Act for Change Fund

Learning Theme 3: Community Benefit and Impact

Irise International

Introduction

Supporting young people to tackle social injustices is at the heart of the Act for Change Fund. The 'Impact Learning' initiative has drawn together organisations funded by Act for Change to develop new knowledge and share existing learning about delivering sustainable and effective programmes with young people. This project, conducted by Irise International and Forward UK, relates to 'Learning Theme 3: Community Benefit and Impact' and explores how social change can be created through meaningful youth engagement.

The aim of this study is to gain insight into the lives of young people engaged in social change initiatives in order to learn from their perspectives and experiences. This understanding is used to identify the pathways through which social change occurs and understand social norm change processes. Young women's perceptions of and engagement with their personal communities are examined and discussed, and ideas for how to strengthen this engagement are suggested. Insights from existing institutional practices are captured to enable learning and sharing. These provide ideas for how organisations can engage with young women more effectively, dismantle traditional hierarchies of power, encourage young people to lead, and engage marginalised groups.

Main research question:

How do young women engaged in Act for Change perceive 'community'?

Sub-questions:

1. How do young women and communities interact and how does that create social change?
2. How are young women supported as leaders of social change? How is young women's motivation and engagement maintained?
3. How do new communities that form drive further social change?

Method

Irise International held two online focus groups via Zoom in early 2021. Each group contained four participants, making a total of eight participants, who were aged between 18 and 25 and members of the Irise International community. Targeted recruitment was used to identify and invite participants representing a range of ages (within the general age bracket of young adults) and backgrounds (including nationals from around the UK, Europe and Asia). The participants were asked a range of open-ended questions to elicit their views on 'community', 'social change', 'leadership', and young women's role. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed.

Three staff members were interviewed about the methods and approaches used by Irise International: Emily Wilson, CEO; Acushla Young, advocacy coordinator; and Sophie Rowson, member of the trustee board. The content of these interviews was analysed and summarised into six key principles underpinning Irise International's work in the context of communities and social change.

This report is illustrated with postcards from an Irise International community art project. In this project, participants were provided with a blank postcard and watercolour paints and asked to produce artwork on the theme of 'our collective power.

Questions asked to focus group participants:

- How do young women and communities interact and how does that create social change?
- What does the word 'community' mean to you?

- What does 'social change' mean to you?
- What 'communities' are you a part of?
- What type of role do you think young women play within communities?
- Do you think communities play a role in creating social change?

Results and discussion

Sub-question 1: How do young women and communities interact, and how does that create social change?

Locating and defining community

The focus group participants described community as a group of people with something 'shared' between them, resulting in a sense of connectedness and belonging. Examples of communities given by the focus group participants included people connected by a shared location (e.g., people living on the same street) or people connected by a shared cause or value (e.g., a social movement). Others mentioned communities linked by shared experiences of growing up or living in a particular place (e.g., expatriates, school friends). Later in the discussion, workplaces emerged as another example of community.

> *"A community is a group of people that have something that they share…"*

Community was associated with a sense of safety. One focus group participant reflected on how she had recently moved to another country and missed the safety net of her previous community in London. Another focus group participant, from Afghanistan, described how many people in her home country struggle to survive, and receiving material support from the community is a vital form of social security.

> *"It is a scary prospect, my boyfriend and I were saying today, we haven't got a community yet, it's quite frightening because what if something happened to us, who would I go to to help?"*

Although many communities were described as being rooted in a particular physical location (e.g., neighbours, hometown friends), social media was also used as a mechanism to locate communities. For instance, the focus group participant who had recently moved to another country described using Facebook to locate a group of expatriates. Another described using Twitter to seek out and connect with people with whom she shared values and interests. Social media was also used as a tool to maintain connection when physical proximity was temporarily disrupted, e.g., in the case of student communities during the pandemic. The strength of community in the world of social media was notable, despite having no physical location.

In both focus groups, participants expressed a desire to feel more connected to the people around them. One focus group participant explained that she had joined Irise International in order to find a community of people with similar values to herself, as she found it hard to find such people in day-to-day life. The Irise International community was agreed to be very important to focus group participants in this regard.
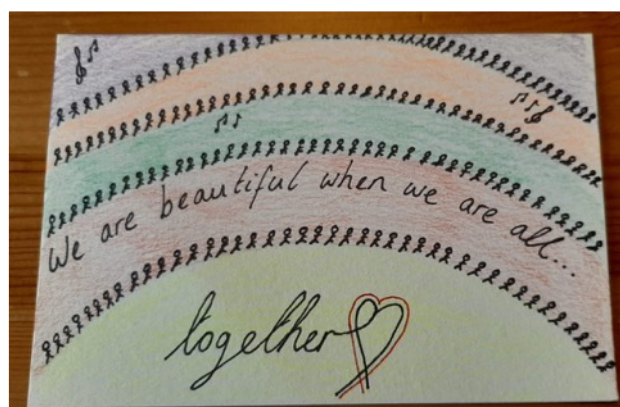
We are beautiful when we are all... together

Although the focus group participants valued the opportunity to interact with others who held similar values to themselves, there was also acknowledgement that being surrounded with others with similar views could result in being surprised at, or feeling a 'gap' from, the views of others in the world outside the community.

> *"There's a bigger gap when we go out from those places and is a bit difficult to face it…"*

Focus group participants explained that they were a part of many different types of communities, and that there were certain differences between them. The contrast between communities formed around a social justice ideal, and other kind of communities, was noted.
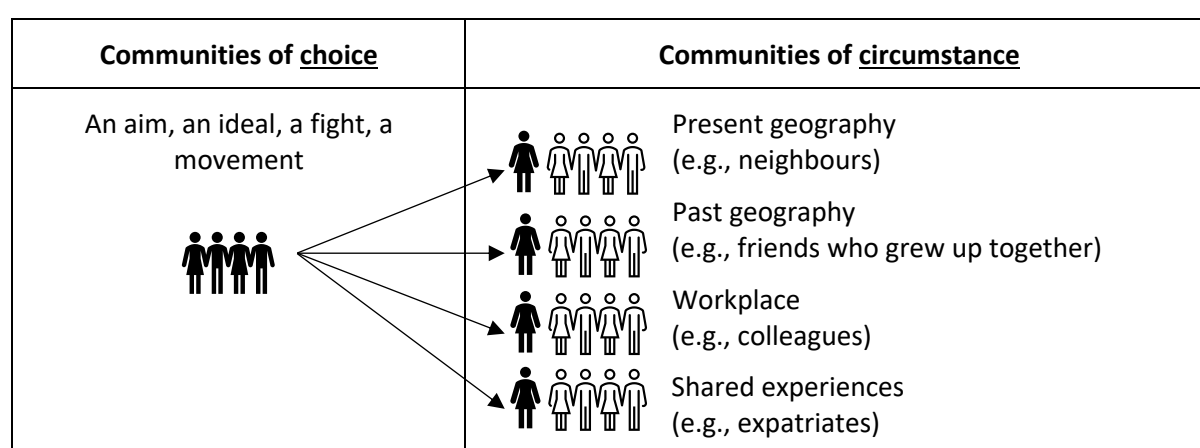
> *"That leads you to have very different communities, because you could have the community of where you live, but then you can also have a community of say, activists who have a common goal, so there can be quite a clear difference…"*

Understanding social change in community

Whilst community participation was considered to be an important part of social change, there was also a reflection that the notion of community could be romanticised, and the willingness of communities to accept certain ideas depended on their receptiveness. Social change was also recognised to be a long-term and non-linear process.

> *"What you can bring to the community sometimes is dependent on what the rest of the community will let you bring…"*

In order to discuss and answer research sub-question 1, how interactions between young women and communities create social change, it is helpful to divide the examples of communities mentioned by participants into two broad types. These can be described as communities of *choice* and communities of *circumstance*. Communities formed around a shared interest or value (e.g., social movements) are communities of *choice*, whilst communities formed around shared experiences or locations are communities of *circumstance* (e.g., neighbours, workplaces, expatriates, school friends). Most people are members of many different kinds of communities, both of choice and circumstance, and move between them on a regular basis.

Communities of <u>choice</u>	Communities of <u>circumstance</u>
An aim, an ideal, a fight, a movement	Present geography (e.g., neighbours)
	Past geography (e.g., friends who grew up together)
	Workplace (e.g., colleagues)
	Shared experiences (e.g., expatriates)

Members of communities of choice are typically in broad agreement about the form of social change that is required in the wider world, and the community is a place to come together, support each other, learn together, and share resources. In this context, these communities are a powerful driver of social change. This was described by focus group participants as the power of people working together.

> *"It's a lot harder to affect social change as a single person, you need the community momentum behind you and the power of people working together…"*

As people move between their communities of choice and communities of circumstance, the ideas and ideals generated and developed within the communities of choice are transported out into the wider world. Various examples of this were mentioned by focus group participants, such as being informally asked to explain a particular topic by a colleague or leading a campaign.

> *"I feel like I bring that perspective to a lot of my communities… with a group of my friends, I'm the one that people go to… they want it explaining or my perspective…"*

The focus group participants also discussed the importance of those with personal experience of social injustice issues to be at the forefront of leading the social change movement and holding positions of power in society.

> *"If you don't experience having a period, you're not gonna understand how period poverty works, and it's those sort of things where having women in positions of power, they're able to put that point of view there."*

Sub-question 2: How are young women supported as leaders of social change? How is young women's motivation and engagement maintained?
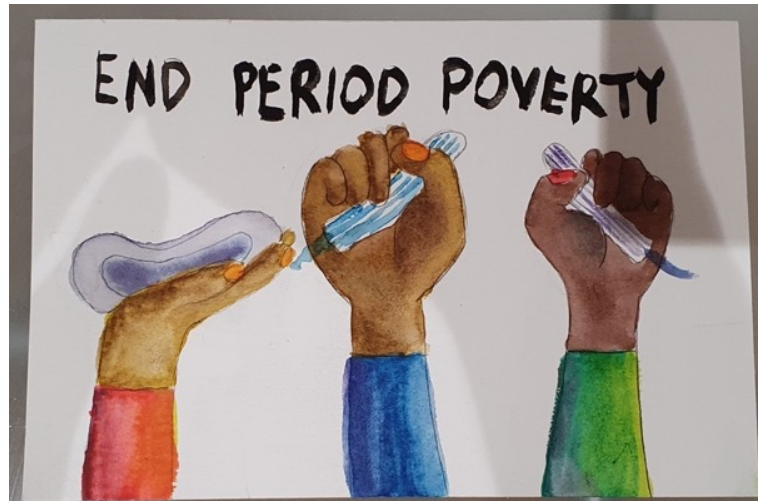
Creating a strong community

Certain factors were identified by focus group participants as necessary for creating a strong and supportive community that they were willing to join and engage with. These can be summarised as:

- **Having a common aim and ideal**: The starting point for focus group participants seeking a community of like-minded people was usually centred around an interest, an aim, a movement, or an ideal.

> *"The first thing for me is an interest, something that I care about, or I want to spend my time doing, and I know it's likely that I can find people that share those same interests."*

- **Creating a safe, respectful, and inclusive space**: Focus group participants considered it critical that everyone within the community felt respected and valued. A culture of listening empathetically to everyone's voice, without judgement, was considered particularly important. If they did not feel respected and valued, they would be unlikely to stay in the community. There was recognition that some voices may require more encouragement and space to participate, particularly if they have been historically silenced.

> *"It has to be space for you to continue being yourself and being the fullest version of yourself… I wouldn't want to go back to a community that I didn't feel like I was being listened to… or my ideas were being quashed…"*

- **Providing opportunities for self-improvement**: There was a desire for the community not only to be a place for socialising, but also for learning, growing, and developing their experience and

knowledge. There was a strong desire for peer-to-peer learning, particularly from diverse and less well-heard voices, and this active involvement felt like an important process of self-realisation.

> *"A sign of a successful community will be a place where you can grow and you can learn from each other, expand your ideas… know from voices you've never heard before."*

Whilst discussing their ideal community, focus group participants sometimes described personal experiences, particularly from the workplace, where they did not feel like others were willing to hear what they had to say or take their thoughts seriously. Having their voices ignored or shut down was described as sad, uncomfortable, and feeling powerless. By contrast, being able to have a voice and exert influence within the Irise International community was an energising and empowering experience.

> *"You don't want to feel judged or unaccepted by a community that you share something with because you feel a part of that, so then if they were to turn around and be like, we don't accept this point that you're making, it is really isolating."*

Empowering social change makers

Focus group participants identified certain activities as being particularly useful for supporting young women's leadership and enabling them to create social change in their communities. These can be summarised as:

- *Challenging perceptions*: Negative stereotypes of female leaders were an inhibiting factor for young women's leadership, and challenging these views both externally in the community, and internally within young women themselves, was considered important.

> *"A lot of the time, when women are trying to lead, their knowledge isn't seen as valid, or they're judged as trying to be bossy or controlling… Some women might believe it's not right for them to lead."*

- **Encouraging leadership:** Support to combat internal doubts and encourage young women to believe in themselves was thought to be very valuable, particularly in the context of a tabooed and stigmatised topic such as menstruation. One participant reflected that many women already have the strength to make social change in their communities, and they just need to realise their own power.

> *"I guess the biggest thing is knowing that you can lead, and it's okay to, and it's alright to use your voice."*

- **Sharing knowledge**: Being equipped with the knowledge to understand and describe forms of social injustice, along with having the opportunity to critically discuss the concepts with others, were considered important tools for leading effectively and confidently.

> *"Putting a name to things, so that I can understand how to change them, and having that knowledge shared too."*

Digital tools, such as social media platforms, were highlighted as a particularly valuable method for finding like-minded people, developing and maintaining networks, sharing information, and finding inspiration. However, digital exclusion was raised as an important and difficult barrier to engaging marginalised and underprivileged individuals through these channels.

Sub-question 3: How do new communities form that drive further social change?

The experience of Irise International

Over the past five years, Irise International has developed a theory of social norm adaptations which underlies their community work and social change advocacy in the menstrual health sphere. Using this approach, a national and international community network of activists has been formed around the ideal of creating a world where nobody is disadvantaged by their period. The key principles of their approach and lessons from their experience can be summarised as:

1. **Diagnosis of the problem: "Power, not pads"**
   Issues of menstrual health and wellbeing are rooted in negative social norms and stigma around being female. This is caused by a lack of diverse women in leadership and decision-making spaces, resulting in a cycle of exclusion and stigma. The root cause of poor menstrual health and wellbeing therefore isn't a lack of pads, but a power imbalance. The long-term solution for this problem lies in empowering women, and those most affected by exclusion and stigma, to take up leadership positions and lead a societal norms shift.

2. **Theory of change: "Connecting positive deviants to create new social norms"**
   Any community with strong social norms (e.g., menstrual stigma) will contain a number of 'positive deviants': people with a differing or questioning view of the social norm. When connected together into a new community, they can create new social norms which are contrary to the dominant norm (e.g., menstrual positivity), and find a collective power instead of feeling isolated and frustrated. Over time, the broader social norm within the wider community can also be shifted.[1] Detailed and context-specific mapping of stakeholders, individuals, and groups with power and influence can target and accelerate efforts to create social change.

3. **Creating identity: "Values come first"**
   Communities are founded upon a sense of shared identity, and identity is based on values. Having strong values is therefore key to creating a strong and successful community. The values must be clearly defined, institutionalised, and translated into the details of everyday practice, so that they are clearly visible from first contact with the organisation.

4. **Implementation: "Commitment to consultation"**

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[1] This theory draws on 'Community Readiness to Change' and 'Positive Deviance' approaches to community-level social norm change.

Traditional, top-down leadership structures can potentially reinforce existing marginalisation and unequal power dynamics. Non-traditional, participatory leadership structures, which enable and support members of the community to choose the organisation's direction, can negate this. People with lived experience of societal challenges can often see what is wrong with a system very clearly, and therefore their participation and leadership within the movement is critical to its success. Emphasis on the processes of consultation and deliberate relinquishment of centralised control are critical components of Irise International's approach.

5. *Horizontal leadership: "Anyone can be a leader"*
Leadership doesn't necessarily require years of experience, but instead requires clear values and vision for the future. Young people, and those with experience of period poverty and stigma, are encouraged and supported to take up leadership roles within and beyond Irise International, to create the change in their communities that they wish to see. Foregrounding grassroots activism, young people, and diverse voices within the menstrual movement is considered very important.

6. *Kindness and mentorship: "Everyone's voice matters"*
A culture of kindness and respect is vital for creating a strong, welcoming, and diverse community. Whilst open dialogue is encouraged and opinions can be challenged, 'calling out' is discouraged, and all contributions are treated with respect. Mentorship in particular forms an important part of the empowerment process for both participants and for staff. All people within the Irise International community are treated with trust and confidence, and encouraged to reach their full potential.

The principles and approaches used by Irise International are particularly suitable for working with young people, who often have wide spheres of influence due to their digital literacy and membership of a wide variety of communities (e.g., school; after school activities; online communities). Young people also often prefer peer-to-peer learning on sensitive topics such as reproductive health, and reaching out to them before puberty is an important opportunity to supply information and resources before menstrual stigma becomes internalised. However, organisations must be mindful to not take advantage of young people, whose energy and efforts can sometimes be taken for granted in the activism space. Appropriate reimbursement is an important part of valuing and respecting their contributions.

Digital platforms are a powerful tool for connecting national and international networks of young activists, and also allows for rapid evolvement in changing circumstances, such as the COVID-19 crisis. However, a physical presence and community in the local area of Irise International's headquarters is also valued and important, particularly for mobilisation around physical tasks such as distributing menstrual products. Whether members of the Irise Community engage digitally or physically, they are encouraged to stay connected with the organisation, and can progress on a journey from being a beneficiary to a mentor and supporter.