suggest that critical self-reflection cannot take place without

meaningful beneficiary participation in projects, but because many funders and implementers are

unwilling to take on participatory projects in their most Freirian, dialogic form, 'participation'

has adopted looser definitions. Servaes (1996) has described some of these varying approaches

as treating participation as a 'means' rather than an 'end.' Participation is an end in itself if it promotes empowerment and societal power distribution. But participation can also be used simply as a means to improve project design (such as by getting feedback on materials) or, more nefariously, to 'make target audiences "feel" more involved and, therefore, more acquiescent' (Servaes, 1996, p. 23). Treating participation as means can thus merely function to 'enable elites to pursue their own agendas' (Eversole, 2012, p. 30).

Eversole (2012) sees the tension not as whether participation is treated as a means or an end, but rather whether participation positions development beneficiaries at 'the core of any development process' or simply as having a role in external and 'institutionalized development interventions' (p. 31). In the latter case, outside decision-makers are privileged, and find ways to bring beneficiaries into *their* system, rather than conceptualizing communities as driving social change.

An important question, then, is whether or not outsider-led projects can incorporate participants in a way that does anything more than bring them into the institutional fold. Can they 'activate' social networks in a way that ultimately promotes social justice from within communities? The case presented here examines how Freirian philosophy might translate into such a project and, I argue, provides evidence that this balance is indeed possible (although the present project does not represent a perfect model, for reasons I will address).

Small Group Discussion

Small group discussion among community members offers a potential entry point for a synthesis of outsider-produced media and organic, beneficiary-led reflection. Communication scholars have acknowledged that the media do not always directly affect audiences, and that it is often, rather, members of social networks who spread ideas, through discussion (Katz and

Lazarsfeld, 1955). Research on the power of social norms (e.g. Bandura, 1986) corroborates the idea that our behaviours are, in large part, influenced by what we perceive as 'normal' among our peer group, and extant research suggests that group discussion can reinforce perceptions of social norms (Werner, Sansone, and Brown, 2008).

Regarding discussion of women's empowerment, it is therefore possible that media featuring positive messages about the rights of women could be reinforced through group discussion. But more importantly here, it is also possible that the discussion *itself* can start to be seen as 'normal' and 'acceptable,' and hence politically liberating. Indeed, democratic theorists such as Warren (1992) and Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw (2002) argue that the act of discussion can promote democratic empowerment and help form a 'deliberative habit,' in which citizens become more politically engaged as they practice debate and deliberation (Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw, 2002, p. 414). By acknowledging the 'power they have over their own lives,' citizens begin interrogating their everyday behaviours and relationships (Gastil, 1993, p. 17). In this sense, then, small group discussion is inherently participatory: reflection may begin with the media product, but the content of that reflection is determined by the group. If discussion helps to form a 'deliberative habit,' it could thus carry forward into other areas of participants' lives.

Media products that promote discussion about a particular issue, such as women's rights, can also act as community 'catalysts,' which Figueroa et al. (2002) argue is the first step toward social change (p. 6). The case presented here suggests that externally produced media designed for small group discussion can serve as a catalyst to promote self-reflection in development settings.

Waisbord (2015) argues that CSC, as a field, has become siloed by the various sub-disciplines that have incorporated it, such as health, disaster relief, and agricultural extension, which all have their own theoretical foundations. CSC thus lacks adequate theory to tie *across* disciplines regarding how communication can promote development (Waisbord, 2015). For this reason Waisbord argues for 'defining a core set of theoretical arguments' within CSC (2015, p. 148). The role of small group discussion, coupled with engaging and effective media products to promote critical reflection, may offer an example of a thread that could anchor CSC theory across fields.

The Intervention

Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn's 2009 book *Half the Sky* discussed the state of oppressed women around the world. The book later developed into the organization the Half the Sky Movement (HTSM) which aims to '[cut] across platforms to ignite the change needed to put an end to the oppression of women and girls worldwide' (Half the Sky, n.d., para. 1).

In 2013, the organization received funding to use various media tools to promote women's empowerment in India. A full background on the state of women and girls in India is outside the scope of this analysis, but to briefly summarize, the United Nations Development Programme ranks India 130th in gender equality out of 155 nations (UNDP, 2015). This inequality manifests in devastating outcomes for women, including increased abuse and increased maternal and child mortality. This project took place in Tonk, India, in Rajasthan state, which, due in part to gender inequalities, experiences some of the highest maternal and child mortality rates in India. It also has one of the worst child sex ratios in India, with only 888 females per 1,000 males (World Bank, 2016).

In order to address these issues, HTSM created short videos and a discussion guide, along with other applications (not discussed here), to distribute to target audiences in India. HTSM partnered with an international NGO (Save the Children) and a local NGO (CECOEDECON) to complete the work.

Tensions between the intervention and the principles of CSC

Before I attempt to argue that the HTSM project bridged a divide between top-down and bottom-up design, it is important to acknowledge that the project was primarily top-down and outsider-led: it was based on a U.S., rather than local, agenda, and outsiders handled the majority of decision-making.

The principles of participatory design in general, and of CSC in particular, embrace the idea that communities that are struggling are best placed to determine what is needed to improve lives. By contrast, most Western-funded interventions are based on a priori determinations of what communities 'need' without consulting the communities in question.

Such a case can certainly be made for the HTSM project. The project, funded by USAID, aligned with current attempts by major world donors to address the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. While gender equality (currently goal #5) is inarguably important, this does not mean that the communities targeted here would have placed it at the top of their agenda for improving local lives. If they *were* to design their own intervention around gender equality, it very well may have taken a different form.

Going further, many critics have pointed out that behaviour change projects in general inherently promote a neoliberal agenda by laying blame on *individuals* in struggling societies rather than on institutions (Plastow, 2014; Thomas, 2008). By creating interventions that focus on changing individual behaviours rather than, say, reforming governments that limit human

rights, projects implicitly support the status quo regarding regional policies, economics, and institutions (Hickel, 2014; Wilkins and Engel, 2013). It may be preferable to American business interests, for example, to promote gender equality over an effort to change policies in low-income countries that allow American goods to be produced cheaply (and unsafely) by exploited labourers. The assumption of a neoliberal version of development, in which individuals can rise out of poverty if they simply change their own behaviours, thus conflicts with the core ideology of participatory work.

Hickel (2014) explicitly ties U.S. government gender equality projects, including that of the Half the Sky Movement, to promoting market interests. Not only do empowerment projects put the onus of change on individuals (here, women) but do so on economic grounds, promoting a world with a vastly increased number of workers, consumers, and, ultimately, debtors. Indeed, HTSM's definition of empowerment places primary emphasis on education, economic empowerment, and family planning, all subjects that promote an idealized Western market. As USAID attests in their own policy documents, 'an extra year of secondary school for girls can increase their future earnings by 10-20 percent' (USAID, 2017) and the role of women as sole caretakers of children leaves 'women and girls with 1 to 4 hours less time each day than men and boys for market or other productive activities' (USAID, 2012). Such statements support the critique that seemingly altruistic intentions to raise the status of women worldwide simultaneously support the economic interests of powerful nations.

At the same time, however, it is the contention of this author that some outsider-led goals do improve local lives, even if the goals also support outsider interests. In this case, changing local attitudes about the role of women is a clear avenue toward improving the lives of women in this region, even if a more participatory approach could have ultimately produced outcomes that

challenged the pervading status quo of global economic hierarchies. Interviews conducted here demonstrate that this topic was of great importance to women in the community.

Furthermore, this tension between outsider-defined project goals and bottom-up social change highlights the poignancy of the question at hand, which is whether top-down models, often based upon a neoliberal agenda, have potential to do real good. It is the author's belief that this project, despite its limitations, had concrete positive results, not only in the original behaviour change goals, but also in spurring communities to discuss gender empowerment in a way that facilitated critical reflection and self-actualisation.

Conducting the Research

HTSM enlisted [name of Centre deleted for the review process] to conduct monitoring and evaluation work for the project, and to assist in developing a theoretically rigorous project design. The Centre's approach moved the evaluator to a role of facilitator, in line with the principles of developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011). We helped with decision making during project design and implementation, and suggested modifications as the project rolled out and hurdles or unexpected outcomes arose.

Approximately 340 men and women took part in the discussion groups, which took place over six to ten total sessions (spanning approximately one year), included approximately 10–15 participants each, and lasted approximately 1.5–2 hours per session.

The evaluation included a pre-test and post-test survey, as well as a three-month follow-up survey. Qualitative methods included focus groups and one-on-one in-depth interviews with beneficiaries and local project staff.

Creation of the video and discussion guide 'toolkit'

The intervention design was based on the idea that group discussion would promote dialogue about gender topics both within and outside the group, as well as influence attitudes, levels of perceived self-efficacy, and perceptions of social norms. This aspect of the project did not outline specific behaviour change goals, other than to speak more openly about the issues affecting discussion participants. This was under the presumption that, in a community where even *talking* about gender empowerment is rare, it would have been naïve to predict exactly what 'increased gender empowerment' would look like in the short- or long-term in this particular setting.

The project was not designed within the conceptual framework of Freirian conscientization, but the tools were designed to assist project beneficiaries in reflecting upon, and gaining deeper psychological insights into, the context in which they live their everyday lives. For example, a video featuring a young woman describing being beaten by her husband is followed by questions in the discussion guide such as whether participants believe there are circumstances under which women deserve to be beaten. These types of questions ask participants to reflect in an open format on the gender-related challenges of their everyday lives.

In the same vein, correct 'attitudes' were not 'taught' to the participants. Rather, videos and discussion guide activities were designed to provoke discussion and explore themes. For example, the discussion guide asks participants why they think women marry at a young age in their community, rather than using a top-down model of explaining potential causes and declaring that early marriage is wrong. Such a model is in line with Freire's (1970/2005) concept of a 'problem-posing' model of education, which eschews didactic models of information transmission in favor of posing questions to groups. (However, as will be discussed further on, much of the media material was still viewed as overly didactic by participants.)

The discussion guide was just that – a guide to help local women lead discussions about women's empowerment. It was designed with eight modules, each pertaining to different areas of women's empowerment,[1] and allowed the discussion leader to lead activities, prompt discussion, and screen the videos. Discussion leaders or groups are able to choose the modules and activities that are locally appropriate (though for this pilot project, choices were pre-determined). Community Health Volunteers (CHVs), employed by the Indian government to carry out basic health care in their communities, led the discussions. All discussion leaders were trained prior to the start of the program, though the discussion guides include extensive instructions and were designed to be self-contained so that other organizations could use them without training.

The project thus cannot be considered fully 'participatory.' Though the team consulted local stakeholders during project design for feedback, it was the project implementer who ultimately made decisions. While the videos were shot on location, they were created, edited, produced, and directed by a production company in New York. Local groups could determine which modules and activities to use, but only from within the choices supplied by an outsider.

Yet the project includes several elements that parallel Freire's notions of participation and critical reflection, which allow us to reflect on how these strategies contributed to producing positive change. While one half of the intervention design (the production of the videos and discussion guide) was almost completely outsider-produced, one half of the intervention design (the group discussion) almost completely removed the implementer from the picture. Though the media production was not participatory, the videos were meant to encourage viewers to start a conversation based on what they had seen.

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[1] The eight modules were: women's empowerment; education; economic empowerment; family planning; maternal and child health; gender-based violence; sex trafficking and prostitution; and deworming.

Findings

Discussion toolkit to promote critical reflection and interpersonal discussion

The pre-, post-, and follow-up surveys indicate that the project was successful along several quantitative dimensions, including changes in attitudes and levels of self-efficacy. These are published elsewhere (Kogen & Esenler, 2016). In-depth interviews with CHVs and beneficiaries back up the quantitative data and lend credence to the idea that the videos, together with the discussion guide, prompted meaningful discussion and self-reflection. According to local project staff, after seeing the videos and taking part in discussions, women 'share their private stories after meetings [and talk] about the issue...' One participant stated that she 'used to keep quiet for the sake of [her] husband but now [realizes] that she should not keep quiet.' Another stated that: 'No one is quiet now. They have mentally and physically become strong; they share with their families; they take major steps. They are not cowards anymore.' (Findings regarding gender-based violence were more tempered, however, than for other topics. Overall, it seemed, many women were still uncomfortable discussing gender-based violence by the end of the intervention period. Men continued to deny that such violence occurred.)

The qualitative data also suggest that discussion was spurred in part by the recognition that oppression was a shared experience. According to one CHV:

I believe every second or third woman [in this community] experiences gender violence whether she admits it or not. But when they sit together in a group they all share their feelings together. If one begins to share their experience then all of them start to do the same, one after another. There they realize that the pain of one woman is a collective pain of all the women present...

Other CHVs told us that 'what used to be a very limited conversation is now a healthy discussion. Their level of participation has increased tremendously,' and that 'it also creates a healthy atmosphere. They try to find the answers to their questions among themselves, through discussion.'

Indeed, during the final evaluation, stakeholders made the apt suggestion of introducing black 'pause' screens at strategic moments during the videos, during which questions could be posed to the group about what they were seeing, rather than waiting until the end of the video to discuss. The fact that the videos and discussion guide appealed to the participants' desire to 'answer questions among themselves' is an important indication of a potential merge between top-down and bottom-up efforts and supports Freire's 'problem posing' model (1970/2005).

Storytelling to promote critical reflection and interpersonal discussion

The intervention also made discussion of gender issues more *enjoyable*. The women wanted to discuss these topics and the groups provided an outlet to which they had not previously had access. The following comment from a discussion leader summarizes this sentiment:

Earlier, [the women] were quite hesitant in sharing their problems… and wondered whether we and other members were really interested in listening to what they had to say. But with the video they freely share whatever they have in their hearts. They have understood that what is being discussed or shown is something of their concern and now they also take pleasure in it.

Further insight comes from the fact that the video the women seemed to find the *most* enjoyable was 'Pooja's Story.' It features a young girl who hopes to finish her high school education, then continue on to university. In the video, she discusses with her parents her

chances of finishing school. Stakeholders provided examples of how the video and the discussion afterward influenced families to prioritize education for their daughters. A local religious leader stated that: 'After watching the video of Pooja, [three or four people in the community] gave bicycles to their kids to commute to school.' The NGO program coordinator in Tonk tracked re-enrollments, and found that nine of the girls in the discussion groups who had previously dropped out of school re-enrolled during the project. He attributed this to the project and to the influence of the discussion and the *Pooja* video in particular.

Interviews with beneficiaries suggest that the popularity of the *Pooja* video may have stemmed, in part, from its narrative format. Interview after interview brought up the story of *Pooja* as the *most* interesting, relevant, and important of all of the videos. What differentiated *Pooja's Story* from the other videos was that it was one of the few that focused on the *story* of an individual. It featured one conversation between Pooja and her parents, without voiceover or text, yet Pooja came across as a full and complex character with hopes, dreams, and obstacles to overcome. Some of the other videos in the toolkits focused on individuals, but featured a more educational bent. In one video, for example, an Indian woman shares advice on how to save money. While videos that focused more on knowledge acquisition, or which covered an array of topics or individuals, were liked by the audiences, they were not praised nearly to the same degree. In other words, videos that were perceived in any way as didactic produced lukewarm responses.

This finding is in line with the participatory literature suggesting that top-down information depositing is not the most effective route to change. It also jibes with findings from the Entertainment-Education (E-E) field that indicate that personal identification draws viewers in and works best for stories that are *engaging* and feature characters that audiences consider to

be similar to themselves (Green, Brock, and Kaufman, 2004). The fact that Pooja was a girl participants could relate to provided them with a jumping off point to explore a topic they were unaccustomed to discussing.

While participants were not directly asked why they liked the *Pooja* video more than other videos (a question which, in retrospect, ought to have been asked), their comments, along with extant research from the E-E field, lend credence to the idea that it was the narrative format that was appealing. For example, participants' recall of video details was better for *Pooja* than for other videos. Watching *Pooja* express her opinions and goals to her parents also served as a model to some of the interviewees, which is also in line with previous E-E research on role modelling. One participant stated that she 'got strength' from watching Pooja; another stated: 'There are very few people who will share with their parents. Pooja shared this with her parents. She told them so I liked it very much.'

These findings, regarding 1) the use of the toolkit to promote reflection and 2) the effects of narrative storytelling, lend support to findings by PV researchers (e.g. Baú, 2015; Rodríguez, 1994; Wang and Burris, 1997) that media materials coupled with group discussion can help promote critical reflection in the field. Furthermore, this discussion may lead to concrete community change when it extends beyond the group itself. Such discussion may indeed 'activate' local networks, as Waisbord (2015) argues is key to effective social change. This was evidenced here by the facts that 1) most of those surveyed reported that they spoke with at least two others outside of the group about the project; 2) 40% reported speaking with six or more individuals; and 3) many of our quantitative indicators of change *increased* between our post-intervention survey and our three-month follow up, suggesting continued discussion and

engagement post-intervention (though it was not possible to assess the degree to which this increase resulted from our program).

Discussion

This discussion-based format was therefore at least somewhat successful in bridging top-down and bottom-up intervention designs in meaningful ways. In this case, meaningful participation was achieved by developing a media-based discussion group 'toolkit' that would be flexible enough for a variety of organizations to use in a variety of contexts after the project ended, without input or oversight from outsiders.

The discussion guide was designed so that after our initial pilot project, individual communities or local organizations could take the lead on creating and facilitating their own discussion groups. There seemed to be demand for such tools. Indeed, over the course of the two-year project, 28 Indian NGOs that were not involved requested the HTSM video / discussion guide package (which are also freely available online).

The model supports the idea that top-down and bottom-up strategies can be usefully combined. The project was clearly outsider-led in that project implementers created the broad level goals of the project and had final say over all decision-making. Yet at the same time, the design of the project was intentionally *flexible*, meant to be used by communities for their own ends, and in that sense allowed local communities to be primary decision-makers when it came to using the tools to support local needs and desires, particularly after our pilot project ended.

Waisbord (2015) advocates that CSC projects 'activat[e] social networks to promote… social justice' (p. 146). It was the aim of the project to inspire *local* networks to instigate change in their communities, not to impose pre-defined outcome goals from without, the presumption

being that local discussion was not happening, or not happening to a degree necessary to instigate meaningful social change.

Of course, this does not mean that the pilot project was without flaws. In addition to the ideological assumptions embedded within the initial project goals, as described above, the evaluation revealed weaknesses in both the discussion guide and the videos, including an overemphasis on didactic material and a reduced impact on male beneficiaries. Modifications of the materials would be required to make them more useful for other communities.[2]

Evaluations are most useful when they help us build theory regarding how to use communication to promote positive social change. Lie and Servaes (2015) argue that CSC practice can be strengthened by grounding the field in sub-disciplines of communication. Jacobson (1996, p. 269) specifically suggests that the sub-fields of small group studies has the potential for offering insights for broader CSC theory.

In this spirit, the reflections presented here focus on what we can learn about the role of communication in social change. The case highlights the idea that small group discussion, if it privileges local decisions about what issues are important, eschews specific behaviour change goals, and places beneficiaries at the 'core' of social change, can inspire Freirian critical reflection and begin to activate local social networks through a process that is at least somewhat organic.

Small group discussion creates a space for the meaningful exchange of ideas, which can fulfil a community need if even a small number of community members seek such a space (as seemed to be the case here). It can even be enjoyable, as people have an opportunity to discuss

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[2] A detailed description of project challenges can be found in the final evaluation report (Author, 2016).

something that is relevant to their daily lives, and which they may not have been given an opportunity to reflect upon previously.

Finally, the case suggests that media that present stories of other individuals living under similar conditions may usefully prompt discussion and reflection. Here, a simple conversation between parent and child was enough to provide a platform for meaningful discussion.

Limitations and directions for future research

While the project suggests the potential for bridging top-down and participatory designs, the 'top-down' aspects of this project remain problematic. While giving women more power is important in its own right (an attitude that many women involved in this project clearly held), this does not mean that the communities in which the project took place would tout it as the most important issue facing them. The project supported a Western-based agenda of women's empowerment.

Additionally, it is possible that the CHVs and local staff who were interviewed gave overly optimistic reviews of the impact of the discussion groups in the hopes of securing future funding. This worry is somewhat mitigated by the interviews with participants, who have little to gain from positively assessing the intervention. Nonetheless, more in-depth interactions and dialogue with discussion group participants during the design, implementation, and evaluation phases of the project may have revealed deeper insights into the benefits and flaws of the program.

Finally, the project lacks sufficient data on the benefits of narrative stories like Pooja's over other types of media. Thus, future research in this area should assess which types of media (e.g., storytelling vs. information-based) do more to promote self-reflection and discussion.

Conclusion

If, as some critics argue, these projects ultimately do more to serve neoliberal agendas and multinational corporations, then they must be approached with caution, and we should be particularly careful about making claims that these projects represent effective ways of pulling nations out of poverty. Rather, they should be assessed for what they are: local attempts to initiate conversations about gender equality. It is also important to recognize that for some issues, such as gender equality, in which community norms may systematically marginalize and oppress a group of people, outsider perspectives may be welcomed by marginalized groups.

The case outlined here involved issues of gender empowerment, but the idea of using small group discussion and flexible media toolkits to support CSC and participatory communication has clear applications in other areas of social change that would benefit from open discussion among peer networks. What is key is keeping beneficiaries at 'the core' of development processes. Thus flexible tools that can be used by different groups for their own ends may offer one way to bridge a divide between Western funding systems and local needs.

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