



LOCAL VOICES

As the international development sector prepares for a very important year, **Chris Fitch** finds out how a photography project is ensuring that the very people affected by global progress have their voices heard in the wider conversation



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A small Chinese boy playing by the edge of a muddy pond. A Nepalese woman with an elaborate nose piercing sat by an open fire. Hundreds of small houses with corrugated iron roofs scattered across a misty Peruvian hillside. A young Ethiopian boy being helped with his homework. A woman's hand, colourfully decorated with jewellery and henna, draped across a Tunisian flag.

These seemingly disconnected images are the work of Development Progress, a project supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and run by the UK's Overseas Development Institute (ODI), an independent think tank based in London. ODI's mission is to 'inspire and inform policy and practice which lead to the reduction of poverty, the alleviation of suffering and the achievement of sustainable livelihoods in developing countries'.

As anyone involved in the international development sector will know, 2015 is a big year. This September sees the wrapping up of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, first set in 2000. The MDGs set worldwide targets to address poverty, hunger, and disease, as well as improving education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, and environmental sustainability.

Development Progress was launched in response to scepticism that the world was making any meaningful progress on achieving the MDGs. Indeed, results have been mixed; while there has been significant success in some countries, and in achieving some goals, others have made only minor progress over that time period.

'The feeling was, that that's not the full story,' says Susan Nicolai, head of the Development Progress project. 'That there are examples out there of where progress has happened, but they're not very well researched. The kinds of things that are well researched tend to be something that an NGO or a donor is doing very specifically. But when an evaluation happens on something like that, it tends to lose the big picture. Those interventions aren't the whole reason why Nepal has halved its maternal mortality rate in fifteen years, for example. We're trying to look at the bigger picture of where development outcomes have improved, and how that's happened.'

This year will see the confirmation of follow-up goals to the MDGs - likely to be called the Sustainable Development Goals - at the UN General Assembly in New York. Development Progress aims to help gain an in-depth understanding of what has and hasn't worked in international development, as well as why, which is key in finalising the SDGs. It also encourages a new method for measuring countries' progress with the SDGs, different from the rigid 'on track' versus 'off track' scoring system currently used by the UN.

'The lens that is being used for the MDGs is very black-and-white,' says Nicolai. 'For this new set of goals, we'd really like to see that lens be more nuanced, and look at questions like starting points

and trajectories that can be expected.' Development Progress studied thirty eight countries, focusing on eight areas of well being, as identified in a report by renowned economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi. These were health, education, environment, political voice, social cohesion, employment, material well-being, and security. Each area was led by a different ODI researcher - based on their own personal expertise.

'We're trying to do some analysis in terms of looking at which countries have made really striking improvements in those areas since 1990,' explains Katy Harris, senior communications officer for Development Progress. 'We're not necessarily picking the top performing country in each area, but trying to look at what are some of the surprising stories, what are some of the stories that people don't know? Look at what progress has been achieved in that country on that sector, and crucially, why?'

HEARING VOICES

A notably significant proportion of the project is also devoted to stimulating conversations with people from outside the development sector. 'There's a lot of increasing evidence to show that, certainly in the UK, the public is becoming sceptical that development is having an effect, that very little has changed since Live Aid in the 1980s,' says Harris. 'I think that's down to the fact that we're just not communicating those stories particularly well.'

'As an institution that focuses on research, we wanted to look at and understand some of these stories, but we didn't want to only do it from a research perspective,' adds Nicolai. 'We also wanted to directly hear some of the voices.'

To that end, ODI partnered with PhotoVoice, an international photography charity. 'We specialise in participatory photography as a tool of amplifying the voices of people who are affected by issues, or marginalised in their communities,' says Matt Daw, projects manager at PhotoVoice.

The first step was to identify six countries from the original group, with a broad geographical range and varying levels of development. The six selected were China, Nepal, Ethiopia, Tunisia, Ghana and Peru. Each country had an overarching theme based on the areas of well-being; education in Ethiopia, women's empowerment in Tunisia, political voice in Ghana, urban poverty in Peru, water management in China, and both maternal health and renewable energy in Nepal.

Focusing on the themes identified for each country, PhotoVoice partnered with local organisations specialising in tackling those specific issues in that country. It would then travel to each country and run a series of practical photography workshops for participants, most of whom had never held a camera before.

'The reception from the communities was really strong,' says Daw. 'It's important to us that people understand how to communicate with

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

She Abdulkadir Tuka from Ethiopia, regrets not growing up with the same access to education his grandchildren have; Nepalese children explore their cameras; Amina from Tunisia wants to change assumptions and stereotypes about veiled women; Bhola Rai in Nepal explains that even though electricity is improving village life, strong storms still cause serious access problems



SHE ABDULKADIR TUKA; JENNY MATTHEWS (2); AMINA GHARRED



photography. To capture not only what they see, but what they want to say about it.' The participants were free to take photos of anything they felt was important or which helped them express their own personal experiences of development.

'Although the overall project is looking at positive stories of development progress - because we're working in countries where we know progress has been made - we were not trying to sugar-coat the picture of development,' says Daw. 'We did encourage people to be critical and analytical. I think the stories really reflect that; even when people are explaining how things are better now than they used to be, they are highlighting where improvements still need to be made.'

'People were really passionate,' reflects Harris, who travelled to Ghana. 'People really wanted to talk about how their country had transformed in the last twenty years, and what their hopes were for the future. Their enthusiasm was infectious.'

Filmmaker Shell Coe also observed many of the workshops and spoke in depth with several participants, while making a documentary about the Development Progress project. 'I spent one or two weeks in each country, observing the development, filming workshops and accompanying participants as they took photographs around their community,' she says. 'By the time of each final exhibition, I had come to know the groups pretty well and this made the public display of their work even more of a

celebration. It was gratifying to see everyone sharing pride in their collective achievements.'

DOCUMENTING CHANGE

It's worth considering the impact the project itself could also have on the participants, not least being the ability to continue using photography to document the development of their communities. 'The cameras remained with the communities themselves, so that everyone participating in the project could continue to use the skills they gained in their own lives,' says Daw.

One point made by many of the participants was how being able to take photographs made it easier to compare the present with the past. She Abdulkadir Tuka, a religious leader in the Ethiopian region of Arsi, describes why he chose the subjects of his photographs: 'I took a photo of a kerosene lantern. Before this invention, we would get light from wood. I took photos of an ox ploughing the land and also of a tractor to compare the two farming methods. When I look at my son, I see 'change'. So I photographed him to convey what he represents.'

In Peru, Santos Quispe Taquire, general secretary of Villa Maria del Triunfo, a community of 500 people, explains that being asked personally how successful various projects have been has engaged the community to think about how development can help them. 'This course has changed our daily lives by encouraging us to look

at our development with new eyes,' she says. 'For the people, this project is like holding a mirror up to their everyday lives, encouraging them to reflect on what changes are still needed.'

NEW PERSPECTIVES

The photographs and stories will now be going on public display, starting with a two-week exhibition at the Royal Geographical Society in February.

'We'll be looking to showcase the photos at any conferences and events that are on relevant issues over the coming year,' says Harris. 'We'll be looking to see if we can do a bigger exhibition around the time of the UN General Assembly [being held 15-28 September], to try and encourage people to look back at what has been achieved in the last twenty years and to better inform how we might then begin to implement the SDGs.'

PhotoVoice has played a key role in influencing policy on numerous occasions before, including a 2010 campaign in Paraguay, alongside Amnesty International's local partner Tierraviva. The indigenous Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaya communities had both been forced out of their homes nearly twenty years previously, living in poverty beside nearby highways ever since. Working with PhotoVoice enabled those people affected to tell their story - with accompanying photographs - as part of a campaign which culminated in both communities ultimately being legally granted new land on which to settle.

A NEW STORY

Only time will tell what the long-term impact of the Development Progress project will be. With all the discussions taking place this year regarding international development, the MDGs and the SDGs, the challenge for ODI is to get its own collection of local voices heard among the noise.

But the project may be one of the first steps towards trying to create a new narrative about development, one comprised of multiple personal stories and intimately told by people who are actually experiencing the effects of development in their own lives.

'There's a story from the China workshops which I particularly like,' says Daw. 'Li Wenjing looks at the impact of the various improvements that have been made in access to water in the village. However, in pretty much every photo that she's taken, she's managed to get her son in there somehow. So there's this really nice personal touch, where we're seeing how she interacts with these things on an everyday basis with her son. This includes the important role that donkeys play in farming life. Because water access is so scarce, you actually have to carry water to your farmland. There's a lovely picture of her son squaring off against the donkey, with the junction box for the new water tank in the background. For me, that really captures the essence of what you can get from these stories, something you wouldn't get purely from the facts.'

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Gajendra, whose father installs bio-gas pipes in Nepal, explains why expensive renewable energies are seen as threatening by indigenous people; children in Walewale market, Ghana, which was modernised after grassroots community discussions; Li Wenjing's son and donkey play near the village's new water junction box

To experience more local stories from PhotoVoice's groundbreaking project, visit the *Geographical* website at geog.gr/1wPJRLi