

REL Practice Paper 1

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Balancing research and practice in an international NGO

Reflections on setting up a long-term study of change



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Contents

Summary	4
Introduction	5
Ten Years of Change: ideas and first steps	6
Ambitions and visions	7
Practical considerations	8
Translating the idea into practice	9
Parallel evolution, different structures	11
Country programme identity	11
Stakeholder motivations for participation	12
Cultures of evidence, meanings of participation	13
Design, methodology, capacity and skills	15
Challenges: collaboration and decentralisation	17
Navigating trade-offs	18
Navigating power	18
Conclusion	19
Balancing 'practice' and 'research'	20
To what extent is the research collaborative?	20
Position and role	20
Achievements and looking forward	21

About REL Practice Papers

REL Practice Papers are published by the research, evidence and learning (REL) team at Christian Aid. REL works to support the generation of high quality research and evidence in Christian Aid, and enable and encourage the use of evidence in programme design, organisational learning, understanding impact, policy development, and communication. Our Practice Papers reflect on what we are learning from this work. Find them [here](#).

Summary

This practice paper tells the story of the establishment and evolution of Ten Years of Change, a collaborative, long-term practitioner research initiative designed to take place in three countries – Colombia, Kenya and the UK. Ten Years of Change is implemented by the Research, Evidence and Learning team at Christian Aid, an international non-governmental organisation (INGO).

The research began with the overarching question **how are community members and supporters being influenced by, and influencing, processes of social change?** Each country team adapted the question to make it relevant to their socio-political context, and designed research at several different levels, from local to national.

In setting up a practitioner research initiative in Christian Aid, the REL team made some assumptions about incentives and capabilities, meaningful research frameworks, and the possibilities for delivering decentralised practitioner research on a tight budget. Not all of these assumptions held.

Is our decentralised, collaborative research model working? We may have been overly ambitious in concept and design; translation into practice and the studies themselves have not progressed as far as we initially hoped. Trying to set up study that is both practitioner-led and decentralised led to a process that was too open to iteration, making it challenging to keep a hold on the overall picture, ensure connections between the elements, ensure research quality and, ultimately, have impact.

Co-creating collaborative research is hard: it takes patience and time, and it is even more complicated when being negotiated at a distance through many layers and the fragmented relationships that connect them. Although we knew this at the outset, this did not make the challenges easier to navigate; they are relational, structural and unpredictable, and not always possible to mitigate. We gave shape to the overall study and identified the over-riding research question that connects across country contexts, but most of our time and focus has gone into supporting and enabling the local-level research, and renegotiating in organisational spaces to keep the long-term study on Christian Aid's agenda.

In shifting the balance of our attention away from the local level research we are aware that we need to enter a new phase. If we are to answer the question of how the local interacts with the national we need to pay attention to the national. We also need to seek a source of funding that will enable us to transition our nascent research into a properly resourced study, with a dedicated, long-term coordinator.

Yet although Ten Years of Change has started slowly, we believe it is valuable in many ways. To our country programme staff who are learning about research through doing, by identifying research questions, negotiating research approaches and agreeing research practice; to Christian Aid, which is investing in understanding change in the long-term, beyond the project cycle; and to us as research leaders in an INGO, committed to a collaborative approach that actively seeks to dismantle the 'normal' practice of UK-based researchers going to developing countries to collect data for analysis back in the UK.

Introduction

This practice paper tells the story of the establishment and evolution of Ten Years of Change, a collaborative, long-term practitioner research initiative designed to take place in three countries – Colombia, Kenya and the UK. Ten Years of Change is implemented by Christian Aid, an international non-governmental organisation (INGO).

The authors of the paper are staff of Christian Aid's Research, Evidence and Learning (REL) team, which coordinates Ten Years of Change. We all have experience in development research and practice. We have written this paper as an output of our own cycles of reflection and action.

Ten Years is based on our shared understanding of practitioner research in development, which we see as:

- a process of systematic investigation using any appropriate research method, which is conceptualised, developed and led by development professionals
- carried out to generate evidence, deepen understanding or document new or excluded perspectives on an issue relevant to development practice
- carried out with an intent to be useful by having impact on development thinking, practice or policies – either through the way the research is done or by producing useful, accessible outputs
- aware of power, and deliberately designed to shift accepted views of who researchers are and whose knowledge counts in research.

While part of our understanding of practitioner research is technical, it is also normative and political. We believe that practitioner knowledge and academic knowledge are both valid, and that both have a contribution to make to development. We challenge the frequent exclusion of Southern practitioners and voices from research processes, and aspire to value and build from local knowledge and framing of development challenges. In rejecting a model of extractive development research in which Southern perspectives make only a tokenistic contribution to shaping agendas,¹ we believe that we – a small, UK-based team sitting within an INGO that has country and regional programmes in the global South – should, wherever possible, decentralise research, establishing and strengthening research partnerships in and between Southern countries.²

Our understanding led us to make some assumptions in setting up a practitioner research initiative in Christian Aid, which informed how we developed this piece of research. We assumed that:

- among our colleagues, partners and supporters, some would have incentives and capabilities to participate in practitioner research
- we could provide a research framework, which others could participate in, and make meaningful and useful in their context
- Christian Aid could develop and deliver practitioner research, within a tight budget³
- if we decentralised the research, focusing on collaboration and co-design, then the process would be collectively owned and relevant to practice, and would deliver impact.⁴

¹ See, for example, the work of the [Rethinking Research Collaborative](#) and Chambers, R. (1994) 'The origins and practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal', *World Development* 22.7: 953-969.

² Bingley, K. (2018) '[Considerations for integrating research into programme design](#)', blog, Christian Aid

³ Over three years, resources invested in Ten Years of Change have been £10k a year for three years in Colombia, £6k a year for three years in the UK, international flights (one trip to Colombia and one to Kenya involving 2 staff members) around £25k in staff salaries for time spent on the study.

⁴ As suggested, for example, in Newman, K., Bharadwaj, S. and Fransman, J. (2019) 'Rethinking research impact through fair and equitable partnerships', *IDS Bulletin* 50.1: 21-42.

Reflecting on our experience with hindsight, we realise that not all of these assumptions hold completely. Developing research of this nature, scale and complexity has challenges, and for this research, some of the challenges arose directly from limits to our assumptions.

In a spirit of reflection, we hope that this paper will be of interest to advocates and students of practitioner research and action research; advocates of equitable research partnerships in international development; participatory researchers in international development and other fields of social policy with a participatory research tradition; students of the roles and practices of international NGOs; Southern INGO staff engaged in research as well as practice; and northern-based INGO staff engaging in research with country programme offices.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we tell the story of the start of Ten Years of Change: how we clarified our ideas and ambitions; identified where, by whom and how the study would be implemented; and worked with colleagues in other countries to begin to translate our idea into practice. We then discuss the forces that shaped the parallel but distinct evolution of each of the three streams of the study, before reflecting on the challenges of trade-offs and power. We conclude by returning to some of our assumptions about practitioner research, reflecting on how they played out in practice, finally turning to considerations for the next stage of the study.

Ten Years of Change: ideas and first steps

In 2015 an interesting idea was born. Two of us⁵ had just completed a study of the impact of Christian Aid's governance work, and were aware that in many ways, it fell short. It had provided a snapshot of what was happening during the single, brief moment of the study. But we knew that our governance work was complex and non-linear, and influenced by many factors outside our control.

At this time, Christian Aid – like any other INGO – was under increasing pressure to provide evidence for the impact of its work. Many in the sector were debating assumptions about evidence and the organisational processes for producing it,⁶ and dynamics in Christian Aid reflected these wider trends. While there was investment in and discussion of programme monitoring and evaluation systems, these only showed part of the story: they were not designed to capture complex change processes, usually conceptualising change only through the lens of a project.

Moreover, much of Christian Aid's communication of evidence to its audiences of supporters and churches followed a simple format: a brief, snapshot story of a person whose life had been transformed through engagement with the organisation's work. While these stories were capturing some of the results of Christian Aid's projects, they did not enable supporters to understand the contexts that shape projects and influence their outcomes.

As we reflected on these experiences and debates, we had the idea of developing a long-term study – research that would involve some Christian Aid staff, partners and supporters as researchers and participants; that would exist independently of Christian Aid's development and humanitarian project work, but would be integrated with and inform it; that would be robust in its design and methodology to enable learning throughout implementation; and that would produce outputs that could capture ten years of change and Christian Aid's place in it.

⁵ Kate Bingley and Kate Newman, REL's co-heads and founders

⁶ See, for example: 'The political implications of evidence-based approaches', a series of posts on Oxfam's From Poverty to Power blog (2013); Eyben, R., Guijt, I., Roche, C. and Shutt, C. (2015) *The Politics of Evidence and Results in International Development*, Rugby: Practical Action Publishing; and Wallace, T., Bornstein, L. and Chapman, J. (2006) *The Aid Chain: Coercion and Commitment in Development NGOs*, Rugby: Practical Action Publishing

Box 1. About Christian Aid and the Research, Evidence and Learning team

Christian Aid is the international development agency of 41 sponsoring British and Irish churches, founded at the end of the Second World War to help refugees in Europe. At the time when Ten Years was starting, it worked with around 650 partner organisations in nearly 40 countries, managing an annual budget of around £100 million. Each country office determined its own strategy, objectives and partnerships with reference to a global strategic framework.

Christian Aid's work includes long-term development programmes; humanitarian response; and policy, advocacy and campaigning action. It works with and through alliances, coalitions, partners and supporters. Its internal structure responds to these different areas of work, with three outward-facing departments (International; Policy, Public Affairs and Campaigns; and Fundraising and Supporter Engagement).

Christian Aid differs from many other large INGOs because of its engagement with its supporter constituencies in the UK and Ireland. Links with churches give direct connections to groups of supporters, and working with them is central to the organisation's approach to programming. Christian Aid's branding emphasises standing alongside partners and supporters, with a focus on dignity, equality, justice and solidarity, to enable mutual transformation and to learn and grow together. In its work in the global South, Christian Aid takes a lead from its partners, working alongside them to support those living in poverty to be active agents in their own development.

The Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning is a small team which sits between two departments – International, and Policy, Public Affairs and Campaigns – reporting to the directors of both. Set up in 2016, it focuses on strengthening Christian Aid's ability to engage with evidence, to generate and use research, and to share learning from its experience. REL aims increase the profile, quality, legitimacy and value of practitioners as researchers, and works to build a case for investment in practitioner research.

Ambitions and visions

Ten Years of Change was one part of a broader agenda to strengthen Christian Aid's critical engagement with evidence, and its ability to produce high-quality research. Early discussions about the study took place as Christian Aid decided to invest in REL (see Box 1).

In line with our understanding of practitioner research, we envisioned the study as an opportunity for local people involved in Christian Aid's programmes, and the organisation's supporters, to tell us about their experiences and definitions of change, which are often overlooked. But we also wanted to understand how their actions interact with and contribute to broader changes in local and national contexts.

While we wanted programme participants and supporters to be actively engaged in the research, facilitating and documenting their reflections and experiences would only give us one perspective on change. We also needed to understand the changes Christian Aid and partner staff were trying to bring about and how they understood their role as their operating environments shifted. Finally, we were also interested in wider changes in the role and practice of INGOs, especially as Christian Aid invested in re-visioning its future, organisational structure and strategy. We therefore aimed to complement community-level work with research at different levels.

We looked carefully at other long-term and longitudinal research in the development sector and beyond⁷ – including some by other international NGOs⁸ – and concluded that our commitment to a collaborative, decentralised and multi-level research design did not lend itself to a formal longitudinal cohort approach, where research is periodically carried out with a consistent sample of respondents. Instead, our study design would need to be flexible and emergent, responsive to changes in programming and organisational strategy, and was likely to be adjusted during the research period.

Alongside the research element, communication was also a central part of our ambitions for Ten Years of Change. The intention was to generate a range of content for different audiences, and potentially use digital communication tools as a research method. We hoped to have real-time, locally generated materials complemented by annual analytical reports based on the reflections of Christian Aid programme staff and partners, as well as thematic learning and broader analysis of national contexts, picking up on themes of interest aligned with Christian Aid's agenda and with research on the role of international NGOs.

We intended that communication outputs would have a direct benefit for local participants, providing them an opportunity to reflect, analyse, plan action and extend their influence in their context. We also thought that these could be used by Christian Aid internationally to develop solidarity links and common visions between supporters in the global North and programme participants in the global South. Beyond their immediate use, these outputs would enable learning to be shared, and would contribute to long-term memories of change in each country, as well as becoming part of Christian Aid's own history.

In summary, we aimed to explore:

- the relationship between contextual social and political change and change in communities
- the changing relationship between communities, Christian Aid partners and Christian Aid
- the relationship between what happens in each country and change in Christian Aid at the international level

through research at four interacting levels:

1. community, through research with community members and supporters
2. national, through political economy analyses
3. programme, through reflection on interventions and theories of change
4. Christian Aid, through reflection on the evolution of Christian Aid's practice in each country and internationally.

Practical considerations

A decade is a long time horizon for an INGO more used to a three-year project cycle, and we knew that there would be many challenges in sustaining such a study – both practical, but also in ensuring organisational support and buy-in at every level. We therefore needed to be very clear about what we were trying to do and why, to make our proposal attractive and practical enough to bring others on board. Our emphasis on a decentralised and collaborative approach, rooting the study in communities and country programmes, was central to this. We had to be sure that Ten Years of Change would have value for all those who participated in it.

Funding also shaped our plans and ambitions. About 40% of Christian Aid's funding is donated by individual supporters, and a proportion of this is not restricted to particular programmes or projects;⁹ this meant that we could start work on the study with our existing budget, enabling us to develop ideas slowly and ensure that they were well-integrated in programmes. However, we also knew that sustaining and developing Ten Years of Change would need external funding.

⁷ Including *Young Lives*, a four-country longitudinal study of childhood poverty; *Seven-Up*, a documentary film series that follows the lives of a group of UK children at seven-year intervals; and *Ethiopia Wide*, a longitudinal study of modernisation, continuity and change in Ethiopia's rural communities that started in 1991.

⁸ Plan International's *Real Choices, Real Lives*, a study following 142 girls in nine countries; and CARE's *Longitudinal Impact Study* of women's economic empowerment.

⁹ In the lexicon of Christian Aid, 'restricted' funding is tied to a particular project or programme, and 'unrestricted' funding, usually that raised by supporters, can be invested in any initiative.

Recognising that Christian Aid is a practice-based organisation, and staff outside REL are not recruited for their research expertise, we also wanted to engage academic partners in each study country. This would both strengthen the research and contribute rigour and robustness; it would add capacity to the study to complement Christian Aid staff who have full workloads; and it would enhance Christian Aid's broader understanding of partnering with universities, exploring whether and how such partnerships contribute to INGO research capacity.

The commitment to a collaborative, decentralised research design meant that coordination was also an important consideration. While many different actors would be responsible for making the initial idea operational and driving the various elements of the study, REL would be responsible for ensuring opportunities for collective analysis and ownership of outputs; and that insights and learning from different countries would be disseminated across Christian Aid and beyond. In addition to playing an oversight role and supporting the development of research questions, methods, documentation and communication strategies, REL also planned to complement the work in study countries by focusing on questions about Christian Aid's role in supporting social change.

Translating the idea into practice

REL began by building support for the idea of the study with Christian Aid's directors and board of trustees. We used two hooks. First, Christian Aid was in its 70th year, and staff were busy collecting stories from the past; we argued that if we started documenting our work now, we would have a clear set of outputs to share for our 80th anniversary. Second, we emphasised that understanding, documenting and communicating change would strengthen our practice – and therefore our impact on poverty – and deepen our relationships with supporters. By regularly mentioning our early plans to the directorate and the board, we tried to avoid hitting a stumbling block from senior leadership further down the line.

We needed to agree where Ten Years of Change would take place, what it would look like and who would be involved. We worked with a group of representatives from different departments to agree the framing of the study, before beginning discussions across the organisation.

The key to presenting the idea more widely was balancing the excitement needed to get colleagues to buy into the vision of the study, with reassuring them that by working to shape the appropriate focus and form for the research, they weren't having to commit to something big and complicated. We agreed that interest and enthusiasm of the relevant country managers would be critical to success of the project, especially as the research was to be sustained over ten years. We wrote to all country managers and directors inviting them to participate with us in the adventure. Four expressed an interest, and the International Director and Heads of Region advised us which were best placed to engage with us – taking into account stability of focus and funding of the country programmes. Colombia and Kenya were selected.

The next 18 months comprised a long period of negotiation, to collaboratively deepen the concept of Ten Years of Change and shape its design with country and regional offices. However, there was a tension here between taking a decentralised approach, with our study partners driving the research design, and our own view that the design should include some participatory tools, to ensure the active engagement of community members in sharing their own understandings of change. This tension, rooted in different understandings of how central participatory research should be to the study design, became important later.

During this period, the role of the UK supporters in the study also shifted. The initial idea was that Ten Years of Change would work in two country programmes, and that UK supporters would receive and learn from the information generated. Initially, then, we worked with colleagues in the Fundraising and Supporter Engagement Department to work out if there would be an audience for the types of materials we envisaged the study producing. Although some were enthusiastic, others were concerned. Would supporters want communications without clear messages for action? How could we manage contradictory communications? If we showed development as too complicated, would people stop supporting altogether? These were all important considerations, and through the discussion it became clear that we did not have full understanding of how our supporters might react. This, along with wider discussions on the role of Christian Aid in the UK that were part of developing a new theory of change for the organisation, led to a repositioning of the UK in Ten Years of Change – as the third study site.

The three country components have each followed very different pathways as they were translated into practice; Box 2 summarises where each stands after three years.

Box 2. Where are we now? A snapshot of Ten Years at the end of 2019

Ten Years of Change began with the overarching question **how are community members and supporters being influenced by, and influencing, processes of social change?** Each team then adapted the question to make it relevant to their socio-political context.

In Colombia, five decades of armed conflict were formally ended with the signature of a Peace Agreement in November 2016. Subsequent years have seen efforts at implementing the Agreement, but also the election of a right-wing government with a weak commitment to implementation. Ten Years of Change is asking **how are poor and excluded communities in the Valle del Cauca affected by the Peace Accord, and how do they influence it?**

One of Christian Aid's established NGO partners, the Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace (CIJP) have been making regular research visits to Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in the Naya and San Juan river areas of the Valle del Cauca since 2018. As well as this community-level study of change, Ten Years has supported a national political economy analysis, and given staff from Christian Aid Colombia and CIJP the opportunity to participate in facilitated reflections about how they anticipate and respond to changes in their context, particularly about how the Peace Agreement plays out in implementation. For Christian Aid Colombia, this has taken the form of annual reflection sessions with REL staff, while CIJP participated in a facilitated reflection on their theory of change, which will be used as a way of tracking changes in their work over the remainder of the study period.

In Kenya, an ambitious devolution process has since 2013 transferred some service delivery functions and financing from central to county government. Ten Years of Change is asking **how does the health and well-being of poor and excluded communities in Narok County change, in the context of shifting structures of health provision and governance?**

In 2017, we supported a national political economy analysis and held a research design workshop in Narok County. Here, Christian Aid has a long history of work, and established relationships with partners the Transmara Rural Development Project and the Narok Integrated Development Project, which hoped to participate in the study. Since then, lengthy discussions and negotiations have resulted in the finalisation of a research design. This focuses on the use of mixed qualitative methods – interviews, focus group discussions, participatory learning exercises – with a variety of stakeholders: Christian Aid programme participants, partner staff, community health volunteers, government employees and representatives, local leaders and decision makers.

In the UK, Christian Aid works with supporters – people who may give financial contributions, organise fundraising sessions in their local communities, engage in discussions on development issues to encourage local action, or campaign with Christian Aid to bring about change. Global trends and shifts in national

discourse have an impact on how these supporters view their place in the world, and their relationship with Christian Aid. So Ten Years of Change in the UK is asking **how do supporters understand themselves as global citizens, how does context shape their view of development and their role in it, and how do their actions influence their context?**

Until 2021, the UK component is being driven forward by a doctoral student at Northumbria University whose work began in 2018. A review of literature on participation, change, global citizenship, power and agency has informed the design of the research. The qualitative study will use several methods: appreciative enquiry, targeted social surveys and participatory learning communities. The student began by engaging with staff in two regional offices to explore whether the study might be regionally based. Eventually, the study evolved to focus on younger supporters across the UK, to explore how and why they engage with Christian Aid, and understand how this changes over time. In autumn 2019 the student began by scoping how different staff view 'youth' and their role in Christian Aid. In 2020 he will be engaging with a group of young supporters to explore how they understand change and their role in it, locating the research in relation to the wider socio-political context in the UK.

Parallel evolution, different structures

As Box 2 shows, each of the three components of Ten Years of Change has evolved from the common starting points and overarching question discussed in the opening sections to take a different form and emphasis. In this section, we discuss how four factors – country programme identity; stakeholder motivation; cultures of evidence; and design, methodology and skills – were particularly important in shaping the current iterations of each.

Country programme identity

At the time of the study, in common with many INGOs, Christian Aid was not a homogenous, singular entity. The differences between the Christian Aid offices in the three study countries are substantial.

Christian Aid Colombia is a small office with few staff, relying on a mixture of 80% restricted and 20% unrestricted funding, and many of its partners are human rights membership organisations. A crucial part of Christian Aid Colombia's function – making the armed conflict visible and upholding human rights – rests on its identity as an international organisation that is embedded in the networks of international civil society. By contrast, Christian Aid Kenya is a large office with many staff, where work relies increasingly on restricted funding streams; staff here are expected to fundraise to sustain and develop their portfolio of development, humanitarian and advocacy programmes. The Kenya office also hosts a hub of technical advisers operating across Africa, a resource that Christian Aid Kenya taps into. Some of the contrasts between the two offices are rooted in distinct landscapes of civil society and political economies of aid. Different again is Christian Aid's Supporter and Church Participation Department in the UK¹⁰; it not only raises all the organisation's unrestricted income, but also encourages supporters to join campaigns. Here, many staff focus on how Christian teaching encourages social justice action, rather than being directly engaged in development programmes. Regional offices across the country engage directly with supporters, encouraging them to 'Give, Act and Pray'. These contrasts in identity and purpose between Christian Aid in Colombia, Kenya and the UK have shaped the unfolding intentions and design of each strand of Ten Years of Change.

¹⁰ Where the Youth team was located at the start of the study. It shifted into the Policy, Public Affairs and Campaigns department in September 2019.

For decades, the work of Christian Aid Colombia and long-term partner CIJP has prioritised protection of and respect for the rights of Colombian citizens. This has given rise to a way of working based on immediate action responding to rights violations, and advocacy for accountability and redress. In 2016, when the Peace Accord was signed, there was a strong hope that this way of working might gradually be replaced with a focus on building what would be needed for peace, rather than responding to conflict; initiatives began on transitioning from a war economy to a peace economy. For REL and Christian Aid Colombia, this moment of transition was central to the motivation for embarking on a study involving partners and community members in thinking about and reflecting on change. But disappearances and other human rights violations did not end with the Peace Accord. This meant that the relatively relaxed and reflective rhythm of the study has always run somewhat counter to the urgency of ongoing work and crisis situations for CIJP and the Naya and San Juan communities. As such, this first stage of Ten Years of Change in Colombia has been characterised by a constant tension between the urgent need to respond to a violent, demanding context and the demands of the study to stop, reflect and be systematic in how data is collected and analysed to understand that context.

At the outset of the study, Christian Aid Kenya had a very different focus and direction of travel. It was evolving and localising, developing its own governance structure in response to legislation on civil society regulation – including setting up its own board – and developing a strong independent identity of its own as a distinct legal entity within Christian Aid. At the time of writing, Christian Aid Kenya's portfolio included one very large five-year resilience programme, with smaller projects on health and inclusive markets alongside. Since the start of the study, the Kenya team have regularly been involved in fundraising for discrete timebound projects with individual partner organisations. The implications of this for the study are twofold: first, whilst there is a strategic commitment to continuing work with the two partners in Narok County, the programme portfolio is dynamic and changing over time in response to fundraising efforts, and the continuity of the partnership is not guaranteed. Second, the fundraising imperative has at times diverted attention from Ten Years of Change.

By contrast, the fundraising imperative is foundational to Christian Aid's Fundraising and Supporter Engagement Department, which has been restructured several times in recent years, partly due to a consistent downward trend in charitable giving in the UK.¹¹ Alongside these external drivers there have also been internal debates which were particularly relevant to the start-up of the study. Different views about the role of Christian Aid in the UK included tensions about how fundraising was balanced with wider work on 'transformational engagement' – working to build the agency of supporters, so that they would be transformed individually and collectively through their active participation in social justice efforts. Further, demographic shifts in Christian Aid's supporter base triggered an interest in better understanding the motivations of younger supporters and an exploration of alternative spaces and opportunities for engaging them. These debates have influenced the way that supporters are becoming involved in the UK strand of the study.

Stakeholder motivations for participation

Partly in response to the contextual differences discussed above, motivations for engagement and incentives for participation also varied across the different stakeholders involved in Ten Years of Change, influencing the trajectories taken by each of the study strands.

In Colombia, for Christian Aid's country manager Ten Years of Change offered a possibility to develop something new in the portfolio of the office that reflected the country being on the brink of peace. For CIJP, the main motivation was the international visibility the research could give to communities with the potential to be left behind by the peace process, as well as a contribution to the systematisation of community memory. Further, CIJP had a pending communications project that Christian Aid Colombia had not been able to fund, and Ten Years of Change provided a way to cover the cost of some of that communication activity. On the other hand, academics from a Colombian university who were contacted in the early stages were interested in the overall research approach and theme, but could only join if their time was fully funded. Inadequate investment of resources made this research collaboration unfeasible. Although there was high-

¹¹ Charities Aid Foundation (2019) 'CAF UK Giving 2019: an overview of charitable giving in the UK'

level approval for Ten Years of Change, it approved only very limited resources. Christian Aid had to balance this investment with its other work areas, many of which have a more direct impact on poverty. The initial intention was to invest resources to enable the start-up of the study, and that further resources would be raised to sustain the study over time. But raising external resources has been challenging in a context of competing organisational attention and priorities.

In Kenya, as in Colombia, motivations were shaped by the contextual environment of the country and the programme, but also the perspectives of individual key stakeholders. The country manager had been a champion of the research and evidence agenda since the early days of REL, and became a member of REL's steering group. REL staff already had a history of collaboration with Christian Aid Kenya on the governance impact assessment which triggered the idea of Ten Years of Change. Christian Aid Kenya's manager encouraged the Kenya team to engage with research initiatives, and was motivated to share experience of the programme's work in academic journals.¹² He wanted the long-term study to focus on multi-dimensional poverty, and was motivated by the opportunity to understand and demonstrate Christian Aid's impact over time; he was acutely aware of how this could help to position Christian Aid Kenya for future funding and raise its profile. He was also keen for Christian Aid Kenya to develop a relationship with Maasai Mara University in Narok County, and saw Ten Years of Change as an opportunity to frame and support this engagement.

Motivations for participation in the UK strand of the study were very different. While in Colombia and Kenya, the two country offices 'opted in', the shift towards the UK becoming a study country – rather than the recipient of communication materials from the other countries – was driven by REL. REL staff had been actively involved in developing Christian Aid's 2017 theory of change, which noted:

To change our world, we all have to change. Underpinning our work is a deep-rooted belief in, and commitment to, solidarity and mutual respect. The people we partner with in the global South and the global North have a common cause [...] We share common needs and hopes, and together we can imagine a different world, and take collective action as global citizens to create a better future.¹³

If all parts of Christian Aid were to have 'a common cause', REL staff reasoned, it would be important for the study to engage with the different countries as equals. Having arrived at this position, they worked to bring others from the Fundraising and Supporter Engagement Department in, and build an internal constituency for to support the added value of involving the UK as a study country on a par with Colombia and Kenya. Crucial to its success was the emergence of the Head of Scotland and later the Head of Westside as champions for a UK study, which led to a discussion of whether the study might be regionally based. Eventually, however, the need to understand young people as an under-represented but future-oriented cohort of supporters led to shift in focus to explore how young supporters encounter and engage with Christian Aid and with international development.

Cultures of evidence, meanings of participation

The idea that community members would be active participants in the research was one of the study's key features from the beginning, linked to our understanding of practitioner research as documenting excluded perspectives. Detailing exactly what this should consist of in terms of a broad spectrum of possible interpretations and meanings of 'participation' has been a strong point of difference between countries, shaped in part by the epistemological perspectives of those involved and the traditions of participatory research in each country. Understandings of what constitutes evidence also differed, with a particular impact on research design.

In Colombia, the qualitative and participatory approach to research built into the concept of Ten Years of Change seemed a good fit with the need to constantly adapt to a changing context, and was a vision shared by all the Ten Years of Change stakeholders. The country manager was enthused by the idea of

¹² See, for example, Kitui, J., Dutton, V., Bester, D., Ndirangu, R., Wangai, S. and Ngugi, S. (2017) 'Traditional Birth Attendant reorientation and Motherpacks incentive's effect on health facility delivery uptake in Narok County, Kenya: An impact analysis', *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 17:25

¹³ Christian Aid (2017) Theory of Change, unpublished

participatory action research and communication, which was part of the initial conceptualisation of the study, as this resonated strongly with Christian Aid Colombia's interest in raising the visibility of the country programme within the wider organisation. Moreover, the ingrained influence of Liberation Theology in faith-based Colombian human rights organisations like CIJP also fitted well with this approach; early conversations with the leadership of CIJP made frequent reference to the work of Augusto Boal¹⁴ and the importance of participatory research. However, translating these ideas into practice was complicated. It took some time to find a coordinator for the research who had an appropriate research background and understanding of the realities of human rights violations in remote communities. Eventually, CIJP appointed one of their activist staff members, the current study coordinator, who holds a degree in anthropology.

As time passed, differences emerged in the meanings of 'participatory' applied to the study by REL and CIJP. For CIJP, 'participatory' implied talking to people and eliciting evidence of abuses where they had happened. For REL, it was much more about a systematic approach to working with communities to build research based on their perspectives, and supporting them in reflecting on how to act on the basis of their analysis. Moreover, REL was concerned about the need for structure and consistency in the research so that, for example, the data gathered could be systematically managed and analysed to respond to the research question. Similarly, there were different understandings of evidence. While CIJP excel in evidencing rights abuses for a public – and sometimes legal – audience, they were less familiar with creating and analysing evidence as part of a comparative research process. Now that the data collection is under way, discussions on the systematic analysis and management of data are still ongoing.

In Kenya, participatory research approaches were mooted early on during conversations ahead of the research design workshop. The country manager talked enthusiastically about the team's previous experience of testing a participatory communications approach – using photography for monitoring and evaluation in communities¹⁵ – and it seemed like a possible methodological option within a mixed methods study. One collaborator in the study noted however that the culture of health research in Kenya is more inclined towards valuing the quantitative over the qualitative, often using a medical model. In mid-2017, the country manager appointed a study lead with substantial research experience, in both social science and clinical trials. Following the definition of research questions at the research design workshop, he was more enthusiastic about quantitative methods than participatory communications approaches; but experimental methods were outside the experience of REL staff and beyond the study's budget. At times, finding a common understanding of terminologies was difficult.

Epistemological differences came to the fore during 2018, exacerbated by the fact that – in contrast with Colombia and the UK – the Ten Years of Change budget in Kenya was not used to fund staff time to develop the study and it was felt that the small budget available would be better spent on research activities. Differences persisted after the country manager took up a secondment on another programme and, although he remained informed of methodological debates, was no longer an active participant in meetings about the study between Christian Aid Kenya and REL. Contestation and negotiation about research design in Kenya were far stronger and longer than they had been in Colombia, or would be in the UK.

In the UK, it was clear early on that if the study was to work well and involve staff as practitioner researchers, they would need support to refine study questions and design modes of engagement with supporters. Despite senior leadership approval and two champions for the work in Scotland and Westside, there were no resources to further develop expertise in research or participatory processes. In practice, this contributed to REL deciding to scope a PhD, working with an academic at Northumbria University experienced in research collaborations with practice-based organisations. This allowed REL to be closely involved in the study design, to bring an academic researcher into the study, and to ground the study design in the wider literature.

Framing the PhD highlighted two aspects related to participation and evidence. First, we asked that the student develop participatory methodologies with UK supporters, to explore the factors that shape how different people understand and engage with Christian Aid. Second, we expected that the student would

¹⁴ Boal, A. (1985) *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group

¹⁵ **Picture Power** is one of several Communication for Development methods used by Christian Aid's communication teams.

actively engage with the evidence in the wider literature to develop new and integrated understandings of the diverse factors that shape how individuals engage with INGOs and issues of international development and change. While we were concerned that the approach was robust and rooted in the current literature, we were also keen that it was rooted and owned by the PhD student, the gatekeepers of the study within Christian Aid, and research participants.

As with the other parts of the research, we created space for participatory design, and for the final focus to respond to the local context and interests. In interviewing and recruiting potential candidates, experience of participatory methodologies and action research, and the ability to engage directly with supporters in a participatory way – i.e. research practice that was lacking within the organisation - were ultimately more important than knowledge about fundraising, international development, global citizenship, faith or Christian Aid.

Design, methodology, capacity and skills

Colombia was the first country to start on a research design. A political economy analysis, commissioned in 2016, gave good insight into both the opportunities and challenges presented by the Peace Accord, and informed a research design visit by REL staff in 2017. The trip initially planned to include all study participants in a workshop to explore different perspectives, motivations and expectations, and agree research questions and process. But it coincided with the brutal murder of a well-known human rights defender in the study region, which meant that the communities involved were scared and saddened, and the focus of CIJP was on the immediate context rather than planning a long-term piece of research; as noted above, the tension between what is planned and what happens in an unpredictable, violent context has been an ongoing challenge for the Colombia strand of the study.

The design that emerged from the 2017 trip was for multi-level research, stretching from the Naya and San Juan communities, to the sub-national level of the Valle del Cauca region, to the national level, and to the level of international actors such as Christian Aid in Colombia. This design included questions about the role of CSOs in social change, and the process of moving from violence to peace; CIJP added sub-questions before they began their fieldwork in 2018. However, despite this apparent agreement of a design, the challenges of the unpredictable context – combined with the lack of an in-country academic partner and a change of coordinator – spelt a continued evolution of the study.

The connected and coherent implementation of the community element of the study demanded more support to CIJP from REL and Christian Aid Colombia than had initially been anticipated. This led to some levels of data collection from the multi-level design being dropped – there was no capacity, for example, to carry out annual review of government and media discourse about peace in the Valle del Cauca region and contrast it with the visions of peace emerging from focus group discussions and film reports in the communities that had initially been envisaged. At the same time, translating the findings generated beyond the local level into consolidated findings for the Colombia strand of the study has been slow.¹⁶ There are several reasons for this: two different REL staff being responsible for overseeing the community and national-level elements; lack of capacity and skills in different levels of the study and parts of the team; and some of the elements originally planned for the study no longer being implemented. These factors were underpinned by a consistent lack of investment in the study discussed above, and staff time for the research that was diverted into other priorities that were more urgent in the short term. Continued commitment to the decentralised and non-extractive quality of the whole study has meant that REL staff have been reluctant to initiate or undertake analysis.

In contrast with Colombia, where the research design evolved once implementation had begun, in Kenya, evolution preceded planned implementation. During the early stages, cross-fertilisation with the Colombia study was important, particularly whilst interaction between different levels informed the development of the research design there. However, the multi-level design was not transposed wholesale to the Kenya study, because of the different motivations of those involved and a stronger focus on the community level.

¹⁶ At the time of publication of this report, the [Ten Years webpage](#) is being updated with a range of videos, blogs and papers

November 2017 saw Christian Aid Kenya and REL convene a research design workshop (Box 3), an important step in moving the research partnership forward.

Box 3. A workshop for collaborative research design

Narok County has many development challenges, including sanitation, access to healthcare, high rates of teenage pregnancy and early marriage, and livelihoods hit by climate change. It was selected as the site for Ten Years because of Christian Aid's long history of work in the area.

The three-day workshop brought together stakeholders from Masai Mara University, partner organisations and the Ministry of Health, with Christian Aid programme, research and communications staff from Kenya and the UK. It aimed to be a collaborative, explorative space to kickstart the design of the study and ensure that it was relevant and responded to local interests, and the group participated with energy and enthusiasm.

An introductory day helped participants explore their own role in social change, and to look back over what had changed in the last ten years in Narok. From this starting point, they looked to future change – using the visual metaphor of a tree – and connected this to their priorities for the study.

The second day was dedicated to using participatory methods to collectively analyse and refine priorities, eventually resulting in three areas of focus for the study: health systems strengthening, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and economic resilience.

The group also took time to consider approaches and methods, including a session on participatory communications and the potential of using community-generated images and analysis in the study. There was a range of methodological experience across the room, and differences in the methods people were comfortable using.

There are challenges in trying to design research collaboratively. Research design and research questions need to balance what is practically possible with what might be desirable. The workshop highlighted how service delivery partners, county health staff, academics and INGO staff all have different approaches, perspectives and research needs – and that this is both a strength and a challenge to working collectively.

Despite the success of the workshop, it was over-ambitious to think that research questions could be agreed in such a diverse group; in retrospect the visit of REL staff to Kenya should have been extended to allow for deeper thinking around the design, optimising the opportunity for intensive face-to-face engagement.

Ahead of embarking on the study, a research protocol had to be submitted to the Ethics Review Board of Kenyatta University in Nairobi, because the study was health-focused; it was intended to involve academics and local staff from Ministry of Health; and Christian Aid Kenya was keen to give the study legitimacy. We were mindful that if we were hoping to leave space for the detail of our methodological approach to evolve and iterate over time – for example, with the introduction of participatory tools alongside qualitative and quantitative research methods – we would need to resubmit the protocol in subsequent years to reflect any changes in approach; this forced methodological discussions to the fore.

By February 2018, REL and Christian Aid had co-developed a short overview of the research approach in Kenya, and used the national ethics protocol template as a basis for developing the detail of the approach.

Among the serious implications this had for the research process was the need to work out who should be named Principal Investigator. We all agreed that the Christian Aid Kenya study lead should take this role – with the REL adviser and two local academics as co-investigators – so he led on developing the protocol, despite not having funded time to do so. In practice, however, REL continued to play a significant role in supporting its development, and working to try to ensure coherence across the study as a whole.

We envisaged that local academics would play a quality assurance rather than a leadership or coordination role, and agreed to bring them into the later stages of the design process when we had reached a certain level of agreement between REL and Christian Aid Kenya about research design. However, unresolved differences in the way we were respectively viewing the study and valuing the legitimacy of different research methods meant that the design process turned out to be very protracted. REL consulted some of the literature on use of mixed and qualitative methods for longitudinal studies, and worked up various scenarios for discussion with the Christian Aid Kenya team, eventually bringing in a UK-based mixed methods researcher to mediate understandings of the methodological options available to us. Ten Years of Change in Kenya is currently stalled for lack of capacity to finalise the detail of the design and operationalise roles and responsibilities, in line with the available and extremely minimal budget; another change of country manager; and the extremely heavy workload of the research lead on other projects. Discussions to consider next steps are ongoing.

In the UK, research design did not start until 2018, a year later than the other two country cases. This gave clear advantages, the overall conceptualisation of the study had been developed two years previously, and by the time the UK study started there was an overall framing and overarching research question. Further, the REL staff member responsible for developing the overall research framing based on the Colombia design discussions also led the UK research, making it easier to see the connections.

Bringing together someone with funded time to think about and plan research, to get fully immersed in the literature and then discuss alternative options with senior leaders of the Fundraising and Supporter Engagement Department who are well rooted in their practice, locality and context, has meant that the mix of skills and capacity in the UK is strong. The participation of actors with different backgrounds contributed to an iterative identification of key questions and an evolving research design. The initial PhD design was driven by REL, and given meaning by the PhD student – a practitioner with 20 years' experience in community development and adult learning. It has been further explored through discussion with Christian Aid staff, and redefined and adapted further to lead to a participatory research design. As a PhD project, the design had to be approved to the university ethics board before fieldwork began in mid-2019.

However, ongoing changes in Christian Aid in the UK have challenged the implementation of the research design. The need for the Fundraising and Supporter Engagement Department to focus on fundraising has led to concerns about capacity to engage in the research, and a continual need to reassure senior leadership that the research can add value, rather than take away scarce resources from their fundraising efforts. This presents a broader challenge: about how a long-term study can fit into an NGO where planning happens in one- to three-year cycles, and where there are seldom adequate resources to take a long-term view.

Ongoing changes within FSE also meant that it was hard to sustain engagement with staff who initially invested in the process, but an opportunity emerged in the form of a campaign review which identified the importance of young people to campaigning. This was further cemented through discussions where the possibility of focusing on a new advocacy scheme developed by the youth team emerged.

Challenges: collaboration and decentralisation

Despite early attempts to emphasise simplicity, Ten Years of Change is complex: a study involving three countries, with a broad overarching framework, as well as research questions tailored to each country context, multiple levels of analysis, and a staggered start-up. But perhaps its most ambitious and innovative feature is its collaborative and decentralised identity. In developing and managing the research in this way, REL has experienced several challenges.

Navigating trade-offs

Christian Aid's flexible, unrestricted funding enabled us to start Ten Years of Change, working at our own pace and developing the study organically, taking time to build relationships with stakeholders in Christian Aid and with partner organisations, and to respond to their timeframes and needs. This way of working has privileged emergence and fluidity over concrete milestones and external scrutiny – with advantages for the quality of relationships in the study. However, conversely, the pressure of external funding can sometimes be helpful, ensuring that everyone involved gives appropriate prioritisation of and attention to an endeavour; and it can ensure mutual accountability on deadlines and deliverables.

At the same time, the multiple points of coordination and centres of authority for the study have made keeping everything moving at the same pace difficult. Over the design phase we have relied on dispersed coordination – both within REL and at country level – with no-one appointed as overall coordinator for the study. In reality, the country programme, regional and partner staff who are involved in the study all have other jobs, most of which did not previously include research. REL staff also have substantial portfolios of research-based activities aside from the study; whilst both REL advisers were allocated one day a week work on Ten Years of Change, working slowly from a distance has made it difficult to maintain focus and momentum; and new research initiatives with the promise of tangible outputs over a shorter timeframe have tended to divert attention away from Ten Years of Change. In Colombia and Kenya also, there were competing priorities in the guise of external funding opportunities with short timelines and the prospect of large budgets; staff sometimes consciously shifted their attention to these. This highlights the importance of clarifying and ensuring incentives for country staff participation in a relatively complex process with a relatively small budget.

In each of the country studies, the priorities of the local level of the study have diverted REL's attention away from the wider, internationally focused research questions. This has made it next to impossible to give attention to developing a cross-cutting analytical framework within which to bring together the different studies. This in turn shows that, without points of connection and shared conversation, a fully decentralised three-country study runs the risk of completely losing its collective character, and in turn its capacity to shift power. Points of connection and shared conversation are needed.

It has become clear that Ten Years of Change needs one coordinator to hold the overview of the study, ensuring alignment of the different pieces of the jigsaw puzzle and managing trade-offs to maximise synergies between the different components. Similarly, we underestimated the layers of complexity that a decentralised approach implies. Ten Years of Change would have unfolded more smoothly if we had been either less ambitious in scope, or more directive in design. These diffuse challenges, associated with the lack of a strong framing for the research, provide an interesting counterpoint to the more often discussed challenges of donor-driven research agendas.¹⁷

Navigating power

REL has a degree of formal power over other actors invited in to the research partnership. Despite the commitment to a decentralised and collaborative approach, power has inevitably shaped the way that this commitment has played out in practice in negotiations between REL and country teams and partners.

In Colombia, CIJP have the power to determine how they focus their visits to the remote communities, and the extent to which the research is prioritised and approached systematically. Whilst there is a formal grant agreement between Christian Aid and CIJP which outlines mutually agreed roles, responsibilities, milestones and deliverables for the research in Colombia, this has not always resulted in timely or outward-facing research outputs. In hindsight, investing in building the relationship between the study coordinator based at CIJP and the UK-based REL adviser, would have helped develop a shared understanding of the research objectives and approach relative to CIJP's human rights work at an earlier stage, strengthening

¹⁷ See, for example, Ordóñez, A. (2013) 'Why is changing donor-driven research agendas so hard', *Politics and Ideas* blog

ownership and mutual accountability. The accountability dynamics of this relationship have been complicated further by the historical relationship between Christian Aid Colombia and CIJP, which is rooted in accompaniment and solidarity, rather than the conventional hierarchy of a donor–grantee relationship. Christian Aid Colombia has long supported CIJP’s agenda and work plans, but in Ten Years, the agenda lay more firmly with Christian Aid. This presented challenges for Christian Aid Colombia in making demands of CIJP about the specifics of implementing the study.

In Kenya, there have been two main areas of contestation. The first concerned the ultimate purpose and emphasis of the long-term study, with REL having a stated desire to understand the perspectives of programme participants and other stakeholders about social change in the long-term, and Christian Aid Kenya’s increasingly explicit desire to have an impact evaluation in which change could be clearly attributed to the development interventions of Christian Aid and its partners. The second, linked to this, concerned the choice between a qualitative or quantitative methodological approach. Allowing time to solve these issues consensually and collaboratively, rather than through REL exercising its ultimate power of veto, has delayed the start of the Kenya research strand.

In the UK, the power relations have played out slightly differently. Initially it seemed that the research would be relatively straightforward, as the Fundraising and Supporter Engagement Department has a research-focused team, keen to understand their supporters and how best to engage with them. In practice though, this team felt that they had little power within their department, and the fundraising mindset and fundamental shifts in the department resulted in a relatively low profile for the study. So, getting buy-in for the study meant strategically by-passing the formal power of departmental structures by identifying champions in the regions whose support key in enabling access to supporters. However, the challenge of ensuring that the research contributes to organisational learning and strategic decision-making around supporter engagement is ongoing. At the same time, the power dynamics of negotiating a collaborative PhD are complex, involving different stakeholders and hierarchies across different institutions.

Although power relations between REL and the Ten Years of Change study countries are one important dynamic, there are also an overlapping set of power relations at play within Christian Aid in London. REL is a small team with very few financial resources, trying to develop a piece of work about long-term learning and understanding; at times this has been in tension with others who are working towards short-term impact or are experiencing different pressures for delivery.

There have also been times when REL has had to mediate between other parts of Christian Aid in London and Ten Years of Change stakeholders in other countries, particularly concerning communications. There have been sometimes conflicting assumptions about what constitutes consent for participation in producing communications content for Christian Aid’s digital channels, particularly around the acceptability of recording verbal rather than written consent. This has caused frustration in Colombia, with staff feeling that they should have discretionary power to tailor consent requirements to the characteristics of the local context. There are also hidden power dynamics inherent in different understandings of what constitutes adequate quality in content for communicating to UK audiences.

Conclusion

Ten Years of Change was set up with the desire to understand how change happens over the long-term and the contribution that an INGO can make to it, something that is seldom possible in often short-term NGO analysis. Three years on, is our decentralised and collaborative model working?

We were overly ambitious in concept and design; translation into practice and the studies themselves have not progressed as far as we initially hoped. Trying to set up study that is both practitioner-led and decentralised led to a process that was too open to iteration, making it challenging to keep a hold on the overall picture, ensure connections between the elements, ensure research quality and, ultimately, have impact.

Nonetheless, the process of setting up Ten Years of Change offers learning on practitioner research. This conclusion asks four questions to draw together our reflections:

- How have we balanced practice and research in our idea of ‘practitioner research’?
- How collaborative was the research design?
- What have we learnt about our own role and position in relation to supporting this type of decentralised practitioner research within an INGO?
- What might we adjust for the next three years?

Balancing ‘practice’ and ‘research’

Throughout the design and initial implementation process we grappled with how to balance practice and research; and we asked our practitioner partners to define the research process in a way that would be useful for their practice. Although the rationale for this was sound, the result has been a process that is so practice-driven that we have struggled to carve out consistent space for research activities, and a shared understanding of study across distance and discipline.

As such, a continual focus the needs of the practitioner and the dynamics of the local level, we may have compromised the research itself, risking quality and rigour at the expense of adaptability and responsive design.

To what extent is the research collaborative?

The focus on a collaborative, decentralised approach was not only to root the research in practice; it was also a statement of intent and beliefs. Thus, it was both practical and political.

However, we did not create space to clarify our beliefs about collaboration or decentralisation, or achieve shared meaning – either within the REL team or among the partners. We did not engage our partners in discussion about what we meant by collaborative research or why we were doing it. Equally, at the outset, we did not initially clarify our own non-negotiables, or our research limitations – which presented a particular challenge in Kenya when the country team wanted to employ a survey approach which we did not feel would fulfil our initial idea for the study.

This raises the question of what happens when there is a tension between the collaborative character of a research process and the choice of methods; this in turn speaks to the balance of power between study participants. Looking ahead, we need to consider how to make our own interests and expectations more explicit, and to be more transparent in how we approach collaboration.

Position and role

In a practice-based, collaborative and decentralised research initiative within a large INGO, what is the role of a small, London-based research unit? In the absence of large-scale funding, delivering our agenda depends on our ability to build partnerships within the organisation, using our power to create shared visions and agendas.

Nonetheless, we have role as ‘funder’ of the study which might constrain a truly decentralised research design. We have endeavoured to use its role to coordinate and ensure that each of the various branches of the study have been adequately supported with the limited funding that has been available.

In addition to the funding role, REL staff have found themselves playing a multitude of other roles at different times in relation to the research process in Colombia, Kenya and the UK – accompanying, advising, coordinating, designing, documenting, mediating, assuring quality, researching, training – in addition to continually finding ways to maintain momentum and support of senior managers in the UK. What impact has this diversity of roles had on the collaborative and decentralised approach to the study?

The roles of accompanying, advising and training colleagues in Colombia and Kenya could perhaps have been decentralised to researchers or advisers in each country – certainly, this was the initial objective. However, without existing personal, trust-based relationships with academics, in practice it was necessary for the Christian Aid study teams to establish the study before bringing in new actors. In Colombia, the lack of funding for the academics also played against decentralising research support and training. This is in direct contrast to the UK, where training and quality assurance are built in to the PhD process, and the

costs covered by the doctoral funding. One lesson to be learned from these contrasts is that decentralising roles demands resources.

REL's two research advisers in particular faced dilemmas in providing quality assurance for the Colombia and Kenya components of the study. They have had to constantly ensure that playing a supporting role did not slip into actually designing and implementing research on behalf of the country teams. At times, both staff felt that they could have become more involved in the research process itself – for instance, in the case of Colombia, by conducting analysis of raw data and writing reports, to help the production of deliverables go faster, and in Kenya, by taking a lead in writing a research protocol. However, both were mindful that this would have been counter to their understanding of the decentralised and collaborative approach, so they did not become involved in these ways.

Co-creating collaborative research is hard: it takes patience and time, and it is even more complicated when being negotiated at a distance through many layers and the fragmented relationships that connect them. Although we knew this at the outset, this did not make the challenges easier to navigate; they are relational, structural and unpredictable, and not always possible to mitigate. We gave shape to the overall study and identified the over-riding research question that connects across country contexts, but most of our time and focus has gone into supporting and enabling the local-level research, and renegotiating in organisational spaces to keep the long-term study on Christian Aid's agenda.

Looking ahead, it will be important to re-engage with our own role as researchers, developing the international-level research questions and developing a central agenda that we can deliver on directly, while continuing to support the evolution of the study at country level.

Achievements and looking forward

In concluding this paper, we are still considering the question of what have we achieved, and whether it is good enough. Progress has been slow. But we do have clear research questions in each location. In Colombia and the UK, we also have actors responsible for different stages of the research process, and systems for translating that data collection into meaningful analysis at different levels. In Colombia, where the study has advanced furthest, we are beginning to see tangible outputs and impacts, summarised in Box 4. A tangible benefit in the Colombia case has been the creation of space to consider long-term change at the level of the country programme.

Box 4. “It is like saying the war ended, when actually it is just beginning”

The words of Luisa Mosquera, a Naya leader, feature in a short video which brings together Indigenous voices on what has changed in their communities since the peace agreement was signed. This video, alongside four others, is an output from the twice-yearly Ten Years research visits CIJP makes to the Valle del Cauca to document and collectively analyse Afro-Colombian and Indigenous views of the implementation of the peace agreement. They are published on the Justicia y Paz website, part of a vital living archive of grassroots narratives of conflict, change and peacebuilding. They also stand as evidence of the human rights abuses that continue in the region despite the peace agreement.

In addition to this community-level work, Ten Years has created an opportunity for CIJP staff to reflect on their own organisational theory of change, and how it has shifted in response both to the peace accord, and to their understanding of how the communities they work with see change. So, as Yohana López of CIJP comments, “protecting lives is still necessary, but so is the strengthening of

capacity in memory and justice, territory and environment, democracy and participation”.

The research has also opened a space for a yearly discussion with staff of Christian Aid Colombia, which provides an opportunity to link community and partner perspectives with those of national and international civil society, and reflect on change. In the 2018 meeting, one staff member noted, “there is an uncertainty at the moment and that impacts on civil society. It is ironic, this moment we are living – the narrative of the government abroad is completely different from the narrative we have in the country... Civil society is trying to adjust and re-accommodate. There is a lot of social unrest. We wonder how will this contribute to a different type of social movement.”

Through these spaces for reflection and learning, Ten Years is providing a unique opportunity to link change at different levels, and provide opportunities for very different stakeholders to reflect on how they respond to it.

Across the three strands of Ten Years, the process has mirrored our understanding of how change happens within our development interventions – for each two steps forward we have had to take one back, as staff in our country office or at partner level change, as the wider contexts change and as Christian Aid’s internal landscape shifts. While we remain excited by the initial idea and enthusiastic about the project, we are also more realistic about what it might be possible to achieve, and what is needed to sustain a feeling of day-to-day progress in the study. We are aware that we need to be clearer about the limits of our collaboration and decentralisation, and the minimum standards required for the practice to be considered research.

In shifting the balance of our attention away from the local level research we are also aware that we need to enter a new phase. If we are to answer the question of how the local interacts with the national we need to pay attention to the national. We also need to seek a source of funding that will enable us to transition our nascent research into a properly resourced study, with a dedicated, long-term coordinator.

Although Ten Years of Change has started slowly we believe it is valuable in many ways. To our country programme staff who are learning about research through doing, by identifying research questions, negotiating research approaches and agreeing research practice; to Christian Aid, which is investing in understanding change in the long-term, beyond the project cycle; and to us as research leaders in an INGO, committed to a collaborative approach that actively seeks to dismantle the ‘normal’ practice of UK-based researchers going to developing countries to collect data for analysis back in the UK.

We are continually learning about how to support practitioners to design and deliver research and we are deepening our understanding of how to construct a space in which we can enable research to be rooted in practice, empowering in design and delivery, and contributing to global knowledge. As we move into the next three years of our study we intend to manage these dynamics better, to deliver value for the participants, clarity for the practitioners and knowledge for the sector on how social change happens the contribution an INGO makes in this process; and to show that a decentralised and collaborative model for development research is possible.

