XALAPA 2017
Poder Para la Gente

INFORMATION BRIEF: SUB-THEME 1

Opportunities And Challenges Of Volunteer Engagement Across The PAL Network

PAL NETWORK
People's Action for Learning

MIA
MEDICIÓN INDEPENDIENTE de Aprendizajes

Executive Summary

Over 80 participants from 19+ Global South countries attended PAL Network's 5th Annual meeting in Xalapa, Mexico to explore citizen participation in household-based learning assessments, under the meeting theme '**Power to the People**'. Over the past 11 years, PAL Network member countries have recruited and trained more than half a million volunteers to conduct simple learning assessments in their communities. Every year, more than **68,000** citizens volunteer to traverse some of the most difficult and remote terrain in their countries, walking from house to house to find out if children are learning.

Volunteers are the PAL Network's most precious resource. Without citizen volunteers giving up their valuable time to traverse even the most hard-to-reach areas of their communities, we would not be able to collect the data we have regarding learning levels of the hardest to reach children. During the meeting, participants broke out into sub-theme groups to discuss their experiences working with volunteers, as well as the potential role of the PAL Network in consolidating and learning from these experiences.

Participants agreed that there is a wealth of ideas about how to celebrate volunteers that should be further explored by the network. Participants agreed on five activities the network could explore over the coming year. The first suggestion was for PAL Network to start a global volunteer award program to recognize outstanding volunteers and celebrate their achievements. The second suggestion was to incentivize volunteers to make short videos about who they are, their motivations for volunteering and their experience conducting citizen-led assessments.

Participants also agreed that the PAL Network could look into creating a global alumni association for PAL Network volunteers with an app or online platform for them to connect and share experiences. Fourth was a suggestion to create a social media strategy for celebrating volunteers by asking them to tag PAL Network with photos, videos, or short texts about themselves and their experiences volunteering. Lastly, participants suggested building a PAL Network compendium to present the wide range of different activities that volunteers undertake across the network.

Introduction

The 5th Annual PAL Network meeting was held in Xalapa, Mexico from 13th to 16th March 2017. The meeting was jointly hosted by Medición Independiente de Aprendizajes (MIA) and the PAL Network. The meeting provided structured opportunities for deep exploration of this year' theme: 'Power to the People'. The theme was critically explored by over 80 participants from more than 19 Global South countries in four different sub-theme groups. Each sub-theme focused on a different aspect of citizen participation in conducting household-based learning assessments with a focus on value, potential and next steps.

Power To The People

The power of this movement lies in the fact that it is led by citizens themselves. Every year, more than 68,000 citizens volunteer to traverse some of the most difficult and remote terrain in their countries, walking from house to house to find out if children are learning. Citizen-led assessments are "owned" by ordinary people, local leaders, local NGOs and other partner organizations at local and national level.

The PAL Network philosophy is simple. You cannot begin to find a solution without first understanding the problem. Finding solutions is not just the responsibility of policymakers, government leaders, head teachers and others, but includes parents and local citizens. The citizen-led assessment model allows hundreds of thousands of citizens to experience and understand the problem first hand in their own communities.

Citizen-Led Learning Assessments: What Do We Know?

Over the past 11 years, PAL Network member countries have collectively recruited and trained more than half a million citizen volunteers

Historically, volunteers have given between 1 and 3 days of their time to be trained, and approximately 2-3 additional days to conduct the assessment

The profile of PAL Network volunteers is as diverse as our communities themselves: in age, in occupation, in level of education, in socio-economic status, and many other indicators

PAL Network volunteers have different reasons and motivations for volunteering their time to conduct the assessment

Each volunteer has a story to tell about their engagement and involvement with the assessment in their own community

The Opportunities And Challenges Of Engaging Volunteers

The PAL Network is a global movement of citizens volunteering their time to understand the status of learning in their communities and collecting data to produce a national picture of learning in their country. Our volunteers are our most precious resource. Without citizen volunteers giving up their valuable time to traverse even the most hard-to-reach areas of their communities, we would not be able to collect the data we have regarding learning levels of the hardest to reach children.

We rely on volunteers who are enthusiastic, willing to learn, interested in people and education, want to make a difference in their community and are committed to persevere, even under challenging circumstances. Relying on citizen volunteers to collect this important data also comes with its challenges: from understanding the profile of suitable and effective volunteers, to understanding their motivations and expectations, to managing logistics and responding to last minute changes.

Sharing Experiences Across The Network

A Summary Of Group Discussions

During the sub-theme sessions in Xalapa, Mexico, the first part of the session focused on sharing experiences across the network. Network members were keen to learn more from each other and asked some of the following questions:

1   What is the typical profile of volunteers who conduct the assessments?

2   How much information do network members currently collect about our volunteers?

3   What do current network members understand about citizens' motivations to get involved in citizen-led assessments?

4   Do we know why 'repeat' volunteers return every year?

5   What more can we do to harness the goodwill and enthusiasm of volunteers and celebrate them?

Experiences From ASER In Pakistan

" As we heard in the panel discussions earlier, the PAL Network has collectively recruited and trained over one million citizens over the past eleven years to conduct learning assessments in their villages and towns. This is an incredible number of people and demonstrates the power of volunteer spirit in global South countries. The strength of the citizen-led movement is reliant on citizens who give up their time to understand and contribute to improving our knowledge about children's learning. But how much do we actually know about our volunteers? Do we recognize outstanding volunteers and provide them with further opportunities to reach their potential? Do we celebrate the extraordinary? What can PAL Network do to upgrade and celebrate our volunteers?

Experiences From Medicion Independiente De Aprendizajes (MIA) In Mexico

" In Mexico, we agree that the volunteers are key to our success. If we did not have volunteers to collect data on children's learning, then we wouldn't have any data at all. This is what sets us apart from other national and international learning assessments – citizen-led assessments are very sustainable. It doesn't cost a lot of money, it can be done on a huge scale, and we use people from local communities so parents are comfortable talking to them. We do collect some information about our volunteers in Mexico, but not enough to be able to share engaging stories about their experiences. Across the network, we are good at marketing ourselves as a data-driven organization but it would be great if the same effort went into telling people – 'we are a global South volunteering movement, driven by wanting to improve the lives of our children'. That is a very powerful message. It would be great if we could agree on some small-scale activities to document the stories of volunteers from every country and then publish those experiences as a network.

Experiences From Uwezo In Tanzania

" It is also important to consider the capacity of the volunteers, so we can identify those who are able to go beyond conducting the assessments. How can we work with volunteers who can communicate findings and encourage parents, teachers, and local communities to take action, for example? If we can better understand the profiles of these volunteers, we can then create strategies to build their capacity. Citizen-led assessments are only sustainable for as long as we are able to motivate volunteers to get involved. We have a role to play in articulating to volunteers: these are the skills that you will learn if you participate in the training and conduct the assessment. Beyond the assessment, there may be opportunities to get more involved with communication efforts. Many of our volunteers are young people who are looking for work, and looking to build up their experience. It is our responsibility to think about how we can retain them and build their capacity. If they move onto work within the education sector, they will remain supportive friends of Uwezo and that is important.

Experiences From ASER In India

> Over time, the profile of our partner institutions responsible for conducting the assessment has changed. At first, there were more NGOs involved in recruiting and training volunteers, but now we have more teacher training institutions. When we talk about sustainability, we think this is very important. We are offering a module to assess children first, and teach them based on what they already know – understanding where they are. Like in Tanzania, these volunteers will likely remain supportive friends of ASER and Pratham. But more importantly, they will continue to use simple, competency-based assessments in their teaching lives. If every teacher did this, then we may be well on our way to solve the learning crisis. In terms of recognizing outstanding volunteers, we could definitely improve. has not been done before. We can also use the monitoring data to understand who the strongest volunteers are, and recognize them for their contributions.

Experiences From Uwezo In Kenya

> In Kenya, there is such diversity amongst the different regions of the country that in each, we see differing levels of motivation to volunteer. In some regions, we find young people ready and motivated to get involved in activities that might build their knowledge and skillsets. In other areas it is very difficult to recruit volunteers as they expect to be paid for their participation. I think this is similar throughout other PAL Network countries, too. In those communities, volunteer recruitment takes more time and effort than in others. We may be more likely to experience volunteers dropping out after they have participated in the training when they realize that this is going to take 2 to 3 solid days' work to complete. Are we doing a good enough job to market the skills and research experience that volunteers will gain from their involvement?

" In terms of thinking of different ways we can make the volunteers see the bigger picture, there is definitely more we can do. In Cameroon, many people get their information from religious organizations and they are very good at mobilizing people. This might be one opportunity for communication of the findings and discussing how to take action at a community level. There also may be ways that we have not explored to engage with the diaspora communities in other countries to build awareness, invite diaspora volunteers to participate in the assessment and fundraise. Having ambassadors or champions of volunteers could also be very motivating, especially for young people. We may not have fully tapped the potential of the private sector to recognize volunteers with small awards or rewards. Lastly, when volunteers have difficulties accessing a particular village, established links with local leaders can help a lot. Leaders have a role to mobilize communities to participate in the assessment, and can also play a vital role in the communication and dissemination of results.

What Is The Role Of The PAL Network?

After network members had shared their experiences of working with citizen volunteers, the second part of the session focused on exploring what the role of the network might be in consolidating and learning from these experiences. Some of the following questions were explored:

1	At a network level, how can we better understand the impact that volunteering has on citizen volunteers and how volunteering has changed opinions, perspectives and even lives?
2	Is there something we can do at a network-level to profile and celebrate our volunteers? What would this look like?
3	Are there potential opportunities to build a citizen-led assessment alumni community? What would this look like?
4	Are there potential opportunities for engaging and retaining volunteers that we have not yet explored? What are they?
5	How can PAL Network amplify the voices of half a million citizens at a global level through the strength of our collective voice?

What Might The Future Look Like?

Next Steps For The PAL Network

From the rich and interesting discussions within the sub-theme group, participants agreed that there is a wealth of ideas about how to retain and celebrate volunteerism that should be further explored by the network. Participants agreed on five key steps to be explored by the PAL Network over the coming year, to ensure that we are capitalizing on volunteers enthusiasm and experiences.

1. Start A Global Volunteer Award Program

All participants agreed that at the national and global level, we could be doing more to recognize outstanding volunteers and celebrate their achievements. One idea for this is to create an awards program that builds from national, regional and global level. An example of this could be something like the Varkey Foundation Global Teaching Awards (with hashtag #TeachersMatter). If PAL Network were able to put an Award together then this is something that could potentially attract independent funding.

2. Incentivize Volunteers To Make Short Videos

Participants' agreed that the network could do more to showcase the PAL Network as a global movement of citizens' volunteering their time to improve knowledge about children's learning. Many volunteers have interesting and unique experiences and stories to share about their involvement in citizen-led assessments that we have not collected. Many volunteers across the network have access to smart phones, where they could film a short video to share their experiences. The network could offer prizes to those volunteers with the best videos and they could be uploaded onto the PAL Network website to showcase the diversity of our network through our volunteer base.

3. Create An Alumni Association For PAL Volunteers

Creating a global Alumni Association for PAL Network volunteers may be a way to capture and share volunteer experiences and connect volunteers across the world. One key challenge of a shared platform could be language. If we created regional hubs within the platform then English, French and Spanish would reach the vast majority of volunteers. Given that many volunteers have access to smart phones, this could even be built as a mobile app.

4. Create A Social Media Strategy For Celebrating Volunteers

Public recognition on social media of outstanding volunteers may be a quick win to celebrate them and tell their stories. PAL Network could institute a program where volunteers can either submit photos and videos or text via e-mail, or tag PAL Network on Facebook or Twitter with a photo or a video of themselves volunteering, and a little text about themselves.

5. Create A PAL Network Volunteering Compendium

In each PAL Network country, volunteers give different amounts of time to do different tasks and activities. To show the range and variety of tasks and time taken, PAL Network could create a compendium of information across the network, tracking how much time volunteers participate in assessment and action activities, how long their training is in each, where the training takes place (household, community, school, or other) and with information about each volunteers' experience and their motivation for getting involved.