

CRITICAL STORIES OF CHANGE

Love of the heart

Tales from Raizes Vivas Brazil

By Andrea Cornwall
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Background

Critical stories of change

Critical stories of change is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid International plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. But in their openness, self-criticism, detailed analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are far removed from self-congratulatory 'good practice case studies'.

Critical stories of change are full of life, and are intended to impart the insights, advice and confidences of a friend.

ActionAid International often makes claims for its work and achievements. Yet, in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is often one of many players. What ActionAid rarely gets to know is the significant nature of its contribution and the factors (both internal and external) that contributed to the outcomes. *Critical stories of change* launches a new learning initiative in ActionAid International. The stories are the product of a facilitated learning process and aim to explore how change (both negative and positive) happens from the perspectives of different stakeholders. These are stories that explicitly link ActionAid and its partners' grassroots work to a rights agenda and hopefully capture the full complexity of ActionAid's development interventions and experiences: from the perspective of poor people, partners and organisation(s) and other stakeholders involved, as well as ActionAid itself. The documented lessons and experiences will hopefully provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

Acknowledgements

I owe huge debts to many people for their contributions to this 'story of change'. I would like to thank the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo and ActionAid Brazil for welcoming me, sharing their time and ideas with me, and for all that they taught me about how development ought to be done. I am especially grateful to Marlis, Nivete, Alberto and Jorge for the time they made to share with me their thoughts, analyses, experiences and reflections. They taught me a great deal. To the women of Barbalho and Pirapama, and especially to Tamiris, Nazilde and Elizete, I am profoundly grateful for making the time to chat with me – and to Nazilde and Luciene for delicious lunches. I'd like to thank Ana Toni and Maria Lucia Cardoso for sharing their impressions and experiences with me, and I'm especially grateful to Maria Lucia for her comments on an earlier version of this story. For her support and patience, and for asking me to write this story in the first place, I'd like to thank Antonella Mancini. It goes without saying that my reflections here are entirely personal and in no way represent the views of ActionAid.

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About the author

Andrea Cornwall is a research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, where she directs a research programme on women's empowerment.

“Love of the heart”

Tales from Raizes Vivas, Brazil



Photo: Andrea Cornwall

View of Barbalho, northeast Brazil

If you don't have love, you can't succeed with anything. There are things about which you have love – the things you struggle to acquire, those are the ones you have love for. Like our community centre, there was lots of struggle and if we didn't have love in our hearts, then we would have stopped. But love in the heart is another thing, you are only separated from it by death. It's that love that makes us struggle.

Nazilde, resident of Barbalho and member of Raizes Vivas project committee.

We get paid to do this, and when we hear these stories, it makes us feel our work is worthwhile.

Alberto, ActionAid Brazil Project Officer, commenting on Raizes Vivas members' stories of change.

Tamiris rocked on her heels, beaming. Twelve years old and sparkling with life, she'd told me about all the things she liked about living in Barbalho – a place that many in this part of north-eastern Brazil regard as a place where only the poorest of the poor live. The fruit is free, she said, and she and her friends can play without being frightened of being run over: the mud road is so poor that few would willingly drive through the barrio, and when the rains come it is impassable. The only trouble, she says, is that it is easy to slip down the steep paths and this is dangerous, especially for pregnant women – like her mother, Neta, who is carrying her seventh child. Barbalho is safer than where she lived before, where she would see dead bodies in the street and hear the sounds of fighting as she tried to sleep. Here it is peaceful.

“What else do you like about being here?” I asked her. “The art we do and the letters we write,” she said. And then she told me of how it was because of the letters that she and her friends had written that all these changes had come to Barbalho, and to nearby Pirapama.

“People lived in wooden houses, but today they live in proper houses and it is us girls who have done a lot for that, writing those letters,” she said. “It has given me the chance to help others. Being able to do this brings me so much happiness.”

It was a perspective on sponsorship that I had never heard before. Tamiris recognised the part she was playing in making people's lives better: that through the letters she wrote, she could do for her community something that few 12-year-old children could imagine having the opportunity to do. It was a far cry from the images of abject African children that are so often used to tug at the heart-strings of would-be sponsors. Here was a very different reason for donating money.

Tamiris' pride and sense of her own ability to act was echoed in the stories her neighbours told me. “Once I was shy, I wouldn't say anything. I just used to stay in the house cooking,” said Nazilde, a striking woman in her early 40s. “Now I feel I am



Tamiris

Photo: Andrea Cornwall

completely strong, I don't have any fear of anyone or anything. Even of going by plane and talking to the president of ActionAid International,” she adds, referring to her recent trip to the World Social Forum with Nivete of the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo (CMC). As we talk, someone calls her from up the hill. “I'm busy being recorded,” she shouts back, turning to me with a broad grin. “Today people call me Dona Nazilde,” she says, “I've gained credibility. Imagine, they call me Dona.”

I said goodbye to Tamiris, Nazilde and their friends and colleagues from the project's work in Barbalho and Pirapama as we walked through the centre of Cabo de Santo Agostinho on International Women's Day. The Centro das Mulheres do Cabo had mobilised more than 100 women to march through the town to demand their rights. I walked alongside the women from Raizes Vivas as they held a brightly painted, 40-metre long banner with panels painted by the many women's groups with

whom the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo works, including one showing their struggle for the right to water. Turning to Silvia Cordeiro, director of the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo, I told her how moved I was by what I had seen. “The Women’s Centre is 20 years old,” she said, “we have a history here in this area. This is about that history.” For ActionAid Brazil, it was that history, and the rich and deep connections that Centro das Mulheres do Cabo has with movements, networks and policy institutions, that made it a partner with whom to embark on a journey in pursuit of social justice.

Brazil is an immense country. For an international NGO to set about trying to satisfy the needs of Brazil’s 20 million people living in poverty directly would barely touch the tip of an iceberg of deprivation and social exclusion. Seeking to address the inequalities that sustain poverty in Brazil calls for strategies to build partnerships and networks with other social actors and critical engagement with the state that can create the waves that make change happen. The story of how, in this setting, ActionAid Brazil is able to make a difference is a complicated tale, one in which partnerships and alliances at the local, regional, national and international levels play a fundamental and formative part. Behind the kinds of changes that Tamiris and her friends and family are experiencing on the ground in Barbalho and Pirapama are relationships that are infused with values, visions and ways of working together. The story of these changes, and of the other changes that ActionAid Brazil helps to bring about through its engagement with its many partners, is as much about these relationships as of everyday development practice at the grassroots.

Becoming someone: changing lives through Raizes Vivas

Surrounded by members of the Raizes Vivas project committee, Centro das Mulheres do Cabo workers and Jorge and Alberto from ActionAid Brazil, I’m listening as each woman in turn shows the brightly coloured picture she has made to tell her story of change. We’re at a workshop in an old colonial house used by organisations in Cabo for training courses. It is tranquil and beautiful, far from the hubbub of the city. Nazilde listens with a smile on her face as each woman in turn speaks about the transformations in their lives in the last few years. Images of clouds, of dreams, of trees bursting with flowers and fruit, of hearts and of flowers. It seems at first a little too sweet. Until these women begin to tell their stories. How they fought with their husbands to be allowed to go out to meetings. How they had struggled to convince others in their community that this project wasn’t just a ruse for outsiders to steal their children. How their relationships with the men in their lives had changed for the better, as they’d gained more and more of a sense of their own strengths and capacities. How they’d come together to demand their right to water from the municipal government, and made this a reality for their communities. And how they’d struggled, delighting in the struggles they waged, and then delighting even more in seeing their fruits.

At the beginning, Rosilda told us, her husband had created problems for her, not understanding why she wanted to go out on her own. “I told him I am going because I will learn things I didn’t know. And I left him talking,” she retorted. After a while, there was no trouble any more. Vania commented on how her family found it hard to understand her doing work without earning, but since she joined the project they’d come to see her grow: “I’ve had the opportunity to ask, talk, to question things.” For Dona Bui, the project was about instilling the “force of desire to participate”, something that simply didn’t exist beforehand. At the first meetings, they were all so quiet, so shy; they didn’t know what to do or to say. Now they burst

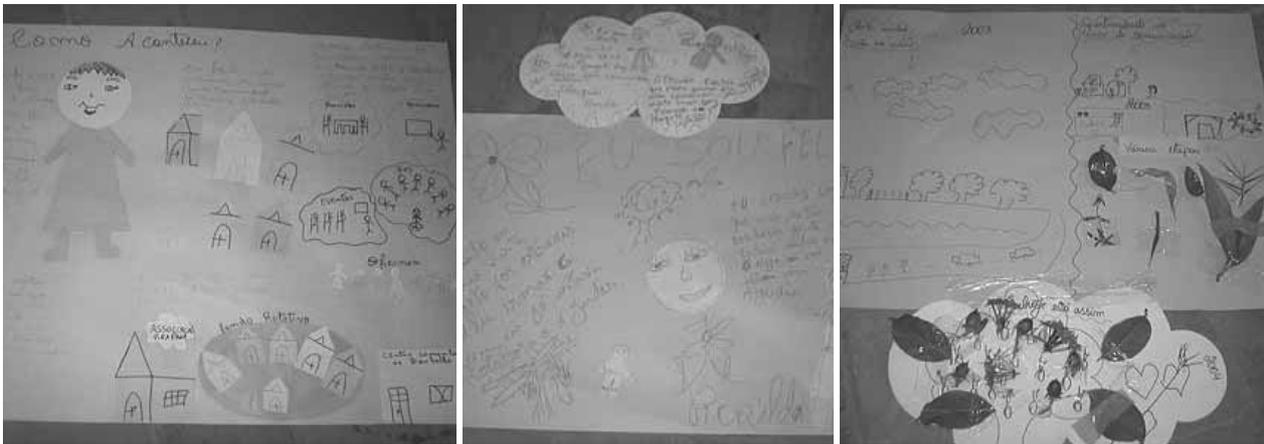


Photo: Andrea Cornwall

From left to right: How does it happen? I am happy; A flowering tree

with laughter and with confidence. Centro das Mulheres staff members Nivete and Marlis tell me that it is quite extraordinary how much they have changed.

With what they and the other women involved with the project have learned and acquired, women like Rosalida, Dona Biu, Vania and Nazilde have been able to begin to change their lives. A tangible sign of this change is the number of newly built houses proudly dotted around the hills of Barbalho, replacing the houses of cardboard, wood and plastic that used to tumble down muddy slopes when the rains came. For so many women, a place of their own is something that they spoke of only ever having imagined in their dreams.

A rotating credit fund has made it possible for these dreams to be turned into reality, and has brought with it changes more profound than anyone involved with the project had really anticipated. The road to Pirapama is now paved. Both communities have access to water as an outcome of women's mobilisation. Pirapama's residents' association now operates out of a new and larger community centre, which runs courses in income-generating skills and community radio that have been so important a part of the project. Tamiris tells of how she can't wait until work is finished on the centre in Barbalho – she wants to learn how to use a computer and do more art. Lourdes glows with pride as she talks of how she heard her very own voice on Pirapama's

community radio, something she would never have believed possible. And Lucinede tells me of the young woman who she sees walking past her house wearing striking jewellery that always matches her clothes, and which is now the basis for a thriving business.

Two of the images chosen by the women from the project committee to describe changes in their lives linger in my mind. The first was an image of a circle of women, which recurred in many of their pictures. When I asked, it was explained as representing meetings. Mention the word 'meeting' and many – if not most – people working in development would roll their eyes, anticipating the hours that are spent detracting from other more urgent, important or exciting things. Meetings take up an inordinate amount of time in work settings where team-based working, consensus, communication and delegated responsibility are drivers of organisational effectiveness. But how often do we stop to recognise what a luxury it might be to have time to share ideas, to hear other people's views and experiences, to chat and perhaps even to laugh a little, to step out of the spaces of everyday life into a zone in which mothers and wives and workers have permission to be themselves?

When women spoke of the project, they spoke of how it had "permitted us to be people": that is, that it had recognised them in all their unique individuality, as people with something to give, as people who should be treated with dignity and

with respect. And meetings were part of that. “They learnt ways to get on with other people,” explained Lucinede, a Pirapama resident who had become the group’s caterer and who had watched from the sidelines at these meetings as she laid out food and refreshments. “At the beginning they weren’t used to being social, they didn’t know how to behave.” Some of the women cried when they saw the food she brought, knowing their children were starving at home. They took what they could with them, and that in itself was a help to them. What was most remarkable, Lucinede commented, was how confident these women had become, and how well they had begun to treat others. Before, she said, some had a tendency to

be rude and unfriendly. Having that time to themselves, being together with other women, being valued for who they were, all those things were part of that tangible, visible difference that she’d seen happening in the group. Empowerment, for Lucinede, was as much about this as anything else – about a sense of inner calm and personal power, a sense of the possible as well as ways of dealing with the here and now.

The second image was one of a house, drawn on a large sheet of paper by one of the women. As she’d told us about how the project had changed her life she’d faltered and fallen silent, overcome with emotion. Hers was a story that had moved

me to tears, recognising how very fundamental it was to have a place to be, a place to bring up children decently, a place that is home, that one can call one’s own. There was something in her testimony, as in the joy that radiated from the other women as they spoke of how they and their lives had changed, that touched all of us as we listened and reflected on just how much these very ‘practical needs’ matter. The buildings scattered over the hillside are visible, tangible signs of change. And not only houses. A community centre, built by the project in Barbalho, holds yet more hopes and dreams with its very permanence. “It is unforgettable,” said Nazilde, “I will die and it will remain there.”

Nothing would ever be the same for these women. It was not just the physical changes in their immediate environment, but something deeper. It was about the way in which those changes affirmed their own sense of themselves as *people*. Raizes Vivas had given these women precisely the ‘living roots’ that the term means in English. It had allowed them a sense of their own presence in the world, and from that the potentiality to act in and on the world around them. By restoring to

Photo: Andrea Cornwall



Nazilde

these women their sense of agency, and by connecting their sense of who they were with that of their capacity to act together to bring about change, the project embodied empowerment in its most concrete and profound sense.

A different way of doing development

At first sight, Raizes Vivas would seem to resemble many other small-scale development projects. But it does not take long to recognise that there is something distinctively different about it. Recognising the very material nature of women's struggles for survival, the project has enabled them to get a roof over their heads and has helped them equip themselves to find the means to an independent income. These are, in many respects, preconditions in any process of empowerment. But Raizes Vivas has done far more than this. Working at the level of the personal and interpersonal, as well as the collective, Raizes Vivas has enabled the women of Barbalho and Pirapama to see themselves as political agents with the right to have rights. Vania, in her 20s, told of how she had gradually learnt to ask, to talk, to question. Now, she said, she is no longer scared of speaking out. For her, the link between needs and rights was clear-cut: "We have the right," she said, "to recognise what we need." Most profound of all was the way in which these women came to speak of their work with each other and with the community, and of the special kind of love that it involved: *amor na coração*, 'love in the heart', a love that radiates.

The project's philosophy is one rooted in a deep respect for those engaged in it, not as 'the poor', but as people who are *living in poverty*. Several of the women spoke of the project in these terms, of it recognising them as people – and allowing them to recognise themselves as fully human, in all its dimensions. For some, this was the most powerful aspect of their engagement with the project: being recognised, being regarded as

somebody. Marlis and Nivete, the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo workers most involved with the project, talk with animation and affection of the workshops they have had in the community, of how the women involved in the project have changed, of the successes that they have relished in together. Their voices resound with respect and admiration for the women whose lives they have helped to change. Beneath what they say, I can discern their profound commitment to social justice, that harnesses anger, care and compassion so powerfully as it animates both the vision and the practice of Raizes Vivas.

Institution-building, capacity-building – and, of course, building houses – has, after just over two years, produced some tangible impacts in skills, resources and capacities. But what, for me, was as impressive was how Raizes Vivas had sought not only to improve livelihoods, enabling women and their families to gain the means to a better standard of living, but also to confront some of the deeper roots of disempowerment and, with it, other dimensions of poverty. One dimension of this was to ask what it means to work with a feminist perspective. "We are different to other organisations," Marlis reflected, "we'd ask things like 'can't your husband stay at home and look after the kids when you go out to the meeting?' We'd ask this kind of thing without thinking twice about it, but it was different for them to hear it."

Celebrating the successes of the project also provides opportunities for reflecting on issues of gender and power. "We'd ask women and men, 'how would your community be if women continued to be as they are, if they couldn't study, work, have time that is their own?'" Marlis continued, "and we'd say, 'you wouldn't have water, you wouldn't have a paved road'." There's a palpable sense of achievement that has come as a result of the struggle the women of Barbalho and Pirapama have been through, one that has enabled them not only to recognise themselves as actors but also to be recognised by others. As

Nivete pointed out, “at the beginning, the women used to say to us ‘you don’t know how we live here’, how awful it is. Now when they go to meet another community, they start talking to others about their successes – and it creates a lot of pride to do this.”

Along with pride, self-esteem and a new-found sense of political agency, the project has created other, more relational, changes. Elizete talked about how in Pirapama barely anyone contributed to the community a few years ago. “Before the project,” she told me, “everyone was for themselves. You could see it in the association, they thought that paying their subscription was enough. They didn’t come to the association, even to ask the association to take up issues with the council on their behalf. But Raizes Vivas taught us that no-one can reach the place they want to get to alone. We learnt that we needed to come together to make change happen.” She talked

about how, very slowly, she and other project members had begun to engage the community. They held meetings in the streets, and hosted public events such as a Festival of Mothers. “Those who didn’t come said ‘I don’t like meetings, meeting doesn’t do anything to change things’, but then they saw how after 20 years of fighting we won the battle for water, a battle that took us to the state government in Recife [1hr away].”

She smiled as she told me: “The local government used to send transport to bring people from here to meetings and people here used to joke that it would be enough to send a bicycle as so few people could be bothered to go. A week or so ago, we had 30 people from here travelling into town to attend a meeting with the municipal secretary for infrastructure.”

One of the most tangible signs of change is in the evident self-confidence of the women who have been involved with the project. Rosi talked of how she’d never dared raise her voice in meetings before, and how now she felt she could speak her mind. Elizete told me of how “often in the past people would think ‘I won’t say anything in case what I say is wrong’. They were scared of giving an opinion in case it was completely off track of what others were thinking.”

She gave the example of the project committee and the early days when they did a role-play about what it meant to be a committee – and when it came to giving a presentation, everyone said “oh no, I can’t do it, I am shy”. But they did it in the end. And everyone enjoyed themselves. She recounted the story of one woman whom she’d invited to participate in the management committee of the project and she’d said “my dear, I don’t know anything, I can’t do anything”. This woman, Elizete said, was frightened of leaving her neighbourhood to go on courses. She was pretty much frightened of everything. But the other women said to her that she really ought to get out, she ought not to stay in her house all the time. And so she did. She’s now as confident and outgoing as any of the others.



Pirapama's association and its president Elizete

As Elizete talked of others whom she'd coaxed into taking part, and glowed with pleasure as she spoke, Lucinede commented, "life isn't only made up of material goods. It is also made up of care, of love, of paying attention to people". Being cared about, being noticed, being treated with dignity and respect: these would seem basic to any development intervention. But all too often it gains too little real attention.

Nazilde drew my attention to another critical component in the changes that had taken place as a result of the project: understanding what it takes to get people to act together, and what they get out of it. A direct dimension of child sponsorship, as Tamiris pointed out at the beginning of this story, is recognising that it is those letters that bring in the money. Relating this question of something that appears akin to *earning* money with the unremunerated labour of community work requires a leap of faith. But perhaps money given as a gift has the potential to produce other forms of giving.

Nazilde explained: "It was hard to understand that there was money, but it wasn't used to pay people. Then I understood. If you pay people, they will deliver a service and go away, but if you call people to do a *mutirão* (communal labour) they will share their love, they will put love into it. People were saying, "why do we need to leave the beach at the weekends to work for free?" But if you pay, well, you won't have the friendship of anyone. People won't think today it's different, we'll succeed in talking to each other, sharing information, understanding that not all that is done is done for money, it's done for love – there are people who are not from this community who come for the *mutirão* just for that. They are not doing it for themselves, they are doing it for love."

Imaginative working methods have been key to Raizes Vivas' successes. These included:

- a skit performed in one group meeting where a fictional 16-year-old pregnant girl turned to each woman in turn to ask her "what would you do?"



Photo: Andrea Cornwall

Rosilda and her picture – I am happy

- Venn diagrams one group of women used to explore the ingredients for interventions in the life of their community that would make a difference
- looking at the differences between *amor* (love) and *amor na coraçãõ* (love in the heart)
- playing with the etymology of the names Barbalho and Pirapama to come up with a symbol for the project that gave it a heart as well as a name
- creating opportunities for women to tell others about their achievements, whether on community radio or through attending events in other places
- role-playing what it means to be a committee and how decisions are made.

Photo: Andrea Cornwall



March for women's rights in Cabo on International Women's Day

All these things and more made project meetings a place for deeper learning and unlearning. Raizes Vivas created spaces that came to be what the social theorist Michel Foucault called 'heterotopian' – in which the rules are different from those in everyday social institutions, where people can behave in new ways, explore new dimensions of themselves, and from which these experiences of being listened to and exercising voice can be carried into other spaces.

Along with workshops and other kinds of activities at the community level, Raizes Vivas has created opportunities for learning that go beyond the narrower confines of conventional development projects. A trip to an exhibition of a Dutch painter from the colonial period in the nearby city of Recife opened up a subject close to their hearts: that of racism. It also brought women from the poor rural hinterland into the heart of bourgeois Brazil and enabled them to give themselves permission to avail themselves of 'high culture', and use it as a focus for social critique.

And there have been some unexpected side-effects from other visits. One of these was to an agro-ecological project in the nearby state of

Paraíba, hosted by one of ActionAid Brazil's partners, AS-PTA. Registration forms were given out at the hotel. Those who couldn't fill them in resolved then and there that if they were to be travellers, then they needed to learn how to write. "We need to give ourselves the right to dream. Life has to have its dreams," said Elizete. And when women talk of the project, they talk of those dreams and how they have seen them realised.

Being associated with the CMC has multiple dimensions beyond the project, from the kind of mobilisation that I was fortunate to be part of on International Women's Day, to being enveloped with the mantle of respect that accrues to the CMC beyond the community. Marlis told the story of a woman from Barbalho who was threatened with assault on a visit to one of the most violent of Recife's favelas. Her reaction was instant. She showed the men her T-shirt and its Centro das Mulheres do Cabo logo, and said "I am from the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo. Don't touch me!"

"We have the whole institution behind us," said Marlis, "and people in the community know we are not intimidated." Recognising the multiple dimensions of gender inequality, this is an organisation whose very approach is infused with engagement in a range of arenas: one whose representatives engage in the political and bureaucratic spaces to struggle for democratic accountability and fairness, whose connections with women extend from the spaces of the community to those of the court and the clinic, and who reach out beyond the confines of Cabo through their radio station, Radio Mulher, and through feminist networks that span the state and the country."

More than a donor: the role of ActionAid Brazil

Over the past five years, ActionAid Brazil staff have visited Cabo regularly. These trips have done more than provide moments of reflection and enable the two organisations to strengthen their relationship with each other. They've also provided a stimulus for another kind of reflection: holding up a mirror in which those involved with the project have been able to see themselves, and all that they have achieved. "We not only have an economic role," observed Maria Lucia, who until recently co-ordinated ActionAid Brazil's gender programme and provided key support to the Raizes Vivas project. "We have a symbolic role." And when ActionAid Brazil staff go to the community, they're aware of what they can do to affirm what has been achieved. It is those other roles, and the way in which ActionAid Brazil staff engage at the level of the community and as a partner with Centro das Mulheres do Cabo that make them so much more than just another donor. This comes over clearly in the story of how the relationship between Centro das Mulheres do Cabo and ActionAid Brazil came about, and resides as much in its ups and downs over time as it does in the evident successes of the work they have done together.

ActionAid opened their Brazil office in 1999. As complementary in their politics as they were different in their styles, Ana Toni and Jorge Romano set about getting to know organisations who would be likely partners. With two years' grace before sponsorship activities had to begin, ActionAid Brazil sought partners who could help to realise an ambitious and radical agenda for social change. Ana Toni told me: "I saw Silvia first at a meeting in Brazilia. She impressed me. She was strong and articulate. And she was there from an organisation that worked with women at the grassroots, articulating with national policy debates. It was what their experience of linking macro-micro might offer us that excited me most." For others in ActionAid Brazil, Centro das Mulheres do Cabo's explicitly feminist focus and extensive feminist networks were what made them an

exciting potential partner. And this sparked considerable debate within the organisation. What would it mean for ActionAid Brazil to align itself with a partner who was nationally recognised as a feminist organisation? What might feminism bring to ActionAid Brazil's work?

Silvia and Ana met again some months later, in Rio. Soon after, Ana and Jorge travelled to Cabo to take things a step further. But it proved less easy to find an activity that offered sufficient convergence of objectives to test out the possibilities of partnership. At the time, Ana was particularly interested in what ActionAid Brazil might have to contribute to and learn from the struggle for agrarian reform. It made sense, then, for this to be somehow part of the project ActionAid Brazil was to develop with Centro das Mulheres do Cabo.

But Centro das Mulheres do Cabo was largely an urban organisation. It didn't work in rural areas. Its strengths lay in communication, in articulation with new democratic spaces for sectoral governance, in women's health, in advocacy and legal support for women who are brutalised by their partners. In line with ActionAid International, ActionAid Brazil's main focus was on the poorest of the poor and on the rural poor in particular. There was limited scope, or so it seemed at the time, for working on issues of urban poverty. Nor on women's health. Nor on violence against women. Nor indeed, on much of the everyday work that the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo actually did. But what CMC offered ActionAid Brazil was something that they recognised as critically important: more than a decade of experience in women's rights issues in Brazil and the success in bridging the micro-macro divide that had captured Ana Toni's attention in the first place.

There was a period in which proposals were shunted to and from Rio, advancing in fits and starts. Finally, agreement was reached on a women's literacy project that was to be based in an *assentamento* – a settlement on invaded land, involving members of the agrarian reform movement – and on an urban sexual and reproductive health project. This would serve as

Photo: Andrea Cornwall



Simone outside her new home

an opportunity for ActionAid Brazil and Centro das Mulheres do Cabo to work together, and get to know each other better. But it was a compromise. The literacy project failed to get off the ground. Both sides wondered what they had got themselves into, and whether it was worth persisting with the idea of partnership. Things cooled off. A period of time passed in which there were no more new ideas, and it seemed as if there was little prospect of arriving at anything viable.

There was something about the *potential* of that relationship that made both parties hesitate about giving up completely. Over some time, other ideas were bounced back and forth between the two organisations as both wondered how to get a joint initiative off the ground. And then the germ of what was to become Raizes Vivas emerged. Intensive discussions followed about what was possible, about hopes and dreams, capacities and limitations. The first step was to conduct a participatory appraisal exercise in the peri-urban communities that had been chosen, Barbalho and Novo Horizonte. Alberto and Maria Lucia worked

alongside Marlis and Nivete, in the field as well as in the office, to design a process. From these groups emerged a set of priorities, of which the struggle for water predominated and came to form initially the principal focus for the project. These priorities were then built into activities and objectives.

A year or so later, ActionAid Brazil established a small fund to which its partners could apply for projects relating to the poorest of the poor. CMC began an intense discussion with the community in Barbalho, identifying who was in the most vulnerable situation and what they felt might best assist them to improve their situations. It became apparent that the state of many people's houses – some of which were still temporary constructions put together out of boards and plastic bags – was an issue that touched on their lives and their wellbeing in many different ways. CMC workers had seen how, in a neighbouring area, an international NGO had used a rotating credit fund to make tangible improvements in people's living conditions. In discussion with ActionAid, the idea of a rotating fund was born, one that would enable people who might never otherwise have access to the resources to build themselves a decent house, or to restore or reconstruct their houses. This, in turn, proved to be a major step forward in mobilising the community in Barbalho. As Maria Lucia commented, it was a tangible product of the partnership between ActionAid Brazil and CMC.

Difficulties arose once sponsorship activities began. Novo Horizonte already had a sponsorship project, run by World Vision. It was against ActionAid Brazil's policy to have two such projects in the same area. A new area was sought, one which would have the capacity to generate sufficient opportunities for sponsorship activities. The nearby community of Pirapama seemed a good bet: not as deprived (on the surface, at least) as Barbalho, but with social and economic problems characteristic of the low-income settlements that circle Brazilian towns and cities. A series of focus groups on people's aspirations for a better life in Pirapama created spaces for reflection on the harsh realities, as well as on the dreams, of possible futures that the women on the project committee were to convey in their drawings. It soon became evident that to have two

separate projects – Raizes da Terra and Pirapama Viva – made much less sense than working together. Raizes Vivas was born.

For Nivete and Marlis, working directly with ActionAid Brazil staff members Maria Lucia and Alberto on the Raizes Vivas project, there was something distinctive about ActionAid Brazil that made them different from other donors. Marlis told me, “it is the people, they are relaxed, they have commitment, they have patience and they have feeling – they talked to us and to people in the community as if they really wanted to hear what we said, as if they respected us all equally. They constructed a relaxed feel to the project, not this business of charts and plans.” From the start, they recognised that ActionAid Brazil was different to the other funding organisations they have worked with in the past. As Nivete put it, “they don’t have the attitude of giving money and sitting back to see the results. They get involved. Really involved.”

While the focus for partnership building had been on establishing a project that could be pursued together, this was not the only contact between the two organisations. ActionAid introduced Centro das Mulheres do Cabo to its other partners at its annual partnership meetings – an opportunity for linking and learning that CMC regarded as very important. People from the two organisations would see each other at events, workshops, campaign meetings, where their networks and interests overlapped. When ActionAid introduced a new system for monitoring and evaluation, the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS), Centro das Mulheres do Cabo were its most enthusiastic experimenters, going on to develop their own participatory processes for review and reflection with communities. Over time, a relationship built up that consisted of more than one-way financial and technical support from ActionAid Brazil. ActionAid Brazil began to realise in the process how much Centro das Mulheres do Cabo might have to offer them in terms of expertise, methodologies, ideas and contacts, and that it might be able to draw on them to help facilitate events and gatherings.

‘Technical support’ can so easily be interpreted as lending people a way of doing things and seeking to make sure that they do it right. ActionAid Brazil’s support to Centro das Mulheres do Cabo was of a

very different order. Women in Barbalho told me that the first time Maria Lucia visited, they didn’t understand what she was talking about. Then they started thinking about what she was saying. With immense fondness, they talked of how, without Maria Lucia’s questions, they might never have come to place into question that which they took for granted in their everyday lives. But there was also much to be gained by ActionAid Brazil from their project and programme workers’ engagement with these communities, and from the way the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo works.

For Maria Lucia, what makes Centro das Mulheres do Cabo’s approach special is their ability to tune into the rhythm of the community. It is this she admires most about them, that they work with the principle that processes of change take time, that they need to come from within, to be constructed slowly. They have made ActionAid Brazil aware of the need for patience. “At times, there were things that came that were not planned. ActionAid Brazil got frustrated when things didn’t happen, but they went at the speed of the community. Their partnership was like a buffer between the time of ActionAid Brazil and the time of the community.” Nivete and Marlis talked of this, of the care they took in finding the right time, in making time to think and to reflect, as well as in taking the time to discuss things that needed to be discussed – not forcing, pushing, hurrying, but working with their rhythm, recognising the competing demands on women’s time, and respecting the time that they gave to the project.

When I asked ActionAid Brazil’s Alberto what he saw his role as being in relation to Centro das Mulheres do Cabo and the project, he answered that he saw it as being to challenge, to provoke them to go beyond what they think is possible. He also sees himself as a channel through which to exchange experiences, bringing what works from one context to try out in another. With a long history of community work, he is instantly at ease when he gets to the community: people remember him and his stories-with-a-moral, his ways of doing things. Something that Alberto has played a part in facilitating is learning from exchanges, from opportunities to see things being done differently and to take from that experience ideas and inspiration to act.

Making connections

It is part of the practice of ActionAid Brazil to instigate the process of making connections, which then creates the opportunity for partners to build their own relationships, and extend their own networks. Its annual partners' meeting is a good example, bringing together, from all over Brazil, organisations working across a spectrum of social change concerns, to listen to each other and to share their experiences, dreams, hopes and frustrations. There is something in that act of linking people and ideas across differences that otherwise separate organisations who work in different terrains of engagement – agro-ecology, feminist politics, community development in urban slums, campaigning for education – that is incredibly valuable in sparking imagination and energy. As Jorge reflected, “it’s taught me not to fear differences. The question now is how to put those differences together. Sometimes we can only change things if we put together things that are really different.”

What holds ActionAid Brazil’s partners together is a sense of common values and goals. The key to this is ActionAid Brazil’s strategy and the processes of consultation, deliberation and debate through which it is grown and owned. Balancing this process with ActionAid International’s strategies is a delicate endeavour, one that Jorge and his colleagues have managed with a great deal of care. In some respects, ActionAid International’s policies have served ActionAid Brazil well: Fighting Poverty Together¹ put into print the guiding principles that were part of ActionAid Brazil’s work from the very beginning. Yet the discourse of “poverty” and “empowerment” is something that fits uneasily into a context where social actors are used to more radical talk – and action.

For Centro das Mulheres do Cabo staff, what ActionAid’s concept of poverty actually translates into in terms of strategies and tactics for change resonates with their views and values. But the word “poverty” is one that some are loath to use. Marlis argued, “The community doesn’t want to be called “poor”. When ActionAid Brazil explained

what they meant by the term “poverty” we could see that the objectives are ones we can buy into. But we didn’t ever really use that word to explain to people in communities.”

ActionAid Brazil staff joke about how they are teased for having so many people with doctoral degrees on their staff. But their investment in intellectual capital does make a difference to their capacity to strategise, as well as to connect across diverse sectors and institutions. Jorge Romano can as easily engage with activists in a discussion about advocacy strategies as whip out from his conceptual toolbag a version of Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and practice that makes perfect sense of the struggle to bring about structural change. By engaging the academy in framing questions and in critical debate on core concepts and practical experiences, Jorge and his colleagues are able to make new connections that animate and activate ActionAid Brazil’s work. Far from the knee-jerk anti-intellectualism that is sometimes abroad in NGO circles, ActionAid Brazil is an excellent example of how engaging with activist-intellectuals can harness the analytical sophistication that can come from the world of ideas with the opportunities to bring about change of the world of action.

ActionAid Brazil staff are all too aware of the dilemmas of working with ideas and making those connections. For them, as for many social actors in Brazil, some of these dilemmas arise due to their position at the interface between the world of international development with its lexicon of buzzwords and the realities of the grassroots. ActionAid Brazil staff’s thinking on empowerment has, however, struck a chord. A group at Centro das Mulheres do Cabo used to meet for an hour before work to read and discuss Jorge and Marta’s book. It helped, they say, to understand the political meaning of empowerment. And even if the term remains in its imported Spanish version, *empoderamento*, and has come to be associated in Brazil more closely with its co-option by the World Bank than with a radical process of social change, there is growing resonance with some of the ways in which ActionAid Brazil puts it to work.

¹ ActionAid’s international strategy 1999-2005

Photo: Andrea Cornwall



ActionAid Brazil staff and CMC reflect on their partnership

What is, however, evident is that getting the balance right between working with imported terms and technologies and stimulating engagement with existing debates, concepts and practices is a challenge. To politicised Brazilian social actors, practices such as REFLECT² seem to miss something important – not least the importance of enabling people to create eclectic methodologies to suit different purposes, rather than prescribe a limited set of techniques. Cards, matrices, beans, circles and other PRA-phernalia garner little enthusiasm in a context where people would rather talk.

So how do ActionAid Brazil staff make these connections? How do they explain their approach, and that of the larger organisation of which they are part? You start, Alberto told me, by talking about power. “People from the grassroots don’t like to discuss power with people they have only just met, they are wary. But when we start talking

about changing relations of power, their eyes light up. “How do you do this?” I asked. Alberto explained how they begin by outlining different dimensions of power, using this to convey the concept of poverty that ActionAid Brazil works with. What are these dimensions? Economic power. The power of knowledge. And the power to act.

Apt indeed. For it is in using their own economic power to seek to democratise the power of knowledge and strengthen their partners’ power to act, and that of the communities they work with, that ActionAid Brazil makes a difference. As Silvia commented, ActionAid Brazil’s work with Centro das Mulheres do Cabo never felt to them like ‘just an instrumental interest in us implementing projects for them – like some of the other organisations we have worked with. They were interested in Centro das Mulheres do Cabo for who we are. And they have sought to strengthen us as well.’”

² REFLECT is an innovative approach to adult learning and social change, which fuses the theories of Paulo Freire with the methodology of participatory rural appraisal.

Partnerships for change

If you think of social change, if you work directly for the poor it doesn't create that change. You need to work to strengthen organisations at every level. Empowering a community is not about creating a creche, it is about creating political actors who can fight the government. It is about empowering them to struggle with the government for their rights.

Alberto

Talking to ActionAid Brazil staff about their vision for how they make a difference, one word is fundamental: partnership. For them, partnership is not simply a get-the-job-done arrangement. It is about building relationships, creating linkages with broader social movements and having a multiplier effect. It is about co-evolving strategies that enable the work of ActionAid Brazil to be more than the sum of its parts. And it is about a way of working that has at its core the aim of strengthening social actors' capacities to act in the pursuit of rights and social justice. As one of the development sector's most misused buzzwords, 'partnership' can boil down to contracting an organisation or individual to do the work that the donor wishes to get done. What ActionAid Brazil tries to do is something completely different. The projects – like Raizes Vivas – that are pursued through these partnerships serve multiple ends, not least as a way to test out ideas together and to grow closer.

More than anything, ActionAid Brazil sees its support for partners as a way of strengthening civil society organisations to be able to pursue issues of social justice on many fronts. It's a process that enables these organisations to increase their ability to radiate influence in multiple spheres, to multiply their connectivity, their scope for influence and their capacity to make a difference. As Alberto pointed out, 'it's not just about Centro das Mulheres do Cabo changing people's lives through ActionAid Brazil's help, it's about Centro das Mulheres do Cabo changing the conditions around them through other actions, with funding from other sources. It's not just a relationship of donor, it is a relationship of two social actors doing something together.'

What form, then, does 'partnership' take in practice, and what kinds of values sustain it? Sitting together to reflect on their evolving relationship, Jorge, Alberto, Silvia, Nivete and Marlis highlighted the following components:

- 
- vision
 - mission
 - values
 - strategy (influencing each other)
 - tactics (engaging together to influence others)
 - activities
 - financial/administrative relationship
 - legitimisation
 - creation of opportunities
 - institution building
 - creation of knowledge

They then went on to think about what qualities were important to making a partnership work:



As Marlis observed, ‘we don’t make partnerships without bringing principles into it.’ For ActionAid Brazil, it is these underlying principles that are fundamental to how they choose their partners and how they work together. One of these principles is to be more than a donor: to accompany those with whom they strike up a relationship of partnership, sharing with them frustrations and elations, beyond the usual cycle of funding particular projects and then moving on to the next grantee. One of the most powerful parts of the story of the relationship between ActionAid Brazil and Centro das Mulheres do Cabo is that it continued despite a false start and misgivings on both sides, because there was something else at stake, something deeper at work.

Over time, partners have played more and more of a part in facilitating the work of what has become an extended network of organisations working for social change who are associated with ActionAid Brazil. Some of these organisations are funded by ActionAid Brazil to carry out projects and engage in campaigns that are identified as of mutual concern, others are colleagues with whom ActionAid Brazil comes together in efforts to influence policies and raise public awareness, others still provide technical services to ActionAid Brazil. Jorge and Alberto counted 70 such partners and there are more and more each year. ActionAid Brazil is not their only donor; indeed, in many cases, they provide a relatively small amount of the running costs of the organisation, and sometimes both ActionAid Brazil and the organisation receive funds from other donors, such as DFID or the Ford Foundation.

As trust has grown and confidence has deepened, partners such as Centro das Mulheres do Cabo have taken on a much more active role, co-ordinating and facilitating meetings, linking ActionAid Brazil with other networks and social movements, working alongside them as a development actor with clout of their own to wield, as a critical friend, as a mentor, as a comrade – as well as being the recipient of ActionAid Brazil’s funding. Through its intersecting networks, through active engagement with social movements and through an active pursuit of networking as an influencing strategy, this small organisation manages to make waves.

The relationship between ActionAid Brazil and Centro das Mulheres do Cabo has grown complex and multi-dimensional since they first began to work together. Rather than being mediated through one or two staff members, relationships of different kinds exist simultaneously, binding the two organisations together in ways that go far beyond the more simple relationship of donor and recipient. And different kinds of activities give the

same people opportunities to play different parts, and explore different dimensions to the partnership. What this produces is a relationship that is constantly being renewed, restored and redefined; it is a dynamic process that resists narrow classifications. As partnerships evolve, different expectations and needs surface. It is important, Marlis observed, to define what is needed and wanted from partnership at different moments – and to make the time and space to reflect on what is most needed at that particular juncture, recognising the dynamism in this relationship. And to stay grounded by doing things together. In this regard, projects become a locus in which ActionAid and its partners grow together.

A further dimension to the partnerships that ActionAid Brazil has created with organisations like Centro das Mulheres do Cabo is precisely that 20-year history that Silvia spoke of, and Centro das Mulheres do Cabo's deep and broad connections with a host of other institutions and organisations. In partnering with Centro das Mulheres do Cabo, ActionAid Brazil stands to gain legitimacy in certain circles because of Centro das Mulheres do Cabo's reputation; it is an association that, along with other associations with social movements and progressive NGOs and CBOs, gives ActionAid Brazil credibility. Part, then, of what partnership means in this context is what it means to be linked with an organisation that is linked with so many others, and linked into policy and community spaces where their influence can be felt.

In recent years, ActionAid Brazil's partnerships have expanded exponentially in the shift away from a narrower focus on campaigns and projects to thematic programmes. Centro das Mulheres do Cabo played a key advisory role in orienting the gender programme, as a point of reference, an interlocutor and a friend. Recognising the richness of debates provoked by Centro das Mulheres do Cabo's engagement with issues of gender, and the universe of connections that they brought into the partnership, has given the relationship a new

dimension. As ActionAid International has come to place women's rights at the forefront of its international strategy, the potential for linking with feminist organisations like the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo will become ever more significant. ActionAid Brazil and the vibrant gender programme that it has established, in which organisations like Centro das Mulheres do Cabo and Brazil's influential feminist networks play an important role, might have much to offer other ActionAid country programmes in the future.

Sponsorship as partnership?

Something distinctive about ActionAid's way of working is the use of child sponsorship as a mechanism for raising money. The paradoxes of sponsorship provoke passions. They also provide opportunities for rethinking assumptions that are taken for granted about the nature of development aid. Participation may have become a development orthodoxy, but it is still rare for those on the receiving end of development assistance to have such a direct role in providing the means by which that assistance continues to flow, as in the case of child sponsorship.

Sponsorship relies on children writing letters, which relies on parents permitting their children to write the letters and letting them participate in the activities provided for them, about which the letters and reports to sponsors come to be written. It is, in many respects, a potentially powerful accountability mechanism, and one that places the power directly in the hands of those benefiting from interventions, rather than those who speak and act for them. "Sponsorship works to balance power," noted Jorge, "because the lines of accountability are so complex."

Sponsoring a child can be construed as a gift, a simple transfer from someone who has resources to someone else who lacks them. But, as the anthropologist Mauss observed, the act of gift-giving creates a relationship. And this kind of exchange is very different to paying for a service

or a good. The nature of the gift is such that the giver as well as the receiver gains benefits. Yet the relationship between the sponsored child and the provider of sponsorship money is far from straightforward – and almost never one that is experienced directly. Sponsorship is an unusual form of gift-giving as the relationship between giver and receiver is mediated by a chain of other actors. Like filters, Jorge observed, each of these actors changes the hue of messages communicated through these layers of intermediaries. Gifts given as charity are transformed into gifts that enable their recipients to empower themselves through collective action: the filters work to sift out other meanings, to reframe and reposition. This work of reframing is regarded as necessary. The very idea of a more direct relationship between sponsors and their wards has always been treated as undesirable at best, and positively harmful at worst. But when these filters work to convey images of ActionAid's activities and those whom ActionAid supports in ways that reinforce the giving of gifts of support as charity, rather than as – for example – acts of solidarity, what is lost in the process? This is not a new debate, neither for ActionAid nor any other international NGO. But it is an important one.

It's worth thinking a bit more about these mediating messages. A sponsor sees a picture in the newspaper of a black African child with tears and flies in his eyes. I have never seen a Brazilian child used in UK adverts for ActionAid. I wonder to myself: are the ravages of inequality and the struggle for citizenship less marketable images than that evoked by a starving African child? Perhaps a child dressed in the kind of clothes Brazilian children wear might not work well enough to provoke the kind of pity that charity has come to rely on. It might make people feel that these are not authentic poor people, that their western-style T-shirts or mini skirts don't fit the image of what the deserving poor or the innocent child ought to look like. Worse still if their skins are white. After all, the word 'Brazil' is more likely to summon up images of beaches, football and Carnaval than

women in Barbalho struggling up and down muddy slopes to fetch water from a borehole, or children like Tamiris being kept up at night listening to gun shots. A British MP visiting Brazil commented to one of ActionAid Brazil's staff, why should the British government give this vast, rich, country any aid money anyway? The story was relayed to me with no small measure of contempt: 'as if ActionAid is the state!'

Images of needy black children as objects of charity allow myths about development to be sustained. What ActionAid actually does with the sponsor's money becomes a secret that is carefully guarded in coded references tucked deep inside the glossy leaflets sent to sponsors. There remains with this little opportunity for the kind of *conscientização* that is so much a part of ActionAid's intention at the community level. The sponsor remains a giver of charity rather than a partner in the struggle against injustice.

Selling poverty is assumed to be a necessary evil, a pragmatic precondition for procuring the money to make a difference. But how different might it be if ActionAid were able to sell what they actually do to people whose gifts were given not out of pity or charity, but out of solidarity? *Vinculos solidarios* – solidarity links, the Brazilian translation of 'child sponsorship' - has an entirely different set of connotations; it also has the potential to work in an entirely different way to link individuals in the north with communities in the south, as global citizens. The idea of a link forged out of solidarity is to produce an effect in the giver as well as in the receiver, to mediate their gift-giving so that what they receive in return is less the warm glow of having 'done a good thing' than sense of outrage at the injustices that keep over 20 million people in Brazil below the poverty line and result in many more black than white Brazilian children not surviving beyond infancy. What prospect is there for these kinds of solidarity links if the mediators filter out politics and substitute it with feel-good statements that invite sponsors to pat themselves on the back and get on with their lives?

This question came to be asked in a very immediate way when a group of Italian sponsors came to visit Cabo. For community members and project staff alike, there was something profoundly transformative about this visit: no-one saw sponsorship in the same way again. The context was that of a large donation from a business, for which an exception had been made to the rule of sponsors not being able to visit 'their' children. A great deal of preparation by the ActionAid Rio office and by Centro das Mulheres do Cabo ensured that the visit did as little to disrupt the everyday work of the project as possible. The effects could not have been imagined. The visitors were ordinary working people who had barely travelled out of their country before. They were so moved by what they saw in Barbalho and Pirapama that even the translator was crying by the end of it.

One of them, a young man, was entertained in Nazilde's newly built house. I was, she told me proudly, the second European to have lunched with her. "It was very important for us, their visit," she told me, "we are expecting to see them again, to come to see how we are getting on." Dona Biu counts amongst the experiences that have changed her "knowing people from foreign countries, like Manuel from Italy." For Nivete, the sponsors' visit shifted her perspective on the work of maintaining sponsors; she and her colleagues now feel a lot more positive about sponsorship than they'd ever imagined they could. It made her think about how this link might be pursued as a way of politicising the models of development that sponsors had; a way of politicising these ordinary people, helping them to recognise – as they simply hadn't recognised ever before – the contribution they could make to fighting injustice.

On a very practical, day-to-day, level, sponsorship creates a huge amount of work. Letters, photos, inscriptions, dealing with those families who have several children enrolled and are waiting to be inscribed due to bureaucratic hold-ups beyond the control of the organisation.... It is hard work. To add to this, projects need to incorporate activities for sponsored children into their work, yet these

activities are not easily integrated into the kinds of change-processes with which organisations like Centro das Mulheres do Cabo are engaging. The Raizes Vivas team estimated that something like 20-30% of their time was taken up on sustaining sponsorship. If this work was to be devolved to a community-based project, it would not only foster capabilities at that level and promote greater sustainability, it would also free up Raizes Vivas staff to work on those larger questions of social change which the project is all about.

Of course there are other, more radical, solutions that would see an end to the laborious process of translating messages, licking envelopes and making sure they are sent off with an authentic Brazilian stamp on them. A DVD, for example, with the voices and images of children and an account of the changes that have happened in the community might be the by-product of a Review and Reflection (R&R) exercise in which ActionAid Brazil staff, their partners and people directly involved in their initiatives looked back over the year and explored how things had gone. Interactive password-accessed web-based materials on each community, with live video clips, music, paintings and pictures, that just required sponsors to log in. Visits by sponsors, documented on video and in printed materials, that told the story of their journey, the questions they asked, and what they learnt – and that could be used as materials for reflection on the relationship of sponsorship with communities and organisations signing up with ActionAid in the future.

The creative possibilities are endless, and none of these suggestions have not been made before. What does seem ironic is that the major changes that have taken place within ActionAid internationally to politicise the development agenda do not appear to have ripple effects in politicising how money is sought as much as how it is spent. Perhaps, as ActionAid reflects on the lessons that might be drawn from these stories of change, this might be one area in which the good practice that is so evident in ActionAid's development work could be extended. Tamiris would, I think, be proud of contributing to that.

Critical stories of change is a joint project of The Knowledge Initiative and ActionAid International's Impact Assessment and Shared Learning Unit.

The Knowledge Initiative is a new organisation being nurtured within ActionAid International. The Knowledge Initiative reflects the importance ActionAid International attaches to the generation and use of knowledge for empowerment, and hence action. The Knowledge Initiative aims to help civil society organisations and others to realise individual and organisational potentials as generators of knowledge for progress, and for empowering poor and marginalised people to use their own and other people's knowledge as a source of power. It does this through new alliances and networks for experiential training and learning, action research, rights-based participatory approaches, and the pursuit of alternatives.

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