

8

The organic process of participation and empowerment in REFLECT

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• Summary

Experience with REFLECT shows that literacy in itself is not sufficient to empower people unless conscious and planned efforts are made to interweave it with a participatory and empowering development process. This article raises some questions about understanding the process of empowerment, as well as sharing practical observations about the organic process of participation and empowerment in REFLECT.

PRA experiences from around the world show that the use of participatory tools and techniques in appraisal, planning or implementation is only one of the components for promoting a participatory process. Other key aspects include: the attitude and behaviour of practitioners, participatory policies and practices of organisation, and participatory monitoring and evaluation for an organisational learning system to function. An organic process of participation and empowerment promotes all these elements, which cannot be separated from one another.

• Introduction

Critical analysis is a crucial and initial activity in the REFLECT process. REFLECT practitioners, from community level local facilitators, learner-participants to national and international trainers, researchers and managers, all conduct this analysis of society. The process of critical analysis helps us to understand how a given reality is constructed, its institutional mechanism, its history and current dynamism. In the process, we also

come to realise why literacy or illiteracy is a political and structural issue rather than a personal and “educational” issue.

The use of participatory tools helps to structure the analysis in a systematic way. Each participant has the opportunity to contribute their perspective and experience. A continuous visual recording of perceived facts, tentative figures and different life experiences is a powerful way to explore the complexity of our environment. Awareness of social stratification is a primary step towards critical and in-depth social analysis. In REFLECT, this analysis develops from an individual to a collective experience, from household to community level, from local to global and also from simple to complex issues.

• Participants and facilitators learn

In the REFLECT learning process, participants and facilitators contribute as well as learn. They can re-discover their reality, identify their respective positions in it, and also explore the potential for a positive change in the status quo. Everyone has the potential to grow and empower themselves.

Whether drawing a village resource map in a community or conducting a national level social stratification exercise (see below), the role of a facilitator is to initiate the process of analysis, not to dictate its content. Participants decide the content. This should not mean that a facilitator cannot share his or her views, because a facilitator is also a participant in the overall process. Rather, the facilitator avoids imposing “answers”. Thus the REFLECT process becomes a two way learning experience with the facilitators sharing their new learning with the group.

The role of the facilitator is crucial for synthesising the learning, otherwise the learning process can become stalled. What is important is that there is a learning process, irrespective of whether it is facilitated by an insider or an outsider. Only then can both participants and the facilitator learn from the process. REFLECT provides an effective participatory frame or methodology, which is a new contribution to the Freirean tradition.

• **Practise theories and theorise practice**

Paulo Freire advocated that literacy or illiteracy is a socio-political and structural issue. Illiteracy is a social product and also the result of an oppressive and unjust social mechanism. The REFLECT process is in broad agreement with this view. Our experience, however, shows that simply teaching this 'fact' to the participants does not work, participants have to internalise this learning in their own context.

For example, the issue of social stratification was explored in a recent REFLECT Trainers' forum in Bangladesh (Chittagong, April 1998), which brought together REFLECT trainers from different organisations based in various parts of the country. A national map (social and physical) and regional and sub-regional maps were produced by people from each area. The group identified various groups in rural and urban Bangladesh using a range of criteria, including: socio-economic status, language, culture, ethnicity, indigenous people, occupational and professional status etc.. They also analysed the situation of women and men in these groups to see how gender interacts with other types of social stratification. Finally, they analysed levels of literacy and education amongst the different groups and the root causes for the lack of access to education.

It took about five hours to complete this analysis and for the group to have identified structural causes of illiteracy in Bangladesh. This helped to promote an understanding of why simply running literacy classes is not sufficient. The roots of the problem have to be addressed - illiteracy is both an effect and a cause of underdevelopment. This example demonstrates how REFLECT tries not to teach theories, rather it practises theories.

• **Political literacy**

Existing local and global oppressive mechanisms contribute to gender, socio-economic and racial discrimination at the household and community level. This means that poor and minority ethnic communities are suppressed and illiterate people, together with "underdeveloped" nations, are excluded from mainstream discourses at global level. These practices are legitimised through the psychological and cultural environment.

Through a critical analysis of power structures in society, REFLECT promotes 'political literacy', an understanding of how power relations work. REFLECT empowers individuals by helping them to develop a politically literate attitude and behaviour which can ultimately lead to wider institutional and societal changes from local to global level.

Social stratification

Power relationships are overlapping. For example, without addressing both gender and racial discrimination, poverty and illiteracy may not be improved. Thus, analysis of social stratification is a fundamental part in REFLECT - whether in TOT (training of trainers), TOF (training of local facilitators) or community level REFLECT circles.

Following social stratification analysis during a recent REFLECT TOT in Pakistan (Abbottabad, March 1998), many of the participants, who have been involved in various government and NGO literacy programmes, commented that they had previously focused on literacy activities without addressing the structural causes of illiteracy in society. Later, they discussed what the role of REFLECT practitioners should be in order to effectively address this issue.

This led us to realise that it is not only the non-literate population who have to learn and change their behaviour, but that literate outsiders have to change as well. We need to understand the structural causes of why more women are 'illiterate' than men (e.g. in Pakistan), why 'illiteracy' is higher in rural areas than urban areas, why more poor people are 'illiterate' than rich people, why more manual workers are non-literate compared

with their literate office clerks. We subsequently explored the historical causes of why more people in developing societies are non-literate compared to the industrially developed and militarily powerful countries.

It was also discussed that understanding and a change in attitude and behaviour should not be confined to a narrow sense of giving respect to a person or speaking politely. What is more important is to promote a politically literate attitude for both individual practitioners and organisations. Through the REFLECT process we have been continuously learning, particularly with regard to the potential for change: how to transform reality and reformulate policies and procedures?

• **Awareness to action**

The REFLECT process leads to awareness and action for transformation. Because REFLECT practitioners at all levels learn and acquire political literacy in the process, awareness and action for change can take place at all levels - both individual and organisational. Individual awareness leads to changes in personal attitudes and behaviour, whether on gender,

generational, economic or environmental issues. REFLECT can bring new and radical elements into the social sphere of adults.

Gender analysis in practice

Let us take the example of gender in REFLECT. There are numerous cases from different parts of the world on how participation in gender analysis has contributed to participants 'discovering' a new reality and how men and women subsequently started to behave in a more gender sensitive way. It has not always been an easy process, but it has helped to analyse the elements of given conflicts.

A recent example from Nepal (Basnet, Taplejung, April 1998) illustrates how the REFLECT process deals with practical issues and also how by starting from an individual's life experience, critical social issues can be raised and addressed (see Box 1). Interaction and analysis in REFLECT circles have led NGO management to prioritise their activities differently and re-strategise their work (see Madhusudan and Bhattarai et al., this issue).

BOX 1 **EQUAL PAY FOR WOMEN**

Through analysing gender differences in workloads, participants in REFLECT learning circles in the Taplejung district of Nepal, became aware of discriminatory wage rates for women and men. It had been a longstanding practice that, whether they are paid in cash or grain, women receive only half the pay of men for completing the same number of hours of work. This issue was first discussed in the learning circle but was eventually taken beyond it. Discrimination in wage rates soon became a community issue and various conflicting views started to be expressed. REFLECT circle participants and many others in the village, both women and men, felt that the discriminatory wage-rate practice was an injustice that needed to be reformed. They managed to change the beliefs of some community members who had initially supported discriminatory wages. Despite resistance and pressure, circle participants and other community members, have succeeded in putting equal wages into practice.

In addition to the REFLECT circle participants at community level, REFLECT practitioners at different levels, including trainers and programme managers, learnt from the process. The most important learning is that the participatory process should go beyond narrow project planning to affect positively social practices. Another learning is that analysis and discussion on important issues, such as the discriminatory wage rates, should not be confined to the REFLECT circle. Without involving outside other community members in discussion, it is not possible to plan collective social action to address the issues.

Furthermore, and as a result of awareness leading to action, REFLECT trainers have moved away from lecturing on Freire and PRA to practising a participatory learning process during training. We have learnt that the contextualisation of REFLECT principles, or the re-creation of REFLECT, should take place from the outset, from the time of training and orientation as participants begin to explore on their own and develop their vision and innovate techniques during training. Training often becomes the model for how practitioners act later on, so it is important that the training experience is a learning one, rather than a teaching-based one.

• **Power and participation**

All development organisations and professionals now espouse the importance of participation and participatory methods. Participation has become a fashion and there are many interpretations of what a participatory development process means. As REFLECT practitioners, we have learnt that one core element of a participatory process is to contribute to the positive transformation of power relations, which is at the heart of empowerment. Only when oppressed and marginalised classes, castes, sexes or ethnic groups of people gain new power (physical or psychological, economic or cultural) at individual and societal level, can they participate effectively in the decision making process.

Some practitioners use physical involvement of people in a particular activity as an indicator of participation. Yet what may be more important, is to see who designed the activity and how it affects power relations. If some 'beneficiaries' simply participate in implementing a project activity which was not planned by them, and if they have never analysed its impact, then the 'benefit' may not empower them. In this case, participation is cosmetic, rather than genuine participation. In REFLECT, participants are involved in a thorough analysis of their reality, including an analysis of power relations, and plan their action for change. Box 1's example of women's action for equal wage rates can be taken as an example of how genuine participation can lead to action to transform unequal power relations.

This also applies in training situations. In REFLECT, we have observed that teaching PRA techniques to participants is qualitatively different from doing or practising PRA in the 'real world' context. The question of transforming power relations must be addressed within the training process as, without this, recreation of REFLECT does not become possible.

• **Conclusions**

The REFLECT process emphasises empowering people to be able to read the world, rather than reading the word. However, this is not an either/or situation. Political literacy enables one to read the world from one's position and perspective. A thorough analysis of given stratifications and power relations helps to promote an understanding of social dynamism, as well as see the possibility of change. Awareness and change at the individual level is important, but this must be supported by change in organisational policies and practices for societal change to occur.

REFLECT, like any participatory process, cannot have a blue-print for scaling up. Recreation of REFLECT means a process of involving people to do their own analysis and to develop their own vision. We can learn a lot from others' practice and also clarify basic principles of participatory processes through supporting each others' work, but ultimately it is necessary for each person and circle to re-create REFLECT according to the local situation.

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