

ALF 2020: LEARNING TO PIVOT

Cheri-Leigh Erasmus



Nothing was as we'd planned

Over the last 10 months I had the honor of participating in Berrett-Koehler Foundation's Action Learning Fellowship (ALF) for the second time. Needless to say, the skills, mentorship and support network I gained from my first year of participation instilled in me a desire to give back to this community as a "facilitant" and I approached this year with an eagerness to learn alongside individuals who are deeply rooted in community building, and committed to having a positive impact on the world.

In the initial stages of the fellowship, I identified the following goals for myself:

- To improve my ability to use more creative, relatable, engaging storytelling when talking about the work we do at [Accountability Lab](#); and
- To strengthen my capacity to facilitate meaningful online gatherings and skills development opportunities to support my colleagues across the 9 countries where we work.

As 2020 unfolded, these two learning areas became more and more relevant and pressing, in ways that I hadn't imagined when I set my goals for the year. The resources provided by BKF as well as the opportunity to learn from my mentor, Yi, came at just the right time and had a profound impact on my ability to pivot to more online work over the last 5 months. I may not have done exactly what I thought I would do, but the skills I set out to develop ended up being what I needed exactly at a time when I had to be agile.

What changed?

The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to move all of our training to a virtual platform, forcing us to re-think how we convene program participants across different countries.

We received funding to start an entire new Lab in Zimbabwe just as the pandemic started. Since we can't travel, we've been forced to conduct onboarding of new staff who don't know our work virtually.

The recent resurgence of BLM protests globally have ignited conversations on racial inequities in the international development sector, and this created the space to have difficult conversations.

The COVID-19 pandemic creates new governance and corruption challenges in many countries as international aid is accessed to mitigate it. This has created many opportunities to talk about the ways in which communities can hold governments accountable during unprecedented times.

Connecting my storytelling goals to the changing space

Using a combination of training resources and storytelling, I created a series of engaging presentations that map the journey of each of our core programs to enable us to onboard new staff remotely and ensure that external partners understand:

- how we implement programs
- the outcomes we hope to see and how we measure them
- the impact we've seen through tangible examples and meaningful stories

As we continue to build our team and programming through our new Lab in Zimbabwe, the ability to make the work come to life for people who have not yet met us in person has been invaluable. These presentations were used to guide Zoom trainings, and the recordings are now being used wherever new volunteers, staff or partners need to learn more about our work as we continue gather virtually.

My participation in the fellowship increased my ability to convene and create learning spaces virtually. The additional Art of Convening training added to this. When I started this fellowship, I could not have known the extent to which it would become a crucial tool very quickly.

An example from the program journey presentation for our arts programs in West Africa

A SNAPSHOT OF OUR IMPACT

80+

Visual Storytellers who are equipped to use film as a tool for advocacy

50%

Visual Storytellers continue to build careers using their skills

100+

Musicians in Liberia and Nigeria who are using their platform to spark civic engagement and spread important information

250,000+

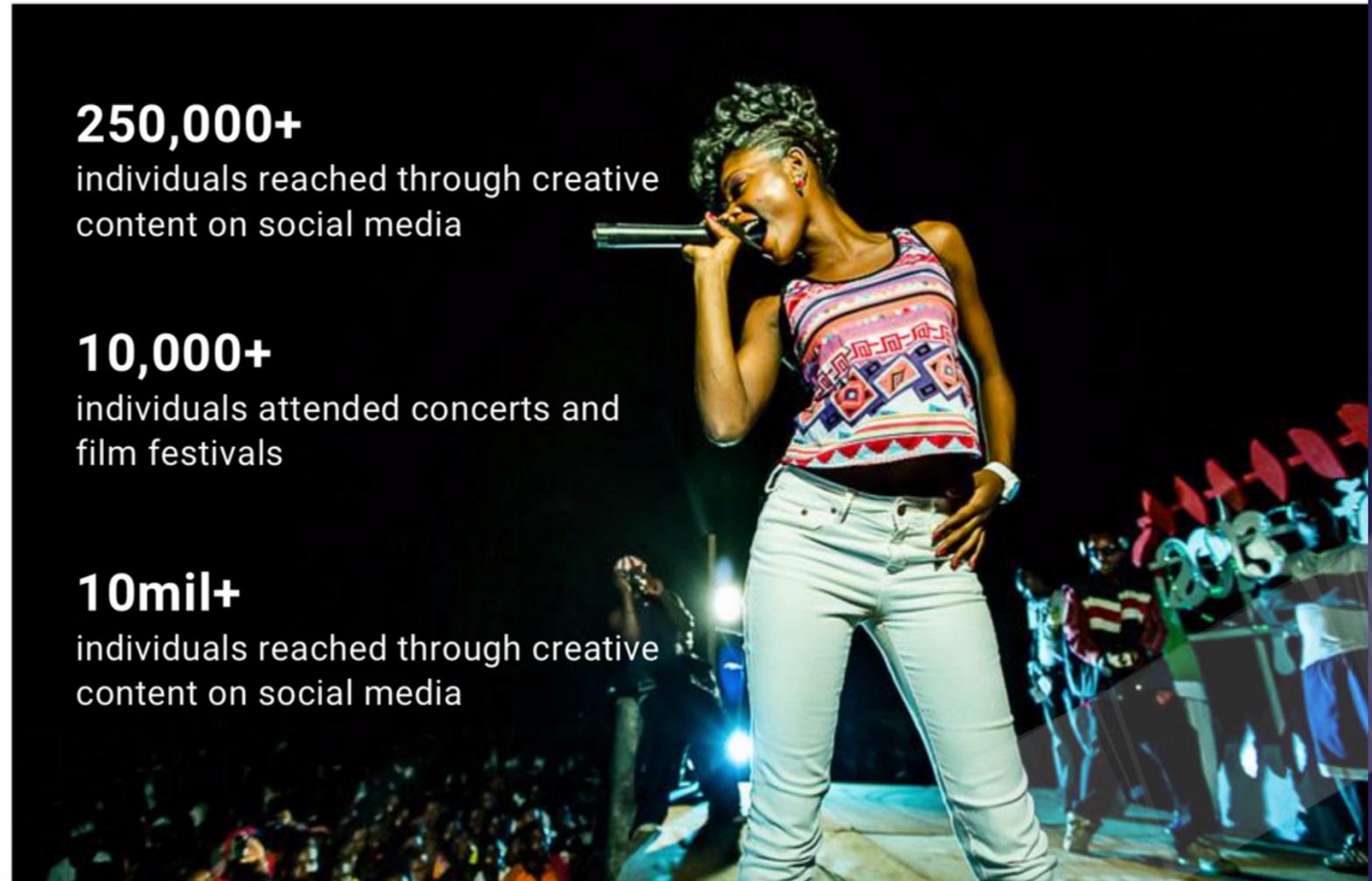
individuals reached through creative content on social media

10,000+

individuals attended concerts and film festivals

10mil+

individuals reached through creative content on social media



Highlighting critical challenges in a relatable way

While the global pandemic has undoubtedly created discomfort and many life shifts for most of us, it comes with a unique set of challenges for practitioners in the development - and specifically governance - sectors.

✱ There are many examples of countries where leaders are using lockdown protocols to close civic space and violate citizens' rights.

✱ The "infodemic" and the flood of fake news, coupled with the pre-existing digital divide in developing countries makes access to accurate, life-saving information hard. This is especially true for the most vulnerable, remote communities like people with disabilities or low levels of literacy.

✱ International donations and loans meant to help vulnerable communities create new opportunities for corruption, and in crisis situations where processes are expedited and civic engagement in decision-making is limited, non-profit organizations have an important role to play in ensuring fair use of funds.

These rapidly unfolding challenges require monitoring, and also served as a call to action to ensure that they are discussed at the international level. At the Lab, we have used our networks and reach to convene a variety of actors, wrote and published blogs and articles that reflect the challenges communities are facing, and used speaking opportunities available to highlight critical issues. In all of this, the ability to relay stories in the most authentic, responsible and meaningful way is the key to raising awareness.

Opportunities to shed light on critical issues

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

We're fighting the pandemic. Now it's time to eradicate the infodemic



Straddling the digital divide ... Eritrean migrants in Misrata, Libya use a smartphone.

Image: Reuters/Ismail Zitouny

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Cheri-Leigh Erasmus
Learning Director, Accountability Lab

I wrote this article outlining how the Accountability Lab is fighting the infodemic through accessible, relatable validated information across 6 countries for the World Economic Forum.



[Webinar] Creative Youth Approaches to trust during Covid19

I had the opportunity to convene leaders from Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda to talk about the ways in which young change makers are holding governments accountability and building trust during the pandemic.

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JULY 1ST, 2020

ONLINE EVENT:
GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

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Government Accountability Explains Differing Pandemic Responses

Representing the Lab, I participated in a CSIS panel on the importance of government accountability during pandemic responses with my colleagues from Mali and Nepal.

Using access and proximity to challenge inequity

The final part of my learning journey over the last few months has been a deeply personal one. As I witnessed renewed protests calling for racial justice sparked by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmad Arbery, I was also painfully aware of the ways in which actors in the international development sectors can be complicit in upholding unjust systems. While many good things are being done daily, there is a lot of room for change in the sector. I am deeply passionate about increasing the representation of BIPOC and other marginalized groups at decision-making levels, changing the relationships between donors, program implementors and communities in the Global South, and shaping honest conversation around the legacies of colonialism in international development.

I recognize that I am privileged to be part of an organization that is authentically invested in equitable relationships with stakeholders, and I have the added benefit of being a woman of color who has decision-making powers. With this privilege, I carry the responsibility to use it for the greater good. That led me to working with a wonderful team of people to convene this panel to gather organizations and practitioners to unpack the tangible ways in which we can work towards addressing inequities, and re-imagine what our sector might look like if we work towards systemic change.

The thought behind this gathering was shaped by the [Art of Convening](#), and the many ways I've learned to hone my voice within the ALF.



Since September 2019, the [ONE Campaign](#) and [Accountability Lab](#) have been participating in a 'Learning Exchange' supported by the [OSF Economic Justice Program](#), the purpose of which is to create a space for reflection and knowledge sharing between both organisations on campaigns, advocacy and communications approaches. As part of our ongoing collaboration, ONE and Accountability Lab are convening a panel discussion to reflect on the inequities in the international development sector. Moved by the recent global anti-racism protests, the two organizations are seeking to create a safe platform for partners and peers (both those with a programmatic focus and an advocacy focus) to take stock of the ways in which our sector contributes to inequality, and the practical steps we can take to right some of these wrongs.

This online panel discussion should lead to meaningful outcomes for participating organizations that begin to address the ways that organizations within the development sector can engage in racial justice work in a purposeful manner that leads to systemic change. This conversation is meant for those who are interested in and/or working to identify ways in which our sector and organisations can contribute to greater racial equity. The session is meant to be a productive conversation where learnings can be shared without judgement or accusation. Chatham House Rules will apply.

Moderator

Cheri-Leigh Erasmus, Global Director of Learning at the Accountability Lab.

Panelists

Lorriann Robinson, Founder and Director at The Advocacy Team
Stephanie Kimou, Founder and Lead Consultant at Population Works Africa
Omolola Adele-Oso, Founder and CEO at LOS Lifestyle Co.
Valerie Traore, Founder and Executive Director of Niyel

The discussion will take place on **Friday, July 31st from 9:00am to 10:30am EST**. To participate in this discussion, please [register here](#) by July 30th. Spots are limited so we encourage you to register as soon as possible.

Gratitude

It is impossible for me to capture all the ways in which the Action Learning Fellowship contributed to my development this year, but I would like to share the following:

The seed resources provided went towards strengthening my storytelling skills. It was incredibly useful in the creation of our online training content, as well as preparing me to use writing and speaking opportunities to highlight complex challenges in a more relatable way at a time when it was critically needed. I continue to grow in this area.

Receiving training and opportunities to practice the AoC methodology grew my confidence around convening. As we continue to work virtually, I've relied on the new skills I've learned in many ways.

The personal support and motivation to keep going provided through the network of courageous, empathetic and highly skilled fellows and community weavers provided an oasis in times of great uncertainty.

It has been invaluable.

