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## An encounter with a 17th century manual

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### • Introduction

In September 1997, I had the opportunity to visit the British Museum with some of my colleagues. As we were looking at some of the old books on a table, we were quite taken with a book entitled 'A Sewing Manual for House Wives'. This book, if I can correctly recall, dated back to seventeenth century.

We were struck by the idea that manuals of this type existed so many years ago and, before long, our curiosity led us to seek out many other kinds of manual. There were manuals for kitchen gardens, for cooking and for knitting. In fact, we found a wide variety of detailed manuals, all of which dated back several centuries.

This discovery led us to reflect. All the manuals were targeted at European society and in all cases, they were targeted at women as the primary users. The manuals contained basic information, in the form of instructions, on how to do certain things in a certain manner. We were struck by the fact that in all cases, the authors of these books were men.

### The REFLECT mother manual

The word 'manual' is now in vogue amongst development workers and there is a growing tendency to produce a manual for almost any kind of work that we can possibly think of such as bee-keeping manuals, training manuals, manuals for social analysis, PRA manuals and so forth.

One of the more recent developments has been the creation of the REFLECT Mother Manual.

As with all the other cases, this was written with good intentions, but increasingly we need

to ask whether good intentions are enough. The concept and nature of a manual may be in direct contradiction with the very approach which it is introducing.

Many PRA practitioners have grappled with this concern. For many years no PRA manual was available and the spread of the approach was through the exchange of case studies (e.g. in *RRA Notes* and later *PLA Notes*) or through horizontal links between practitioners. Producing a manual was seen to be fundamentally problematic as it might lead to stagnation or top down domination.

To some extent, the writers of the REFLECT Mother Manual acknowledge the problems inherent in a manual in the title. The manual is not a manual to be applied directly, but rather is a manual which will generate new manuals: sons and daughters. These should be locally produced manuals, adapted to the local environment. It aims, therefore, to avoid being a packaged manual, offering a standardised solution on how to do a certain thing in a certain way. It tries to emphasise diversity and flexibility. Yet can it achieve this? Does it in fact propagate many new manuals which are genetically very similar to the parent one?

A dictionary definition of a manual is that it is a book containing information or practical instruction on a given subject. The current use or understanding of any kind of manual is not very far from that definition. The manuals in the British Museum appeared to offer a very clear sense of this in practice. They were texts written by the 'knowing' for the 'unknowing'. Whilst they may have served as the source of some practical advice, this was probably secondary. Their primary impact was to delineate the appropriate domestic role of women in society.

We need, therefore, to look beyond the content of the REFLECT Mother Manual and consider its role and impact as a text. One consideration here is to look at the impact of the Manual as a one off definitive publication on REFLECT, which has induced some people to regard it as a 'sacred text' and something from which deviation should not be tolerated. Whilst the content of the text urges flexibility and re-interpretation of REFLECT in each context, the nature and structure of text promotes the opposite.

The REFLECT Mother Manual was written as a result of the positive experiences of the initial pilot REFLECT programmes in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador. These programmes were evaluated and showed positive achievements, so the issue of scaling up the approach was developed. But how is it possible to spread an approach such as REFLECT? Although other approaches were also used, the production and dissemination of a manual became a central part of the strategy. There is no doubt that many people have adapted the manual to their own situation and used it creatively. However, there is also an increasing concern that the manual may be having unintended negative impacts.

• **South Asia experience: challenging the use of manuals**

The REFLECT Mother Manual was not the first of its kind to promote and assist literacy workers in Nepal. For many years, primer-based literacy programmes have also included the publication of manuals or guidebooks for facilitators. In all cases, the intention behind the production of the manual cannot be questioned. One particular manual which stands out, was produced nationally for use in a mass literacy campaign in Nepal.

Whilst much effort is placed on preparing these manuals, field level practitioners are, on the other hand, constantly talking about the capacity of facilitators who can be recruited in rural areas. They rarely match the ideal profile which is conjured up in manuals, and yet, after a couple of weeks of training, they are expected to run literacy centres with little help, other than some "primers", or a facilitators' manual/guide-book. As a result, we often experience problems of dropout or very poor

performance of the participants; or rapid disillusion and drop out amongst the facilitators themselves. In spite of all these problems, the preoccupation of most literacy promoters and co-ordinators is to meet their programme targets, increasing the number of centres each year.

For all the good ideas in any manual, the use of a manual in such circumstances has not helped the facilitators to teach creatively. Few of the ideas or suggestions are internalised by the facilitators. If used, the manual, becomes a source of prescriptions to be mechanically followed and there are rarely examples of facilitators adapting the suggestions meaningfully to the context in which they are working.

The use of a facilitators' guide book or manual is thus rarely effective. For those of us excited at the potential of REFLECT to offer a new approach, we have to be very careful about falling into the use of old tools or mechanisms.

In the case of REFLECT, this challenge applies at two levels: first, to the REFLECT Mother Manual itself and second, to the local REFLECT manuals, which the Mother manual aims to generate. For example, we need to question whether a local REFLECT manual is any different from any other manual, when it comes to the grassroots level. Is the manual being used to further the dependence of the facilitators on it or are we promoting their capacities, so that they can redefine and use the manual according to their context? Is a manual likely to freeze REFLECT and prevent its evolution or adaptation? Does a manual create a gap between the 'experts' and the 'others'?

The REFLECT Mother manual suggests that a local team of people should produce the local facilitators' manual and recruit and train facilitators in the use of the manual. This approach was rejected in Nepal because it appeared to fall into the trap of producing a manual, not dissimilar to old manuals, in which people were told what to do but were rarely able to do it. Providing facilitators with a definitive manual produced by other people (even if done locally) would be to disempower them; make them 'cogs' in the delivery of the programme; robots, who should

follow a set of instructions. Instead, the focus has been placed on training of facilitators in the ideas and methods of REFLECT, so that they can internalise the approach and make it their own - doing those things they feel comfortable with and ignoring others. There is no sacred text for them to follow.

This requires a different mode of operation from the one in vogue. One-off training or casual follow-up training is not enough. The challenge is to establish a process that is continuous, developing and engaging local institutions to develop their potentialities at various levels. Mere reliance on the manual to propagate an approach will not be sufficient. We need to constantly have dialogue with the facilitators and the users of the approach.

This 'no manual' approach, currently being followed in Nepal, forms a stark contrast to what was developed in Bangladesh. There, the REFLECT Mother Manual, together with the manual from the pilot programme in Bhola, was used as a very direct resource for producing other local manuals, which had relatively little variation or adaptation. This is now changing and diversification is being emphasised, but there was a clear indication that the weight of a 'definitive manual' was distorting the very philosophy which the manual itself propounded.

In India a further innovation has emerged which offers a third way. This involves the facilitators themselves producing their own local manual in the course of initial and on-going training. Having been introduced to some basic participatory tools, they adapt the tools to address critical local issues and then write their own guidelines (for themselves) on how each tool could be used for developing reading, writing and numeracy practice. By being involved in the process of producing a text, they echo the process of the REFLECT circle itself. Having written their own manual, they are less likely to regard it as sacred and are more able to adapt the approach to their own individual contexts. The 'manual' they produce is compiled loose leaf, so that it can be updated and revised and never becomes a fixed or frozen text. Any manual should always be in the process of production or revision if it is to avoid becoming, in effect, a new primer.

There is no single path but it is clear that the concept of a manual is inherently problematic. In seeking to develop a radical approach to literacy, we must avoid becoming unwittingly constrained by one of the most inherently reactionary forms of text.

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