

**Participatory Communications:  
Communities gather photographic evidence for social change**

December 2018

Report by Paula Plaza



## Participatory Photography in El Salvador

In early November, a Christian Aid Communications staff member travelled to the Department of Morazan in El Salvador to carry out a participatory photography activity with communities taking part in the project '*Transparency and Accountability*' which is implemented through our partner Social Institute for Democracy (ISD)<sup>1</sup> and funded by Irish Aid.

Over the last year, Christian Aid has been carrying out participatory photography through its in-house methodology called **Picture Power**. In El Salvador, we trained community participants in basic photography and gave participants the opportunity to express through their photos the challenges and positive impacts that the project has had on their lives and in the lives of the community.

### Picture Power

Participatory photography is a methodology where participants are trained in photographic techniques and supported to identify key issues they wish to document. At Christian Aid, we have developed our own methodology called Picture Power - where communities are provided with the skills and equipment to conduct their own project evaluation and/or monitoring of a project. Participants use photography as a tool for gathering qualitative data on the changes and challenges that have been important to them during the lifecycle of a project.

Their photos tell their story as each participant talks about their photos and why each photo is important to them. Ultimately, the photos become 'photo evidence for action', a social accountability tool to engage with duty bearers. We do this through a community exhibition which is attended by the community as well as community leaders. For people with low literacy skills, photography offers an opportunity to document and share their stories, providing insight into the context for the work, and any changes experienced.

### Picture Power in El Salvador

For Picture Power, 13 community participants who have been involved in the '*Transparency and Accountability*' project, were trained in participatory photography in a two-day workshop. The participants were previously selected by ISD ensuring choices from a wide range of participants, male as well as female and of different ages and not limited to the most outgoing

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<sup>1</sup> The participants from ISD included: Dina Gutierrez, Roberto Castro, Elizabeth Mejia from our Guatemalan partner COONGECOOP and from Christian Aid: Tania Grande (CA PO for El Salvador) and Paula Plaza (Programme Communications Lead)

participants. The participants came from different communities in Morazan including six municipalities: Cacaopera, Jocoaitique, Joateca, Torola, Meanguera and Arambala. Written consent to take part was sought and given by all the participants in writing.

The participants had two days of training in camera use and visual storytelling, and two additional days to take photographs. After this, the images were captioned and edited with the participants selecting their favourite images to present in a community exhibition.

Through this Picture Power, we saw the photos as enablers – they gave marginalized, excluded and vulnerable persons within the community the space to reflect on the project and how their lives have changed and the challenges they face.

### **Objective**

For participants to document through photography the impact that the project has had so far and to document the challenges they face in their communities.

To achieve this, the participants were given two questions and asked to capture those through their photos:

1. How has the project changed you and the lives of people in your community?
2. What challenges do you and your community face?

### **Methodology**

Thirteen community participants, were chosen and trained in participatory photography in a two-day workshop. The participants were selected by our partner requesting that they chose a wide range of participants, male as well as female and of different ages and not limited to the most outgoing participants.

Two participants were chosen from each of the six municipalities targeted by the project.

The participants received training on basic photography skills, including technical handling of a basic camera, (IXUS 185), photo types, photographic composition, focus/framing, photography ethics, reading photography, ethics, consent and body mapping (in order to explain power and the power they hold as photographers). During the workshop, they had the opportunity to practise their newly acquired photo skills.

The participants were introduced to the two key questions and asked to capture in photos the answers to these questions. They had two days to take photos answering the key questions.

After these two days, the participants came together to deliver the photos they had taken and to select and caption their favourite photos, which answered the two questions. Each participant selected and captioned photos and explained why these photos were their favourite. We did not influence the photo choices made by the participants, they selected them themselves. The following day, an exhibition was held showing the photos taken by the participants.

## Challenges

- Whilst initially 13 participants were chosen to take part, on day 2 of the training one participant did not join. Given that the training is a two-day workshop, this participant was discarded from the activity all together. This left us with 12 participants completing the training.
- In contrast to other Picture Power activities and given the focus of the project on transparency and accountability, answering the question about how their lives have changed as a result of the project, proved a lot harder to document in photos. The participants had to be creative and think carefully about a photographic representation of change.
- On the day of delivering the photos most of the participants did not think they had completed the task. However, when we sat down with the participants we were pleasantly surprised with how resourceful and creative they had been with their photos and depictions of the changes. It proves that in this methodology the photos are not isolated from the narrative or captions given by the participants. The photos are the vehicle and evidence for capturing change and for engaging in deep conversations and observations that the participants have on how the project's contributions.
- The exhibition which is always planned after the workshop was disappointing as we did not receive permission from the municipality to hold the exhibition in the central square. This meant that we had to find a venue at the very last minute, leaving no time to send out invitations. As a result, very few people came to the exhibition as it clashed with a market day and celebrations by the municipality. However, it was encouraging that the partner carried out the exhibition a couple of weeks later, with more success.

See photos below showing people looking at the photos taken by the participants.



**Exhibition of photographs produced by the Picture Power participants**

## **Reflections**

The group of 12 participants were very engaged throughout, actively taking part and expressing their opinions. They had a huge appetite for learning. Many of them owned a mobile phone so they were familiar with taking photos but benefitted from learning about basic technical aspects of photography including lighting and composition, but most importantly about reading photos and photo-storytelling. Compared to other Picture Power experiences, this was more challenging given that the project impacts were more difficult to document. As a transparency and accountability programme, the results are less tangible and more difficult to document in photos, compared to say a livelihoods project. As a result, the participants had to be creative and think hard about how to document things like leadership, empowerment, making demands and holding decision-makers to account.

However, despite the challenges, their photo-stories show that through ISD training they have gained awareness of the power they hold and how to exercise that power. The participants are

leaders within each of their communities and talked about women's rights (photos by Mauricio), children's rights, community participation, non-patriarchal forms of masculinity ([photo by Edgar Hernandez](#)).

Many of the photos are examples of how the project has empowered communities by raising awareness about their rights, especially around their right to request information on how the municipality's budget is being used. Through this awareness they are actively participating in decisions affecting their communities and making demands from the government (see stadium [photo by Nelly](#)). This empowerment has encouraged their participation and enabled them to find solutions to their problems.

I observed through their stories that the participants are not resigned to their fate. Having realised or gained the awareness that they have rights and those who they elect have a duty towards them, means that they are a step ahead in overcoming poverty. However, these communities face some overwhelming challenges that may undermine their power. For example, the environmental events (drought, torrential rain) which the communities may have no control over or the lack of employment opportunities available to them.

**Estela Mendez** in her [photo](#) highlighted some income generating activities that NGO's have carried out in some communities, for example raising chickens, but noted that many people will live hand to mouth so these initiatives were not successful as families resorted to eating the chickens instead of waiting for them to grow and eventually generate a profit. She noted a lack of knowledge about financial management. However, this was in direct contrast with the setting up of a savings and loans scheme developed by one community and documented through this other [photo](#) by **Estela**.

It was far easier for the participants to document the challenges that they and their communities face, most of what they documented were environmental hazards including landslides and mudslides and the communities felt that the government was either slow to respond or non-responsive at all. I visited the home of Maria Elena Ramos, one of the project participants who told me that the landslide had happened in October 2018 and whilst there were diggers soon after event happened, the government presence was not felt thereafter. Many houses still had no electricity, there was water stagnated as a lot of the boulders had not been removed, and as a result her granddaughter had several mosquito bites. Maria Elena Ramos and her family are survivors of the landslide, her house is perched on a hill and when the boulders were rushing down they just managed to avoid her home. She was lucky. Her family remains at risk and whilst she had a lucky escape, many in her community have had to evacuate having had their homes and small businesses buried under the mud. Two months

later, and what I saw was still the scene of a disaster zone, still completely unresolved. I wonder how working through ISD the affected communities can advocate for the swift removal of the debris and measures to prevent a disease outbreak caused by the propagation of mosquitoes due to the stagnant waters. See **Maria Elena Ramos'** [photo](#)

## The photographs

For the purposes of clarity, we have grouped the photos in themes that reflect the positive changes brought about by the project.

The themes showing positive impacts of the project include: community cohesion, gender equality, empowerment, advocacy gains, and transparency.

The photos showing the challenges the community faces are grouped under environmental, financial and corruption.

Below are the photos under each theme, starting with the photos showing the changes the project has made to individuals and their communities.

### Community cohesion



This is a photo of a meeting of motorcyclist friends. In this group we do a lot of work including clean up campaigns and solidarity with neighbours. For example, we handed out food parcels to the families affected by the mudslides in October. Before, I didn't care much for my community but through the project with ISD, I have become more sensitive to the needs of others.

Photo by Edgar Hernandez

## Gender equality



“This Xochitl, she is 8 months old and my first daughter. I look after her since she was born because my wife works every day. I have learned to bathe her, change her nappy, cook and feed her. For me this is a new experience and it has been good because I have become a more responsible father. It is also a challenge because this takes time and keeps me from attending training sessions. But I feel very proud to be able to look after her. Looking after children is the role of

both men and women”. Photo by Edgar Hernandez



“This is a meeting from the Feminist Collective for local Development. This meeting was focus on developing an action plan for next year and to agree how we are going to work together and how we have been affected for defending the rights of women who don’t have a voice. I’ve taken elements of the various ISD training sessions which have helped me to work in the defence of women”.

Photo by Rosa Ramos





“One of the things we have learned through the project has been empowerment which means that women are now participating and being taken into account. This photo shows a woman who has received bags of fertilizer for her maize crops. Before this was only given out to men, because it was thought that only men were involved in agriculture, but today a lot of women are involved and they have to be included in the

agriculture programmes”. Photo by Mauricio



ISD has helped to get women organised and more involved in community activities. This is an assembly with women’s network in the municipality. Their organisations help to improve the municipality.

Photo by Mauricio

## Empowerment



ISD has helped to empower us, it has helped to know our rights as citizens and to make demands from institutions. We have managed to access information for example information on how municipalities' budgets are invested in our communities.

Photo by Leydi Maricela del Cid



This is me, Deisy Hernandez Esperanza Hernandez Martinez, I am 26 years old and come from the municipality of Torola. Before I used to be very shy, but since I joined the project of transparency and accountability, I started learning that as a woman, I am entitled to make demands from those in government, so they fulfil their promises. We do presentations and make friendships with women leaders of other municipalities. This has helped me to be a confident,

fearless and empowered woman. Photo by Leydi Maricela del Cid



For me the cat in this photo represents a trusting citizen. We ask that those that we elect, are trustworthy so that the taxes that are collected are allocated in a transparent manner. ISD has trained us to understand corruption. They taught us that as citizens we are able to advocate for funds to be used in a proper manner. Photo by Leydi Maricela del Cid



As a result of the work of ISD, a lot of leaders have been trained in our communities. The leadership skills have helped us to present ourselves publicly. This photo shows an activity that we have created to provide a space of play for children with the participation of adults. These activities help participants to gain confidence in themselves –key qualities

for the leaders of the future. We carried out this activity with support from the Local Committee for the rights of children and adolescents. Photo by Nelly Mendez



Through the trainings with ISD we have learned about how to improve our families' incomes. We took the initiative to create a cooperative of savings and loans. Creating this cooperative helps to generate employment and teaches people about the importance of saving. These photos show people involved in the savings initiative. As we don't have access to bank loans the cooperative allows us to borrow money amongst ourselves. We then use these loans to

make small investments that gives us an income. Photo by Estela Mendez

## Transparency

Alcaldía Municipal de Arambasá, Morazán, El Salvador  
 Teléfono: 2041 - 1480  
 www.arambasa@gmail.com

**Lista de solicitudes de información del año 2017**

Nombre solicitante	Tipo de información	No se tramito	Si tramito
Dina Gutiérrez Gonzales	Presupuesto municipal 2017		Tramitada y entregada
José Catalino Argueta	Certificación de acuerdo de ratificación de empleados		Tramitado y entregado via correo electrónico
Nohemí Rivera	Si existe comisión de transparencia		Información tramitada y entregada via correo electrónico
Juan José Amaya	Información de auditoría interna		Información tramitada y entregada
Ana Lida Benítez	Leyes de ordenanza, obras ejecutadas 2016, presupuesto anual, estado de situación financiera, mora ciudadana		Información entregada
Ana Lida Benítez	Acuerdo municipal de aprobación del presupuesto		Información entregada
		Total, de solicitudes tramitadas	6 solicitudes

Licda. Suleyma Rodríguez  
 Alcaldía Municipal de Arambasá, Morazán, El Salvador

The work by ISD has empowered us to access public information. This document shows the requests that have been made to the Mayor's office, for example requests for the municipality's budget. We request this information for advocacy. In my community there was no budget allocation, but this information has helped us to advocacy for greater distribution and allocation of the budget. Photo by Leonel Claros



Training for employees from the municipality. Neris is a municipality employee responsible for the Women's Unit. She received this diploma following a training session from ISD on Transparency and Public Finance. This training will allow her to oversee communities that don't have a budget. Photo by Leonel Claros

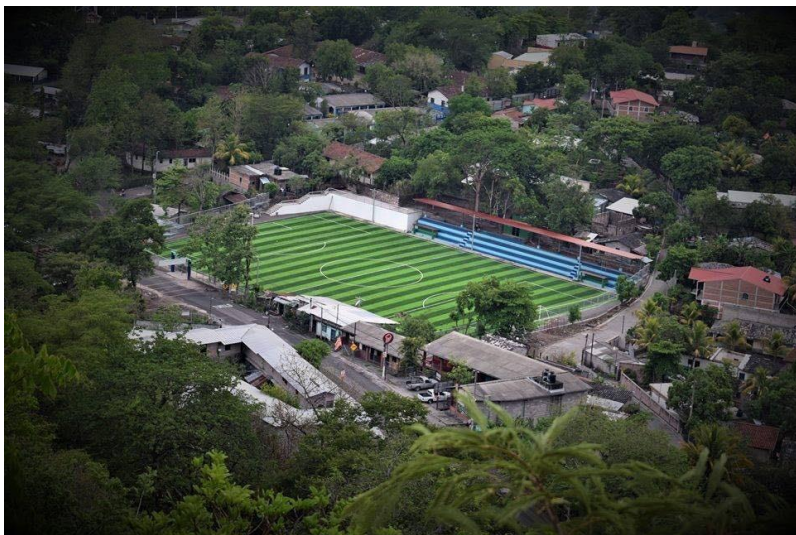


Through the social accountability project by ISD we have learned how the municipality's budget is being spent. We now demand from the local government and public institutions to be accountable in this case demanded a school in the Cacaopera municipality. Here the teachers informed the community about on how the money was spent for the school. Photo by Herminia Luna

## Advocacy gains



In the Municipal Development Committee, we have done advocacy towards the investment in an environmental unit to look after our river, the Torola river which supplies clean water to the municipality. As part of the Codem, we follow up and accompany a reforestation and clean-up of the river. Photo by Herminia Luna



This photo represents the organisation, participation and involvement and demands of adults, women, children, young people who have demanded sports grounds. Before the stadium was built this place used to be barren with a lot of stagnated waters which increased the proliferation of dengue causing mosquitoes. We demanded this and now youths are part of the departmental team. Photo by Nelly Mendez

## Environmental Challenges



Area prone to disasters: The community of El Social is prone to landslides, which in the rainy season obstructs the roads. When this happens, it leaves various municipalities cut off.

Photo by: Flor Escobar



Mudslide in Joateca. My community was seriously affected by a mudslide in October 2019. It destroyed 4 homes and contaminated water supply. We can't drink this water because we get sick. The mudslide caused many trees to dry up. **Pls note this photo was taken in 2018, but it displays a wrong date camera setting.**

Photo by Maria Elena Ramos



The mudslide affected us because it damaged many lampposts. We've had no electricity for two months since the mudslide happened in Oct 2018. At first government institutions came to assess the damages, but they've not come back, and the damages have not been repaired.

Photo by Maria Elena Ramos



The mudslide affected this home, nobody lives there now. This family is now living somewhere else waiting for the government to help build their home.

Photo by Maria Elena Ramos



Chopping down trees. Cutting down trees affects our community, it reduces our water supply, increases heat and in the last few years it has increased a plague of insects that destroyed trees in various municipalities. These municipalities supply water to low lying communities for example those living near the Sapo River. I think there should be a decree that stops cutting trees indiscriminately.

Photo by Leydi Maricela del Cid



This is a photo of the road that takes me home. In the rainy season this road becomes flooded due to the water that runs down from the Torola volcano. This makes us scared. This year, we lost our plantain and sugar cane plantation. This was made worse by the cutting of pine trees which were affected by a plague. Photo by: Leydi Maricela del Cid



This is my son Eduviges de Jesus Argueta. He is 9 years old. He likes to grow green vegetables in our plot of land. Here we can see maize and sesame seeds that he grew this year. But his face shows sadness. The soil in our land is not good enough for planting, it is very sandy and eroded. The plants dried up and we lost our investment. Photo by: Deisy Hernandez



## Financial resources

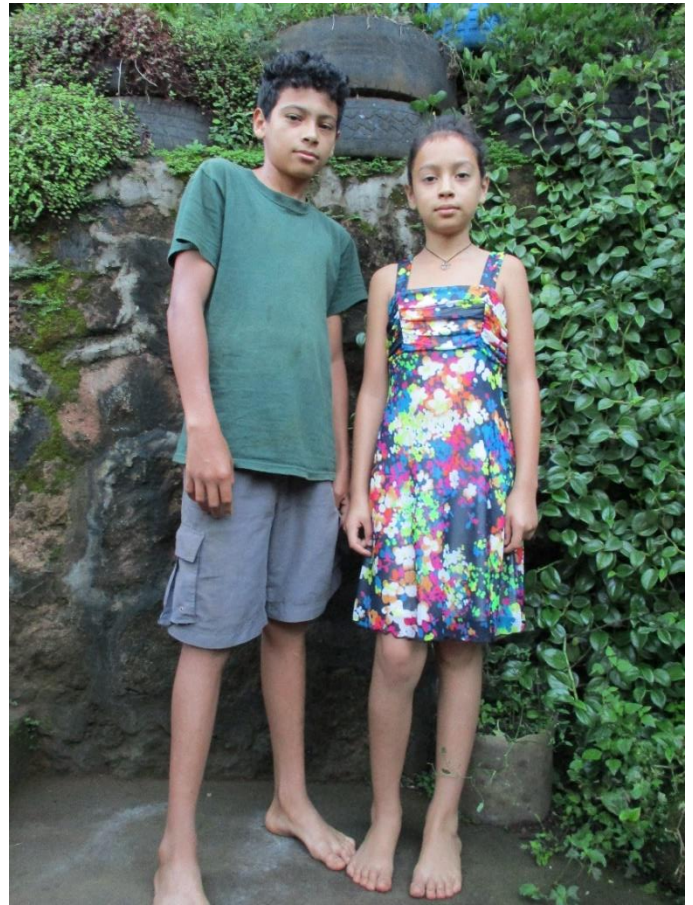
This is my chicken coup where I keep 32 chickens. We sell the meat and eggs for income, but also to feed our family. We prefer indigenous eggs which are not contaminated by artificial hormones, but we have difficulties to raise them. We don't have enough money to feed them or to keep them enclosed. Photo by Deisy Hernandez



There are organisations that bring projects to raise chickens in order to help improve families' incomes. But no income is generated because people eat the chickens or sell them. There is not financial education to help people understand the need to be patient until the chickens multiply. This way, families can generate a profit. There's a problem with handing out things to people. It creates dependency. I shouldn't receive chickens, instead I'd rather have a well remunerated job. Photo by Estela Mendez



Vulnerable children. These are my children and I took a photo of them without shoes because I wanted to illustrate children's vulnerability. In this community children are very vulnerable to physical and verbal abuse. Their rights of girls and boys are violated. With ISD we have done an action plan focused on these issues. Our action plan was overseen by ISD who said with was a good to focus on the needs of these children. Photo by Rosa Ramos



## Corruption

This photo represents inequalities, poor investment, corruption as well as the needs of the marginalised, those whose rights have been violated, those without a voice. Where is justice, if we have the poor and the rich. We give them absolute power to administer our money, but they do whatever they want. They take power as if they were Gods when in reality they are employees who eat of the work dreams and hopes of the most vulnerable. I hope this photo awakens our senses as well as our thoughts, to fight for a better Meanguera, a better El Salvador. Photo by Nelly Mendez





**programmes. (Outcome harvesting focus groups)**

organized efforts to make demands to institutions. This time citizens were successful, and authorities responded to a demand from local youth.

**Evidence that authorities are responding to the pressure from citizens to improve the efficacy of social protection programmes through increased transparency and participations as well as increased investment (Outcome harvesting focus groups)**

**[-Registry of access to information requests](#)**

The list corresponds to demands of information presented by citizens to the municipality of Arambala during 2018. It shows that all of them were processed and information made available. As part of ISD's course on Transparency, participants learn how to request information to government institutions and present an actual request at their municipality. The process is most of the time successful as our partner also conducts another course for municipal servants.

**Evidence that citizens are demanding more fiscal control (new addition from ST 2018)**

**[-Family putting hands up](#)**

Annual training and activities conducted by ISD in 6 municipalities as part of the project has enhanced the capacities of citizens to held authorities to account, this year for instance they conducted an analysis of municipal finances.

**[-Cat with umbrella](#)**

For Leydi Maricela del Cid, the cat embodies a citizen that feels secure and protected by the umbrella which resembles the government that has to serve its citizens and be inclusive at all times. The project has made it clear for participants that authorities are elected to serve and respond to citizens 'needs

**[-Food plate with coins and bills](#)**

With this artistic photo, Nelly sought to represent the issue of corruption, she explained that frequently people in power protect their privileges instead of securing basic food for the excluded population through social programs. Beneficiaries are now demanding accountability from authorities as they know that it is their mandate and does not depend on the Mayor's willingness to respond.

Please note that some photos, showing very meaningful outcomes, could not be included in the chart above as I did not find a place to reflect personal accounts of change within the ToC. All of them refer to changes at a micro level like the creation of a savings group by some project participants as they hardly have access to the formal banking system; the empowerment of women as shown in [Leydi's photo](#) and story from shy to outspoken, as well as her photo of the participation in the municipal women network, and [Rosa's](#) involvement in the Feminist Collective for Local Development.

In this same category, I would include the transformation of [Edgar Hernandez](#) now being the primary caregiver of his small daughter, while wife is working, thus changing traditional gender roles; and [Rosa's](#) organized efforts to look after disadvantaged children in her community.

The picture power methodology was useful in helping to incorporate the vision of the community about the outcomes of the project, many of which had not been identified and registered by ISD in the outcome harvesting app. These outcomes are mainly related to unforeseen impacts at personal level, like challenging gender roles, women empowerment, and promoting local organization through a saving group.

The exercise has been part of other efforts by the partner to incorporate community voices in the project cycle. They conducted a year-end evaluation with beneficiaries in 2018 and have presented the updated theory of change along with proposed activities for 2019, in order to capture the community's input. As a result, project implementation is better informed and will hopefully produce more relevant outcomes for participants.