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# Revitalising a Social Movement through a Global Theory of Change



## AUTHOR, ORIGINS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Rick has a PhD in NGO Management and is a Senior Teaching Fellow at City University Business School, City University, London, directing the NGO Management Masters pathway.

### Origins of the paper

The MU leadership took the initiative to document and tell the story of the MULOA experience. They found that when describing MULOA to DFID, UN or INGOs, such stakeholders were incredulous and wanted to know how they could do something like this themselves. MU want to show others that it is possible to undertake a radically participatory, global listening process at scale that can result in a shared theory of change and a prioritised strategy based on the evidence from people at the grassroots. The MU leadership believe that MULOA demonstrates the cutting-edge relevance of a faith-based movement like Mothers' Union.

So they commissioned Rick James as an external researcher/writer to review key documents and interview a cross-section of stakeholders to synthesize people's perspectives into a coherent narrative. Rick knew enough about the process, having been lightly involved in some of the early discussions, but was sufficiently distant to listen to diverse voices and provide an independent perspective.

### Acknowledgements

The real credit for this work should go to all the Mothers' Union leaders and facilitators and members who made MULOA happen. Given the participatory nature of the process, it is impossible to name them all here.

Many voices have shaped this document too. Particular thanks for their time and insights must go to Bev Jullien; Rob Dawes; Sheran Harper; Themsie Mchunu; Harriet Wojia; Naomi Herbert; Cathy James; Kathleen Snow; Nicola Lawrence; Catherine Le Tissier; Barbara Packer; and Steffie Kemp.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Mothers Union (MU) was beginning to feel its age. Founded 140 years ago it had grown into a social movement of more than 4 million members. But in many places their members felt it had become increasingly inward-looking and ineffective. A radically participative theory of change process, called MULO (Mothers' Union Listening, Observing and Acting), that listened to over 200,000 people in 36 countries between 2017 and 2019, helped breathe new life into this global movement.

The learning from this experience has significant implications for development actors, whether faith-based or secular. MULO showed it is possible to listen at scale. Theory of Change does not have to be a top-down, office-based, process. Participatory activities created safe spaces for mind and heart dialogue, engaging deeply with people's emotions and faith to catalyse personal transformation. Changes in individual members catalysed major shifts in MU's identity, strategy, structures and ways of working. It created a member-led evidence base for MU global strategy that reflected localised priorities. Together with concurrent shifts in MU governance, MULO contributed to a genuine shift towards a more truly global and interconnected movement.

Becoming a more listening, trusting and strategic organisation has since proved vital in helping MU be more agile and adaptable in responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

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## BACKGROUND

Mothers' Union is a global, women-led volunteer movement embedded in the Anglican church that aims to amplify the voice of stigmatised and vulnerable people. From its start in 1876 by Mary Sumner, it grew into an international social movement with over 4 million members in 84 countries.

But five years ago it was beginning to show its age. A strategic plan, Vision 2020 had been created centrally, but when a new CEO joined in 2015, it was not clear how this could be put into practice, or how it connected with the needs and views of the grassroots members and their communities. The shiny vision camouflaged a growing malaise – in some places membership was dwindling rapidly, and the movement was poorly understood. MU had become inward-looking and more like an *"old ladies club for mutual support"*<sup>1</sup> according to one Trustee. Not surprisingly, MU was not attracting many younger women. Many members felt MU was fractured and there was a tension between bodies in Britain and Ireland and the rest of the world. Some members felt: *"Overseas provinces and dioceses were not consulted. It was only Britain and Ireland telling us what to do"*.

Much of the work, whilst well intentioned, appeared ineffective - *"imposing projects that did not meet the needs at the grassroots"* and simply *"taking our solutions to communities"*. MU supported lots of disconnected activities, without much evidence of visible impact. One MU member, a Professor of Gender, spoke plainly: *"Let's be honest, none of our projects is having any impact. We are only doing these projects because we feel we have to"*.

But there were also many pockets of great practice. And it was these that inspired the participatory theory of change process called MULO. As with so many things, MULO started as a casual conversation. In late 2015, Rob Dawes, Senior Development Manager of MU and Cathy James, an independent consultant, were evaluating the work of MU Uganda, using explicit

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes in this document are taken from the key informant interviews undertaken by the author in May and June 2020

principles of ownership, space for faith and methodological rigour. The Ugandan facilitators returned energised by the participatory listening process and the resulting clarity on the way ahead. Rob Dawes wondered aloud *“What if we could get everyone across the MU to do this listening process? We could bring change from the grassroots up”*. He was so excited he immediately rang his boss Nicola Lawrence in the UK. Over the next few weeks, through on-going discussions of a ‘Lazarus’ process for MU, *“Nic turned our crazy ideas into a spreadsheet”*. They took their dreams to Bev Jullien, the CEO.

Bev was already deeply concerned about the lack of clear identity in the MU: *“It meant so many different things to different people”* and the lack of member involvement and ownership of the 2020 Vision. She was fortunate to identify a fund in MU reserves, restricted for ‘Strategic Regional Meetings’, which could potentially be used for a global process.

The idea still required broader leadership support. Trustees met in March and November 2016 to discuss the proposal. They knew change was needed, but some felt an ambitious global listening process was a massive financial gamble – particularly because the open-ended, participatory methodology made it impossible to predict outcomes. But with strong support from the existing Chair and Worldwide President, Lynne Tembey, the Trustees gave their cautious approval.

From the Trustees, the concept went to a meeting of 50 MU leaders from Provinces around the world in Dublin in March 2017. They experienced the process and were energised by it, naming the process MULO (Mothers’ Union Listening, Observing and Acting).

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## WHAT WAS MULO?

MULO began as a global ‘theory of change’ process that involved structured, creative listening to more than 200,000 people, including MU members, partners and the communities that MU serves. Participants from Africa defined it as:

*“MULO is a process that gets us LISTENING to God, each other and the vulnerable to learn WHO we touch, WHAT changes we help make and HOW we are/can be most effective; OBSERVING the resources that we have and enabling others to recognise theirs and everyone ACTING together to improve their lives.”*

MULO asked three simplified theory of change questions:

- **WHO** we serve and who and what already influences them?
- **WHAT** lasting changes we help to bring about in their lives?
- **HOW** we contribute – what are the most effective approaches and our underlying values?

Based on the responses, MULO aimed to reach a clear understanding of who MU is, what changes MU brings and how MU works in the community and with one another; and then to agree strategic priorities and clear plans to take forward.

## WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PROCESS?

How on earth to put such aspirations into practice? How was it possible to create a focused strategy truly owned by 4 million members worldwide? There was no precedent to follow.

Together Rob, Nicola, Cathy, and Bev came up with an audacious plan that involved:

1. Getting trustee and provincial leadership support and a guiding framework

2. Training regional facilitators to lead MULOAs workshops
3. Conducting seven MULOAs 1 workshops in the seven Regions (known as Zones) to enable MU regional leaders to experience the listening methodologies, go through their own personal change and develop a working theory of change framework for their region. These workshops usually had over 100 participants. They used a mixture of participatory exercises (such as 'big step', 'crossing the river', 'bean ranking', 'stories of change', 'stepping stones', 'stakeholder Venn diagrams'); Bible text reflection (using dramatised monologues; guided mediation; role play and art) as well as analysing recognised good practice from the sector (see Annex 1 for more detail).
4. Taking the participatory activities back into branch groups and communities to listen to *who* MU touches, *what* changes MU helps make and *how* MU are or can be most effective, capturing the responses in data forms.
5. Reconvening again in seven Zones for MULOAs 2 workshops to analyse and consolidate locally, using the evidence of what was needed and what is making a difference to develop a journey of change with practical action plans.
6. Analysing the Zonal feedback at a meeting of worldwide leaders in June 2019 into a global theory of change framework, a shared identity, and agreed MU strategic priorities.
7. The Board and Management taking the priorities and translating them into a strategic plan for 2020-2026, approved by the Board in November 2019.

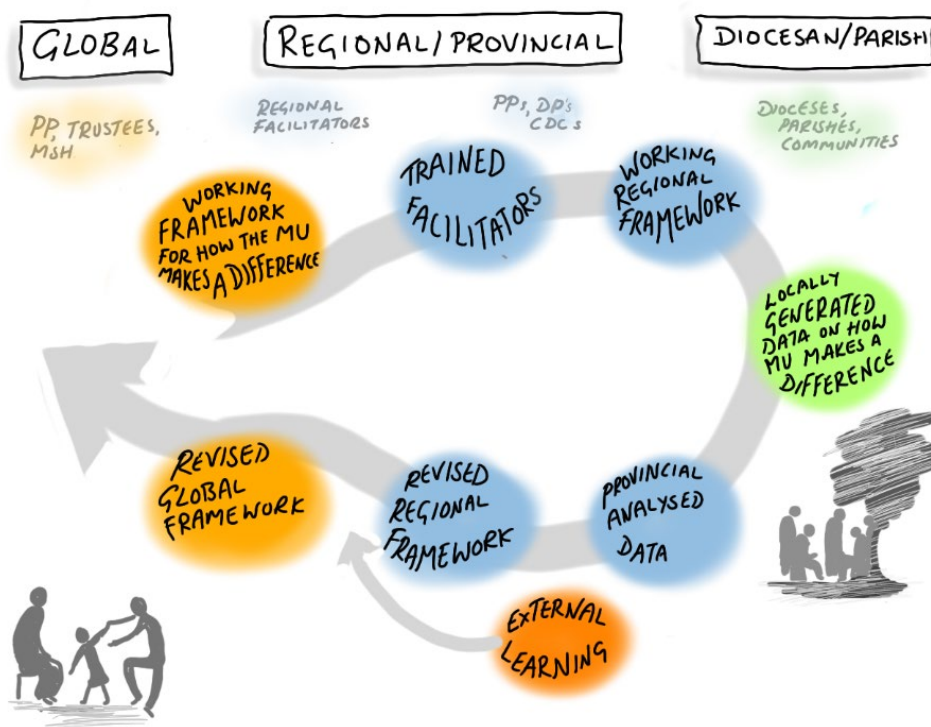


Fig. 1: Overview of the MULOAs process

The theory of change process took the best part of two years, from Sept 2017 to June 2019 (though it was designed to be on-going, and further meetings and retreats are still taking place). The core process cost about £200,000, paid for by the restricted fund. This represents about 3% of MU total turnover for those two years. As MULOAs merged with other MU processes, the overall investment in listening, particularly in places like South Sudan, was significantly more, funded by a mixture of new grants and redirecting resources from other activities.

The MULOAs process was broadly similar in approach and principles across all continents and diverse settings and groups, but adapted to different contexts. MULOAs resisted the temptation "to second-guess – 'that exercise or method won't work here'". People found the overall MULOAs

approach and tools<sup>2</sup>, designed to bring out local issues and priorities, were surprisingly appropriate to all contexts.

Local coordinators and facilitators did adjust the process, however, to fit their context. In South Sudan for example, the 170 MU leaders came together at a point of deep conflict and trauma. *“When people arrived, many were looking around the room and thinking: ‘You killed my children’”*. So the MULOA facilitators adapted the tools towards healing and reconciliation. They also doubled the length of time for the workshop.

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## WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF MULOA?

The impact of MULOA on the MU was not homogeneous. People, dioceses, countries and zones responded in differing degrees. Some parts of the movement, including Britain and Ireland, appeared less influenced than others. But overall MULOA had a transformative impact on the MU globally. It revitalised a social movement.

MULOA contributed to significant changes at different levels:

### 1. Individual impact on MU members

- Changed attitudes and deeper faith, resulting in increased commitment and action

### 2. Organisational impact on MU

- A coherent, collective MU identity
- Implementing a strategy focused on long-term change for the most vulnerable people
- Shift in role of the ‘UK Head Office’ from directing and funding to facilitating and capacity building
- Governance becoming more genuinely global (as MULOA relationships reinforced changes to the Constitution introduced in 2018)

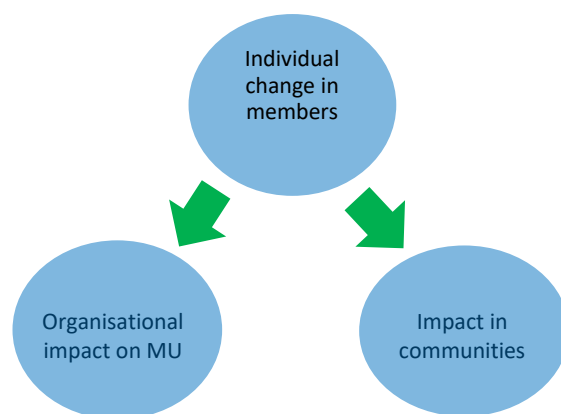


Fig 2: How MULOA contributed to change

### 3. Grassroots impact in communities affecting the global movement

- Self-reliance – improving livelihoods, skills for life and supporting children into education
- Relationships – within the groups, with men and youth, promoting peace and reconciliation
- Gender justice – women’s empowerment

## INDIVIDUAL IMPACT

The first, and arguably the greatest, impact has been on individual members themselves. So many testified that the MULOA process helped deepen their personal relationship with God. This proved life-changing for them.

As members connected their faith to their MU work this energised the movement. As one respondent said: *“MULOA reaches deep into our souls and challenges us and resources us with energy and calling to act”*. Members have renewed hope and inspiration to act. *“Every member felt they were important and making a contribution. They are more willing to contribute because they feel they have been listened to”*. MULOA helped people gain the courage to accept, and in some cases even embrace, change.

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<sup>2</sup> See Annex 1 - developed from Participatory Learning Activities (PLA) and Community and Church Mobilisation (CCM) processes

The wider church has noticed the difference. One of the Anglican Church leaders for all of Africa said: *“I don’t know what you have done, but all these women are now so active”* – an impression replicated in the other parts of the world.

These deeply personal shifts triggered transformation in MU as a movement. Organisations can only change when people change. As individual MU members changed, MU branches started to change; as branches changed, this affected MU at Diocese level, which influenced MU at national level. This then rippled out to continents, zones and to MU as a global movement.

## **ORGANISATIONAL IMPACT**

### **A coherent, collective MU Identity**

MULOA helped MU members develop a shared understanding of their unique identity. It enabled them to *“clarify who we are, why we exist today - our God-given purpose both locally and globally”*. This *“helped us greatly on the journey to become a unified movement”*.

As they worked out what holds MU together, their essence, they found out how much they had in common - *“It was striking how much we have in common across the different regions”*. As one person put it *“We are a kaleidoscope, but the fundamentals are consistent across the world”*. Another said: *“Despite our different cultures and diversities, we are all the same. We all love, fear, cry. We all have taboos of different sorts. Most of our problems globally are the same, even though we might experience them differently”*.

MULOA acted as a connector. *“It united us back into being a global movement, not disconnected small groups”*. The MULOA process resulted in a clear identity statement. This increased sense of unity means that people now feel part of something greater than themselves. They are part of a bigger picture, inspiring greater commitment to the whole. Members realise that the movement depends on them *“If we do not do ‘a’ and ‘b’ then it will affect the whole organisation”*.

This has brought tangible quantitative outcomes. For example, in response to the COVID-19 crisis MU Australia donated from their investments to support the central charity, which was *“unheard of in the past”* as many zones felt the central body did nothing for the regions. MULOA meant that regions now recognise they are part of something bigger and respond accordingly.

In a number of parts of the world MU has started to grow as new members have joined and new branches have opened in places like Argentina. Groups that had closed down are restarting – especially those with young people. Some of the MU country groups, such as Peru and South India have started to re-engage with the global MU family.

### **A prioritised, global strategy focusing on the most vulnerable people**

As MULOA listened to the voices of branch members and communities, this profoundly shaped MU’s strategy. They became more outward-looking, seeking to identify real community needs. *“We were always insular, more like a member support group. MULOA changed the way we worked. We became outreach oriented”*. Another said: *“MULOA opened our eyes to look at community need, not just the church”*. This led to an explicit recommitment to focus on the most vulnerable people.

MU became more willing to engage with other faiths and to partner with secular agencies. *“We have learnt the importance of building healthy relationships with Government departments. Now we connect the community with the government who provide services.”*

MULOA also shaped MU strategy by identifying how MU was most effective in making a difference in a sustainable way. *“We realised that giving people handout parcels is not good. People need to be independent and be able to sustain themselves.”*

MULOA enabled 72 MU leaders to set a global direction at the Worldwide Council in June 2019 based on the voices from the grassroots. Local needs, learned from listening to 200,000 members, set global priorities. MU prioritised three core areas:

1. **Peace and safety:** reducing conflict among indigenous people; healing from trauma; sexual and domestic abuse and other gender-based violence;
2. **Gender justice:** Women and girls' voice and influence to preventing trafficking and child marriage; women and girls in leadership;
3. **Access to livelihoods:** skills, employment for girls and women.

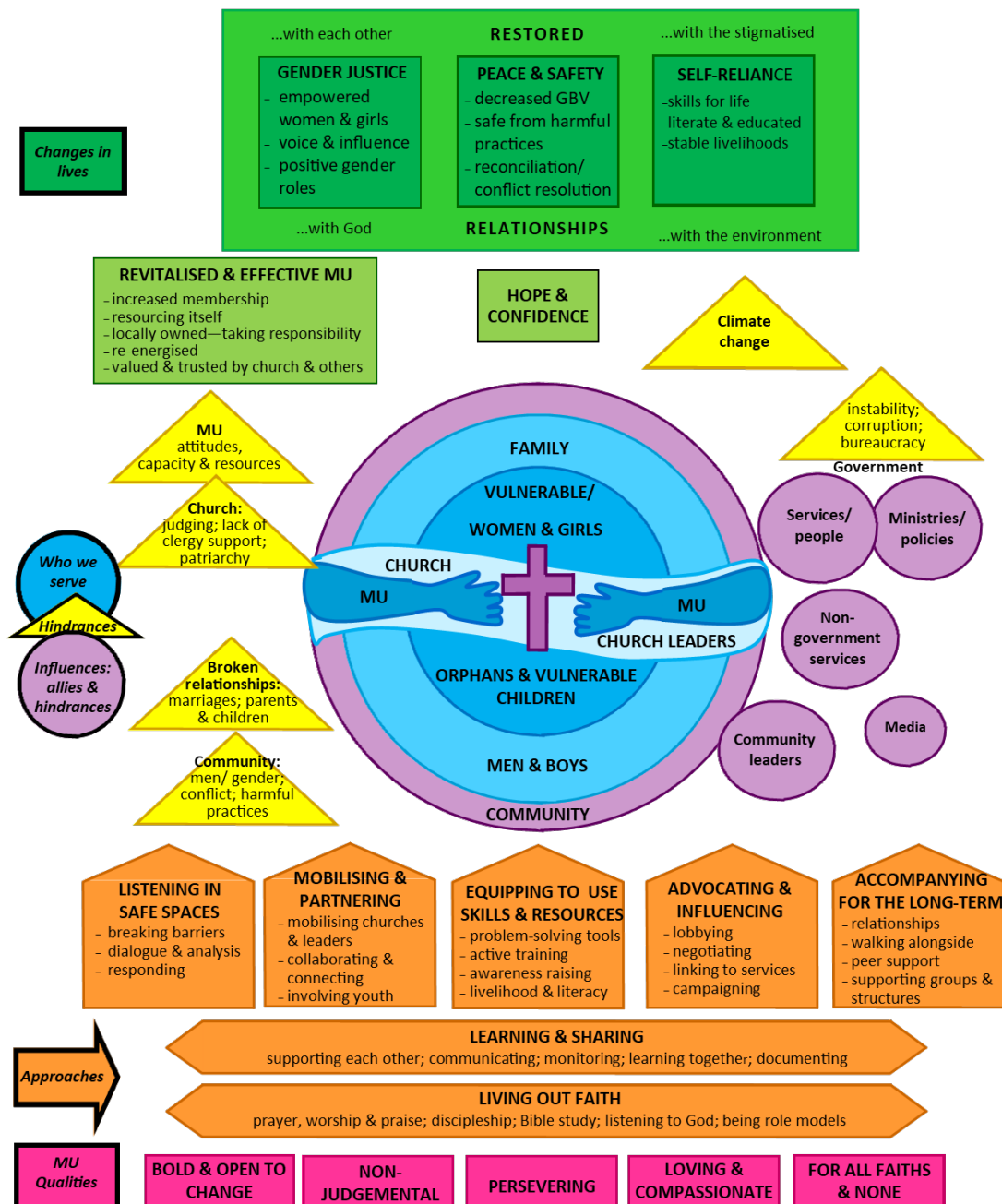


Fig 3: Graphic representation of MU theory of change

Management then supported the Board to translate these priorities, together with the agreed ways of working, into a strategic plan which was approved by the Board in November 2019.



MULOA provided a huge richness of stories and data on which to decide priorities. *“We have a road map to follow, based on the voices of 200,000 members. Now we must uphold and defer to the choice of all these members”*. More importantly, this strategy was not simply in a document, but already embedded throughout the movement. Many countries reported that MULOA had caused them to focus on what brings long-term change for the most vulnerable people. *“Previously we had so many things in front of us and we left things unfinished. We did not report on projects. We now design projects based on the needs articulated in the area, such as albinism”*.

Creative MULOA tools enabled members themselves to surface highly sensitive taboos, such as gender roles or safeguarding. Consequently, at the Worldwide Council meeting: *“All talked and unanimously agreed a MU approach to safeguarding. It came from them, not the UK imposing”*.

MULOA also helped MU to create a clear framework to facilitate mutual and external accountability. It established a simple, yet meaningful Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) system which produced realistic quantitative data on overall numbers reached as well as systematic use of stories of change to generate information about impact.

### **A changed role for the UK ‘Head Office’**

MULOA had a fundamental impact on the role of the UK office of MU (called Mary Sumner House, MSH). MSH started to shift its role from that of a typical International NGO head office, raising money for and then managing projects, to becoming a network secretariat for coordination and learning. As the MU CEO puts it: *“We are no longer here to run large programmes out of the UK based on priorities decided centrally. Our role is to help find funding for programmes meeting local needs and help build capacity within the Regions to deliver.”* This is a major shift in ways of working for UK based staff.

### **Genuinely global governance**

At the same time as MULOA, changes in MU’s constitution and governance had already started. The revised constitution gave a greater role to the Worldwide Council and created a more geographically balanced Board membership, with representation from eight different nationalities, including the first ever worldwide president from outside the UK, from Guyana.

These shifts proved mutually reinforcing. Without these governance changes, MULOA may have come to nothing; and without MULOA, the proposed governance shifts would have had less impact. MULOA highlighted the generous funding role that Britain and Ireland had played and continued to play, selflessly carrying the financial burden of the global movement. But this was clearly not sustainable into the future. At the meeting of leaders in June 2019, it was agreed that MU needed to take more of an asset-based approach<sup>3</sup> and become less dependent on Britain and Ireland financially in the longer term. Since a number of MULOA meetings took place during the election period under the new Constitution, it also enabled members to get to know their potential leaders. Indeed, some MU members said that, *“without MULOA, we would probably not have elected the very first President not from Britain and Ireland”*.

MULOA also meant that all Board members became more accustomed to speaking up. *“Zonal trustees are now a lot more feisty. Now they all talk, previously it was just a few”*. MULOA enabled MU to explore the Zonal Trustee bridging role between the central charity and the countries they serve. Through MULOA, Board members became more proactive and got to know their own provinces better. Provincial WhatsApp groups during and after MULOA improved communication.

As all Zonal trustees stepped up into their greater roles, this created a richer diversity of views within the Trustee group, although a healthy tension remains as the funding still comes

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<sup>3</sup> Asset Based Community Development builds on the assets that are found in the community and mobilises individuals, associations, and institutions to come together to realise and develop their strengths (contrasting with a deficit or gap-based approach). See <https://www.nurtureddevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development/>.

predominantly from the Britain and Ireland membership. Hosting the Worldwide Council meeting in Kigali in 2019, the first time outside Britain and Ireland, was an important symbolic gesture. It also enabled all leaders to gain direct insight into the work of MU members in a country with a very troubled history, but where significant progress has been made in encouraging women into leadership roles.

## GRASSROOTS IMPACT

But change at individual and organisational level means nothing if it does not make a difference on the ground. In almost every country MU reports highlight numerous examples of transformative impact in communities:

- In South Africa, after listening to street children for 2 hours as part of the MULOA process, MU changed from their long-time practice of feeding street children, to focus on reconnecting them back with their families, encouraging reintegration and making links to the government social welfare department.
- In South Sudan, MULOA helped MU take steps toward peace and reconciliation between ethnic groups. The MULOA workshop proved transformational. As members laid down their burdens in mixed Dinka and Nuer groups, they cried together. They concluded: *“Let us not follow our political leaders into conflict, but let’s confess to God and each other and ask forgiveness for our enmity”*. After the workshop they took the MULOA exercises back to their communities (including civilians’ camps), improving community relations and having practical impact, for example reducing cattle rustling and starting new literacy training.
- In Sudan, the MULOA Bible study groups created a safe space to talk about sensitive issues like miscarriage (the woman and the cloak) and rape, incest and female genital mutilation (Tamar’s story) and support survivors. *“I have been going to Sudan for 15 years and never got to that depth before,”* according to one MU staff.
- In Zambia, through MULOA, MU members realised that some of their own behaviours contributed towards gender-based violence and violence against children, and this has led them to explore together, and with the wider Church, how they can change their behaviours.
- In Papua New Guinea, MU is now tackling teenage pregnancy and its stigma, working with parents, wider family, school and community to change attitudes and help the girls continue their education.
- In Myanmar, the MU shifted its focus to working to raise awareness of protection laws to combat gender-based violence.
- In Guyana there was less abuse and gender violence after MULOA. This contributed to girls staying in schools in indigenous communities and then going to university. Through MULOA, women were trained to facilitate community conversations. Some were then elected onto previously all-male village councils.
- In Britain and Ireland, there are also some significant shifts. In the Newcastle Diocese, 40 branches have been through a MULOA process, resulting in restarting branches for younger women, innovative prison work and engagement with secular charities for abused women.

But even more importantly, the MULOA process had an incredible on-going impact on the movement at the grassroots. It was not just as a one-off intervention, but it has changed MU’s whole way of working into the future. For example, *“Listening has become the way of starting to work in every community”*. In many places, MU groups continue to use MULOA tools. They see MULOA as an on-going process – *“It never ends”*. This meant that when COVID-19 hit in 2020, MU was in a much better position to respond than it would have been three years earlier.

## The impact on COVID-19 response

Just as MU was starting to communicate externally its identity and strategy in early 2020, COVID-19 hit. In one sense, *“All our wonderful plans were blown out of the water”*. Things were chaotic and complex, but MULOA had made MU more agile to adapt and respond.

MULOA had embedded the practice of listening. So after the COVID-19 wave hit, *“the first thing we did was to listen to the provinces”*. MU set up weekly Zoom meetings with the Provincial leadership from around the world asking: What is going on? What are people saying? How are you doing? What are the problems? What are the biggest priorities? How can we support? This provided a system for global monitoring linked into an existing framework for action. In Britain and Ireland, a series of Zoom calls were also undertaken with the Diocesan Presidents to capture and celebrate stories of members’ work, and identify priority areas for support.

The MULOA process had already shifted the MU focus outward towards the most vulnerable people. It had already helped MU think through the three areas it felt it could make most difference. These each proved highly relevant to a COVID-19 context – gender-based violence; livelihoods; and peace and reconciliation. Through the listening process, members highlighted gender-based violence as the priority – *“In our two-hour calls people share horror stories, joys and actions. This has enabled us to create a joined up response”*. The MULOA process had, in places, already highlighted dangers of incest and other abuses, which are exacerbated by lockdowns.

MULOA had also created closer connections within MU and with communities. The internal MU networks and international connections proved pivotal in creating a coherent response to COVID-19. MU had also become much better reconnected with communities. *“People were more open and willing to share with us. MU members are seen as trusted, truthful messengers about handwashing, for example. This was vital to counter misinformation and rumour.”*

## Was it worth it?

Some still wonder whether MULOA was worth all the money. After all, £200,000 of central funding was certainly a massive investment for MU (albeit from funds restricted to funding regional strategy meetings), and the process also took significant resources within the provinces, as well as staff time.

Investing £200,000 over two years represents about 3% of MU’s turnover each year. If the benefits are very conservatively estimated to last for just three years, this means that MULOA would only have to improve MU performance by 1% to represent value for money. The evidence above suggests that the impact has been considerably more than that.

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## WHAT WE LEARNED FROM MULOA

Analysing what went well, but also not so well with MULOA, emphasises the importance of:

- Principles
  - Mind, heart and faith dialogue at core
  - Transformative power of structured listening
  - Appreciative and action-oriented
- Process
  - Simplified methods for ease of replication
  - Imaginative and varied participatory tools
  - On-going investment of time in follow-through and MEL
- People

- Skilled, creative facilitators
- Courageous leadership

## PRINCIPLES

### Mind, heart and faith dialogue at the core

The MULOA process focused on personal change first, based on the assumptions that behaviours are an outworking of our inner mind-sets and that these attitudes are shaped by past personal experiences and beliefs. Addressing something like gender-based violence is so much more complex than a lack of information. You have to go into the community, listen to them, connect with their emotions and beliefs and get them to figure out how to address it. MULOA therefore explicitly integrated emotional and spiritual perspectives with the technical elements of sustainable change.

As Bev Jullien says: *“Change comes from the heart and therefore approaching change in a more visceral way is the most powerful way of getting something to stick”*. To change behaviour, it needs much more than cerebral assent to new priorities. Rob Dawes humorously describes the depth MULOA aimed for: *“If we have not made them cry, they have not gone deep enough to change”*.

MULOA created space for people to look inside themselves and reconnect with their sense of self; God and others. The ways they behaved were the outworking of feeling *“cursed and unworthy”*. So MULOA involved people connecting with their hurts from their past in a safe way that brought inner healing. This needed people to engage deeply with their spiritual faith as we see below. As one MU respondent explained: *“Because change comes from within, MULOA enabled people to connect with their inner faith and values. Not as an intellectual challenge. But as the deep internal drivers and enablers of change”*. As a result, people emerged from MULOA with *“hope, confidence and agency. Believing I am loved and valued”*.

As a faith-based movement, MU has a huge reservoir of shared Christian faith to draw on. Faith is a key motivator. It is what makes members serve other in the ways they do. MULOA explicitly and intentionally brought people’s faith into the core of the process.

Sacred texts can reach into the heart. The MULOA process used Bible reflections and activities to get people to listen to God, to others and think for themselves what it really meant. For many MU members, used to being told by the male priest at the front what to think, this was the first time they had done this. This use of Scripture enabled MULOA to surface highly sensitive issues such as rape, gender violence and child protection.

Praying and reflecting together (in different ways) was integrated continuously throughout the MULOA process. This brought a sense of healing and renewed hope for many participants.

MU members strongly believe that MULOA was only transformational because there was divine power behind the changes. As one put it: *“Faith is what makes the insane ideas, the impossible, possible. Either there was the same Spirit operating globally or a weird set of coincidences”*. People experienced the MULOA process as a deeply spiritual encounter. They speak of the resulting changes in themselves and in MU as miraculous.

### The transformative power of structured listening

MULOA was designed on the principle that listening changes people. The whole MULOA journey starts with listening: listening to self; to God; to each other; to communities and to good practice from the sector. This listening was much more than just a few interviews or focus group discussions. It was a structured and systematic listening process using participatory tools, scriptural reflection as well as drawing on outside experience.

MULOA lived out a belief in the collective wisdom of the group. As a result, members were more willing to contribute and assist because they felt they had been listened to. Listening to

communities was especially important to combat the inherent pride that we know what people need. *“What makes you think that you know better than the people who have lived here all their lives. They are the ones who have to make the changes. All you can do is walk alongside”*. This listening did not have to be perfect or comprehensive. In South Africa a two-hour listening session with street children changed MU’s whole approach from giving food handouts to reintegrating them back into families. This listening also sought to integrate learning from others about what works. In analysing how to address particular issues, MULOA intentionally considered the learning of external actors about what works.

### **Appreciative and action-oriented**

The whole MULOA message was that change came from people using their own resources. MULOA started with what people had, preventing them from being stymied by a perceived lack of resources. The sacred texts and participatory exercises emphasised an appreciative asset-based approach.

The ‘A’ in MULOA stood for action. Every workshop produced a tangible output and framework answering together the question: ‘How can we take this forward?’ Everyone left with their own individual commitment cards and activities to undertake in communities (not just with MU members). MULOA was a call to practical action.

## **PROCESS**

### **Simple, appreciative and action-oriented**

#### **Simplified methods for replication**

A listening process in 36 countries, reaching more than 200,000 people is an incredibly complex task, so the process itself was made as simple as possible. MULOA had:

- three principles (listening, observing, acting)
- three questions to answer (Who we serve? What lasting changes? How we contribute?)

*“You can do everything wrong, but if you keep these three principles, three questions and use some participatory tools, it will work. The only way you can go wrong is to present to people”*

Facilitators communicated each workshop as a learning journey. They pre-empted fears by pointing out that it would not be an easy process and not to be surprised if they felt confused at times. The tools were simple with very specific instructions, with no PowerPoints at all, making them straightforward to facilitate. Once you had experienced a tool, you were able to facilitate it.

### **Imaginative and varied participatory methods for genuine listening**

Despite the large group sizes, usually more than 100 people at a time, the MULOA process rigorously kept to participatory processes. A circular workshop layout often helped and regular group work was essential. Full participation was essential because: *“If you do not get people actively engaged, they will not recognise the gifts they have within themselves”*. The participatory methods enabled people to open up. As one facilitator said: *“My ‘Aha moment’ was the way the tools could draw out the innermost thoughts from such a wide diversity of members”*.

Some of the frequently used tools include:

#### **Bible stories**

Bible stories such as the story of Esther, the rape of Tamar, the Widow of Zarephath, Jesus walking on water, encountering blind Bartimaeus, the woman who touched Jesus’ cloak, the feeding of the 5000 all reconnected sequentially with the three key questions of ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘how’. The facilitators used a wide variety of methods to engage with these stories, from dramatised monologues; guided mediation; role play and art. *“Drama was key for us because*

women were used to listening to a speaker and not getting involved or having a voice". In patriarchal Church cultures, giving people time to listen to themselves, to what God is saying, to listen to and be listened to by others and debate in a safe environment proved life changing.

#### MU's founder's story

Mary Sumner founded MU almost 150 years ago. In the first workshop with trustees, the CEO related her own encounter with Mary Sumner's story. Going back to the very beginning, its original calling, enabled people to reconnect with what MU was meant to be, not what it had become. Her story of radical advocacy and action, so counter-cultural in a 19<sup>th</sup> Century male-dominated society and Church, had deep on-going resonance. Enabling members to connect with the MU genesis through reflecting on Mary Sumner's story unlocked people's inner values and passions. It made people realise *"If this is what our founder was all about, let's go back to why we were created in the first place"*.

#### Family groups

'Family groups' were a core part of the MULOA methodology. These were carefully chosen, mixed groups from different places. In many cases, and in South Sudan in particular, family groups catalysed deep change as people realised that the vulnerabilities and burdens they lived with were not unique to them. They laid down their emotional burdens in cross-ethnic 'family groups' every day. Being united in human suffering was critical in breaking down ethnic barriers and building peace.

#### Self-analysis

In one sense, listening was the easier part of MULOA. It is even harder to build consensus from different voices at scale (often in workshops of more than 130 people). MULOA involved the people themselves in analysing the feedback, arguing that without this *"All work becomes an assumption and ownership is limited. We have to remain true to the data, not to what we think, but to what we heard."* MULOA used particular methods to enable collective analysis, such as getting groups to enact feedback visually, adapting tools such as 'stepping stones'. Throughout the MULOA meetings, facilitators helped create a visual journey of change on the wall. They produced summary diagrams at the end of each day and revisited the picture each morning to check back that it truly represented what people had said. MU was surprised how much consensus could emerge from this participatory analysis.

### **On-going investment of time in follow-through and MEL**

These participatory methods were time-consuming, but absolutely essential. Listening needs time and patience. As Rob Dawes pointed out: *"If you don't invest early in this you will not go as deep. True voices will not come out. Don't rush it"*.

Yet in such a global process, time was a huge constraint. Whether it was investing enough time to get the MU trustees or wider church leadership engaged; or finding the right times to bring people together for global meetings; or organising the logistics to get 160 people together from South Sudan or trying to squeeze participatory listening with communities in Britain and Ireland into a few weeks, rather than a year, time was always a scarce resource. Looking back: *"We should have spent more time reflecting. It was go, go, go, go, go"*. The only places where MULOA did not work so well was where it was not given enough time.

One of the major learnings from MULOA was to plan in on-going learning and feedback. The MULOA process had developed a clear and effective framework for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL), which could have been woven into normal management and mentoring. In a few places this took place, where facilitated WhatsApp groups circulated stories of change. This proved a good way to track and encourage implementation. In the UK, the Newcastle Diocese went back to 10 of the MU groups 12 months later, presenting back their action plan and asking

what they had managed to do. As the UK respondent pointed out: *“If there are no reviews, there is a danger that MULO A could sink without trace”*.

It proved incredibly challenging to amalgamate data from groups in 36 countries. Looking back MU is clear: *“We needed a structure to capture the outputs and follow through on plans. We needed to be able to collate the information in a meaningful way”*. With the benefit of hindsight, Bev Jullien the MU CEO said: *“I’d resource it better. We did it, not even on a shoestring, but on a thread”*. Rob Dawes agreed: *“We needed a website to handle all the data. We probably needed to invest another £100,000 to do this properly”*. However, it is unlikely that MU would have embarked on the process at all, if that level of MEL funding had been requested at the outset. But as a result, MU accepts it has missed an opportunity to create and implement a rigorous and technically advanced MEL system.

## PEOPLE

### Skilled facilitators

It is hard to over-estimate the critical role played by the two lead facilitators for the whole process: Rob Dawes of MU and Cathy James (independent consultant). It was their original conversation in Uganda that conceived this whole process and they were the ones that guided MULO A throughout.

As there was no real precedent for anything like MULO A: *“it was Rob and Cathy’s vision and passion that enabled us to go into the unknown”*. This took courage, creativity and uncompromising beliefs in the principles of ownership, dependence on God, and acting for justice. They trusted each other deeply. People found them *“brilliant and wonderful – a joy to work with”*.

But such a global process could not depend on two people. The facilitation skills and confidence had to permeate the whole movement, training up MU leaders at every level to facilitate MULO A workshops in branches and communities. Because facilitators *“have to wholeheartedly trust the process and not fall into the temptation to be directive,”* the only way to ‘train’ them was for them to experience the process themselves, first-hand. They could then plan and lead processes themselves with the help of an interactive manual and a toolkit of exercises.

The outcomes of each MULO A process depended to a large degree on the quality of these facilitators: *“It all depends how it is delivered”*. Some were incredibly gifted and open to learning. Others not so much. MULO A could have been improved by greater attention to the choice of facilitators using stricter criteria. Sometimes people were selected on the basis of their position (such as Diocesan President or deputy), rather than on their facilitation skills and spiritual discernment. MULO A might have been even more effective if MU had invested more in the formation and support of facilitators, though at the time this was felt to be beyond budget.

### MU Leadership – strong hands-off support

As well as the quality of the facilitators, MULO A depended on the strength of support from MU leadership. While Rob Dawes at MU was the visionary, the shaper of the process, it was his manager Nicola Lawrence who was the implementer to make it happen. She was politically astute in creating coalitions of support and also absorbed the pressure from above for quick tangible results. Her departure in 2018 mid-way through the process was a loss.

The MU CEO, Bev Jullien recognised the need for change in MU. Given her corporate background with AstraZeneca and as Pro-Vice Chancellor at a University, she was not familiar with such an emergent listening process. But once convinced, she was incredibly open and rigorous. She chose to trust when there was no guarantee of where MULO A would go or where it would take MU. She had the humility to listen and let go of control, even though ultimate responsibility rested with her. *“Lack of pre-determined outcomes freaks people out. Bev was so brave in trusting the process when we could not predict outcomes, nor even next steps!”* She bridged the gap between those

who favoured a more cerebral approach and those who were more reflective. She persuaded trustees to support such an uncertain process – greatly helped by full support from the MU Chairs of Trustees - initially Lynne Tembey, and then Sheran Harper.

Interestingly, the majority of the UK office (MSH) staff were intentionally not intensely engaged in process. While this made some feel left out and could have compromised their ownership of MULOA, MU leadership took a deliberate decision to limit UK staff involvement. As Bev Jullien said: “We did not want to give the impression of MSH overseeing and policing. It had to be fully owned by the members”. All staff were, however, given an experience of MULOA after the closing workshop, and were heavily involved and committed to shaping the strategy based on the priorities given by the membership. They worked hard towards achieving positive outcomes.

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## KEY MESSAGES

MULOA shows that a theory of change process, if done well, can be truly transformative. MULOA helped breathe life back into a global movement. The listening process provided evidence from the field to prioritise strategy in a way that was owned and implemented. MULOA led to action and changed ways of working with communities across the world.

MULOA revealed again to MU the incredible assets and the unique reach it has. MULOA has embedded in MU ways of working with communities that build on what people have, including the most vulnerable people, and which promote sustainability through their full ownership. Members are able to connect with personal faith in an inclusive and empowering way. MU has incredible reach into the most fragile contexts. The work of the MU deserves greater visibility. It should no longer be known as “*The Anglican Church’s best kept secret*” (according to the Archbishop of Canterbury). It is a credible partner for any international agency, faith-based or secular, who wants to work with a social movement of four million members committed to long-term change in the lives of the most vulnerable people.

Even though many people naturally resist change, preferring the comfort of the familiar, MULOA still resulted in a fundamental shift of decision making from the centre to the periphery, resulting in greater collective ownership. MULOA put the aspiration #shiftthepower into practice.

## LEARNING FOR INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

MULOA shows international agencies and faith communities that:

- 1. It is possible and potentially transformative to genuinely listen at scale**

Theory of change does not have to be an abstract, theoretical process undertaken in the confines of an international office in order to fill in a paragraph in a proposal. You can use participatory activities to listen in a structured way to beneficiaries on the ground. Even a small sample can be transformative.

- 2. Capture hearts, minds and connect with peoples’ spiritual beliefs to see deep sustainable change**

Find creative ways for people to engage safely in ‘mind and heart’ dialogue about their realities and possibilities. Explore mind-sets and beliefs that influence on-going behaviours. This is not exclusive to the Christian faith. Secular agencies like UNICEF have taken such approaches in the multi-faith contexts in which they work. In 2019, UNICEF integrated the same MULOA principles to their engagement with multi-faith communities in social and behaviour change in five countries (with the guidance of Cathy James and Rob Dawes through the Joint Learning Initiative). Where



UNICEF listened to the children and different groups they exist to serve (and resist the temptation to present answers), they found people's attitudes and then programmes fundamentally changed.

### **3. It takes humble and courageous leadership**

Supporting such an approach takes bold, visionary and trusting leadership: *"Leaders with the humility to listen. To be in tune with what's at the essence of your movement. This will take you further than having the answers and imposing your own solutions, however brilliant they appear"*

Participatory listening is uncertain and uncomfortable, so continue to cultivate leadership support at every level.

MULOA shows change is possible in organisations and movements towards effective and sustainable asset-based development. Adaptable tools to engage peoples' minds, hearts and spirits already exist. But it takes courage to change yourself and to release others by genuine listening and believing that people really can do it themselves.

What if you too had the courage of your convictions, and believed that it is time for change?

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# ANNEX 1 MULOA TOOLS

## Commonly used participatory exercises

- Listening and burdens (adapted from Participatory Workshops by Robert Chambers)
- Listening on three levels (adapted from CDRA South Africa)
- Big Step (adapted from MU Eagle)
- Crossing the River (adapted from Training for Transformation)
- Knotty problem (adapted from Participatory Workshops by Robert Chambers)
- My corner (adapted from Participatory Workshops by Robert Chambers)
- Bean ranking (adapted from Participatory Learning and Action Tools)
- Stories of change
- Journey of change (adapted from Participatory Learning and Action Tools)
- Stakeholder influence using Venn diagrams (adapted from Participatory Learning and Action Tools)
- Relationship mapping
- Learning from Mary Sumner story

## Commonly used Bible passages:

- Body of Christ (1 Cor 12: 12-31)
- Our calling (Esther 4:6-16)
- Walking on the water (Mark 6: 45-46)
- Day of small things (Haggai 2:1-9)
- Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10: 46-52)
- Woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11)
- Widow and Jars of oil (2 Kings 4:1-7)
- Rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13)
- The woman who touched Jesus' cloak (Luke 8: 40-48)

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