

Picture Power

Empowering communities through photography



About Picture Power

The aim of a community-based/participatory photo project is to provide communities with the skills and equipment to conduct their own project evaluation and/or monitoring. 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.

This Picture Power project was implemented in two districts of Malawi, Machinga and Mulanje, with five participants chosen from a community in each location. Those who took part were encouraged to take photographs of the activities, changes and challenges that have been important to them and their communities during their involvement with ECRP (see below).

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

Developed and managed by Christian Aid's photo unit, Picture Power draws on the 'most significant change' story-gathering approach and can be tailored to suit specific programmes across a range of themes.

About ECRP

Christian Aid leads the consortium delivering the Enhancing Community Resilience Programme (ECRP) in Malawi.

ECRP is working to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, reduce vulnerability and strengthen the resilience of around 71,000 households. In total, it reaches 355,000 people across seven districts – Kasungu, Chikwawa, Mwanza, Machinga, Mulanje, Thyolo and Nsanje.

Christian Aid and its fellow consortium members CARE International Malawi and ActionAid Malawi together manage 10 local organisations with long-standing experience in target areas. These partners deliver ECRP on the ground.

The Participants

Picture Power participants were selected by ECRP partners to represent a cross section of their community. All had been involved in ECRP interventions from the programme's inception and, in many cases, had been actively promoting its approaches in their communities as lead farmers or members of village savings and loans (VSL) groups. Each participant was encouraged to reflect their own experience of ECRP through photography, visually communicating its outcomes and impacts, positive or negative, in their day-to-day lives.

While there is a clear technical element to Picture Power training, in how to use cameras and guidance on composition and exposure, it is emphasised that there are no 'correct' photographs. Everyone was encouraged to take an approach to the project that they felt most appropriate. The aim of the project was not to produce a group of photojournalists, but rather to gain an insight into the everyday lives of their communities from a personal perspective. This led to some participants taking a variety of photographic approaches to the project such as producing self-portraits or recruiting friends to act out scenarios.

Picture Power participants were also encouraged to think laterally about the wider impact of ECRP beyond its direct interventions, for example, the 'knock-on' effects of ECRP on community members not directly involved with the programme. Through this approach, it was hoped that 'soft' issues would surface, that may not usually be picked up by more traditional M&E approaches.



Elliot Chamveka, 35, is married with four children. Selected to start the seed multiplication project, he identified seed systems, irrigation and VSL as the most significant interventions of ECRP.



Bennita Ellias, 40, is a farmer and mother of three. As with many of the Picture Power participants, she identified VSL groups as having had the greatest impact on her life.



Dennis Kaliyati, 23, is a member of the ECRP youth group that educates the local community about the effects of climate change. He identified low carbon technology as the most significant intervention..



Jennifer Mkwanda, 29, is a divorced single mother with five children. For her, VSL, irrigation and conservation agriculture were the most important interventions.



Mary Brahimu, 33, is married with four children. She identified mulching, crop rotation and multi-cropping as important elements of the conservation agriculture techniques introduced by ECRP.



Jack Issa, 32, is married with three children. he identified disaster risk reduction (DRR), winter cropping and irrigation as the most significant ECRP interventions for his community.



Luke Ndendende, 38, is married with five children. A village headman, he is concerned with the wellbeing of the whole community, but saw conservation agriculture and irrigation as key ECRP outcomes.



Steve Malambo, 45, is married with three children. He is a VSL group coordinator and a lead farmer, and is involved in the pigeon pea scheme introduced by ECRP.



Mary Wilson, 43, is a married mother of three and an ECRP lead farmer. She felt conservation agriculture, such as drought-resistant crops and manure making, were the most significant ECRP interventions.



Alex Thomu, 33, is married with four children. He thinks VSL groups and conservation agriculture are significant but is also particularly concerned with deforestation.

Validating the Results

After a week of taking photographs, Picture Power participants, with support from Christian Aid staff, wrote captions describing the subject and indicating why the photograph was significant. Each participant selected between 15 and 25 images that they felt best represented the most important outcomes of ECRP from a personal perspective and from the point of view of the wider community.

The chosen images were then printed and each participant presented their work to members of their community in an exhibition. Once all of the participants had presented their photographs, community members were asked to select the issues in each individual's presentation that they felt were the most important. They did this by placing a coloured sticker, representing their gender, on the photograph they agreed represented the most significant ECRP outcome from their own perspective.

When all members of the community had voted for their photographs, the results were recorded by Christian Aid monitoring and evaluation staff. The choices were compared with results from more traditional evaluation exercises to gain a more holistic view of the effect of ECRP on the target communities.



Participants present their images to members of the community in an exhibition, explaining why the subjects depicted in the photographs are important to them.



Community members use a system of coloured stickers to indicate which of the ECRP interventions they considered most significant.

The Photographs

This is just a selection of some of the images taken by Picture Power participants in Machinga and Mulanje. By the end of the project each member of the group had enough photographs to produce a small picture book showing their personal Picture Power stories.



A meeting of the Majegeja village savings and loans (VSL) group. This was the first VSL group to be formed under ECRP and it has helped many people to start businesses. 'I also benefited and was able to start a pancake business and sell vegetables according to demand,' says Jennifer Mkwanda. 'The pancake business helped me to buy fertiliser to grow more cash crops, particularly vegetables.'





Community members clear the ground for the construction of a community-based childcare centre, which will help local children prepare for primary school. In Jennifer Mkwanda's community, many children don't go to school, so she hopes the new centre will teach them the importance of education.



Mary's neighbour Beatrice Saukira reads. Beatrice is a member of the VSL group, of which about 75% are literate.

Stanford Musapa, chairman of the village development committee, grows acacia trees in the community nursery to be used for agro-forestry projects promoted by ECRP. He has had this role for a year. 'The new trees help protect our property from strong winds and hailstorms and we plant along the river banks to protect the soil from being washed away,' says Mary Wilson. Through the committee, Mary has seen more people getting involved in community development issues. 'Stanford leads by example and this encourages the community to get involved.'





Chief Mlingwa bought this boat with a VSL loan and now charges people to take them across the river. 'This river causes havoc when it floods,' Mary Wilson explains. 'Sometimes there are crocodiles in the river. The other side of the river is Mozambique. Some people from that side come over to Malawi to work in the tea fields, while some Malawians have land in Mozambique.'



A community meeting with representatives from ECRP and elderly and disabled members of the community. ECRP suggested that this group was not being fully reached and has also asked representatives such as Steve Malambo to visit the houses of people unable to attend ECRP meetings and help them to be more involved with the project and its benefits.



Intake for an irrigation scheme, Mbambazi.



Mary Wilson with two of the three goats she bought with her VSL fund dividend at the end of the year. She received MK62,500 (MK38,000 in cash after the deduction of an outstanding loan) based on an initial investment of MK42,000.



With the profits from her fish business, Bennita Elias bought goats which generate income and supply manure for her land.

Emmanuel makes fish traps. Previously, he bought fish from the lake, but after investing in materials to make traps he is able to catch fish himself to sell. This generates MK5,000-10,000 profit each day.





'We distribute our roles and try to be gender balanced,' Emmanuel says. People mock him when he washes clothes, but he doesn't care. He understands it is important to share the chores.



Treadle pumps provided by ECRP feed into irrigation canals constructed earlier through the programme. '[Before] we would irrigate our land by collecting water in buckets and carrying it to our land,' says Bennita Ellias.

There are 32 members of the local irrigation group, which is part of ECRP's larger irrigation initiative. The village headman made irrigable land available to the community for the cultivation of crops.



The village headman stands next to his maize silo, part of ECRP's post harvest management initiative.



Community member Esther Doctor gathers firewood.



Local people cut down trees and use the wood in 'inefficient' ways. In this picture, Dennis Kaliyati 's sister-in-law Dorrica Kabiisa acts out the process to demonstrate the problem.



A performance organised by ECRP partner Emmanuel International. ECRP youth volunteers perform drama and traditional dances that advocate climate change adaptation and raise awareness of the issue.



After selling her cookstoves, Florence is able to buy a school uniform for her daughter Eunice.



Alex Thomu, at the nursery established through ECRP, plants saplings where other trees have died. Only six have died.



Mariam tends the pigeon pea field.



Mariam prepares seeds for planting.

Elliot Chamveka's children go to school.





A new community borehole provided by the government.



VSL member Elube Isa in front of her maize silo.



Amina Hanton looks after orphans despite having no income of her own.



Mariam Ngwembule and other community members draw water from a hole. This water-source is approximately 1km from her home.

Another beneficiary of VSL and winter cropping/irrigation. Profits allowed him to open a shop.



As part of the village civil protection committee (VCPC), Jack Issa receives texts through the ESOKO system warning that Machinga district is set to experience reduced rainfall.





Jack Issa writes a poster to share information from the text messages with the community and to give advice on appropriate action to take (for example, planting drought-resistant crops).



Rainwater harvesting helps with planning for the planting season. Information is shared with the community and people are alerted if floods are likely.