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SEACOW and Chisa Kruskaisa

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- **Introduction**

SEACOW (School of Ecology and Community Work) is an activist organisation working with rural communities in the mid-hills of Nepal, amongst indigenous tribal communities called the Chepang. SEACOW began working with the Chepang people, who live in the Kandrang Valley in the Chitwan district, in 1993. The main economy of the area is subsistence agriculture. There is acute food shortage, inadequate drinking water and generally high levels of poverty in the area.

In response to the needs of the community, a formal vocational school was adapted into a locally responsive land-based holistic training centre. The SEACOW programme assisted with a tree nursery to support the agro-forestry programme. But there was no reliable supply of water for the nursery and so consultation with the community began to try and strengthen the existing drinking water system. It was decided that the project would aim to improve the drinking water and also initiate literacy classes. The community members involved in the project went to visit good and bad examples of drinking water systems. These study tours became an integral part of the project, together with Adult Learning Centres (ALCs), groups which met five times a week to learn to read and write. The ALCs served as an effective informal forum for SEACOW to meet community members in order to learn more about their lives and experiences. ALCs were run for 3 years by SEACOW, which provided training and support to local facilitators.

- **REFLECT and Chisa Kruskaisa**

In 1995, based on their experience of adult literacy and their interest in learning more, SEACOW members participated in a REFLECT orientation workshop. Analysing the limits of their existing programme, particularly the lack of effective links between the ALCs and wider empowerment processes, SEACOW decided to adapt the REFLECT approach for their ALCs. Many SEACOW staff were already familiar with the ideas of Paulo Freire and PRA. During the REFLECT training, the issue of the name “REFLECT” was raised. The group could not find an appropriate Nepali word for this type of learning process and brainstormed to generate a suitable and comprehensible word. *Chisa Kruskaisa* emerged from the participants during this process; it means ‘a short meeting to learn’ in Chepang, the local language.

The seven *Chisa Kruskaisa* (adult learning and empowerment circles) in the Kandrang Valley, have been in operation since April 1997. The average number of regular participants is 14 but can be as many as 25. This number is satisfactory given that the settlements are sparse. Almost half of the participants are women, and there are two female facilitators. The age of participants ranges from 15 to 55, whereas that of facilitators is from 20 to 50. Facilitators, who are all from the same community as their learners, spent about two months holding informal discussions about local problems with possible participants and their families prior to setting regular meetings.

Even after starting up regular meetings of the *Chisa Kruskaisa*, several days were spent discussing different issues emerging in the village before developing the curriculum and introducing the literacy dimension. Informal

discussions and time spent in these meetings gave the participants confidence to start the 'literacy' aspect of REFLECT.

- **Facilitator capacity and learning environment**

As many facilitators had previously undergone training in non-formal education facilitation, they were able to interpret and lead discussions on their own. Based on the informal discussions in each community, common themes had been identified and these were used as the basis for structuring the learning process. Having been involved in developing the curriculum, facilitators in each Chisa Kruskaisa had the confidence to relate the discussion to the overall process of development in their specific community.

A key aspect of REFLECT is making links between the micro and the macro environment and examining how they are inter-related. SEACOW staff members explored Paulo Freire's ideas in greater depth and realised that they were compatible with their way of working, as they focusing on a vision of radical change and the need to empower people rather than simply run charitable programmes. The implications of this were explored in the facilitator's training which aimed to set an example of the participatory

practice which facilitators would later use in their own communities.

Since the facilitators understood the concepts well, they composed the basic ideas of Freire and key issues from their local discussions into songs (see Figure 1). Songs are popular and powerful tools in the local context and are important in the systemisation of information (processing and memorising). Local people use songs to record the major events and changes in people's lives, and they thus act as a local history. Efforts were made to combine visual aids and other oral traditions in an informal environment.

One of the challenges was to make the learning environment appropriate for drawing on such oral traditions. It was concluded that the formal setting of the ALC did not encourage people to openly discuss and express themselves. People felt that their ideas did not flow without smoking or drinking and sitting by the fire, so the formal environment of the old ALCS gave way to a much more informal and vibrant setting for the learning process. This was done in collaboration with participants who together came up with their own definition of the purpose of a Chisa Kruskaisa: it was a 'short meeting': a place to discuss, critically analyse their lives, entertain but also to learn to read and write. This 'literacy' aspect is only one part of the Kruskaisa process in our context.

Figure 1. Local facilitators compose songs based on their learning



• Progress

Changes have been felt at three levels: at the individual and family level and in the wider community where we have seen the beginning of a reflection and analysis process. People have become more vocal and have started to analyse their lives more critically than before. Sometimes whole families join in the discussion, which speeds up the change process and ensures that it is accepted in the family. Enthusiasm to try new ideas has increased.

More inter-community exchange tours have been undertaken, thus further consolidating and broadening the learning process. These have helped to create an informal environment for interaction as well as enhancing solidarity amongst the group members. In this sense, the *Chisa Kruskaisa* has encouraged people to go beyond their community and to see their lives from a different perspective. Meeting with other communities to share experiences has also helped to increase people's confidence, especially when speaking to outsiders. In general a greater feeling of co-operation and solidarity has emerged as a result of the *Chisa Kruskaisa* process.

For example, there is now a letter-press in the village where facilitators can print copies of the texts from the *Chisa Kruskaisa*. This has facilitated the learning process and has created a sense of pride amongst participants when they see their texts printed. The press is useful for producing reading material and also helps to strengthen the literacy-environment in the village.

In the Chyoding community, water emerged as a key issue in the *Chisa Kruskaisa*. Although the drinking water scheme had been supported by various sources, it was not being properly maintained by the community leader. The issue of water was discussed in the circle first and then the participants decided to approach the matter with the community leader. As the community members were united on this issue, the leader was forced to agree with them. People subsequently approached SEACOW to support the cost of repairing the water pipes. In the inter-community tours they had learnt about the drinking water systems in another

village. They invited one of the trained plumbers from there to fix their pipes. This is just one example of direct action which has been undertaken by the participants to improve their lives. The *Chisa Kruskaisa* provided a structured environment in which people could analyse the current water situation in the community and look for a constructive way to resolve the problem.

Likewise, in the Gundi community, latrines were constructed and a section of trail was improved as a result of discussion in the circle. In this case, the community leader was very supportive to the *Chisa Kruskaisa* and actively encouraged people to participate in the circle. The circle has also had an impact on adjoining villages, who are now looking into the possibility of starting their own circles.

The role of SEACOW

SEACOW's input to the *Chisa Kruskaisas* includes employing a promoter to support the process and providing wages for the facilitators. An agreed amount of kerosene, lanterns and exercise books are also supplied. Participants pay a fee of 5 rupees a month which is used as savings by the group. The circles will run for as long as there is interest and enthusiasm for them in the community. There is now a transition, with the local communities taking on the lead role in managing the *Chisa Kruskaisas*. In the future, SEACOW will be providing support for training, if and as requested.

• Internalising REFLECT

It took a considerable period of time for SEACOW to develop confidence to take up REFLECT. After initial REFLECT training in Kathmandu in 1995, two SEACOW staff members returned frustrated. They were reluctant to give up using literacy primers, as they were familiar with them. Another problem was that facilitators did not understand the jargonised and elitist so-called "standard" Nepali - and thus had difficulty in understanding, recording and then transferring what they had learnt in the REFLECT training to other SEACOW members. However, after continuing discussions within SEACOW and after acknowledging the limitations of the

existing primers used in ALCs, it was decided to at least explore REFLECT further.

The first step was to conduct our own training on REFLECT, adapting it to the local context. We realised that rather than introducing REFLECT using illustrations from elsewhere (e.g. the pilot projects), the contextualisation of REFLECT is important during the training. We placed a strong emphasis on the principles, which themselves place emphasis on local adaptation and creativity. Once this was internalised, people were much more open to learning. This internalisation of REFLECT was needed by both individual staff members and by SEACOW as an institution - so that we could see how to build on our past and existing strengths and mould reflect to our needs.

A key part of the process of internalisation was generating confidence.. It was necessary to spend time building facilitators confidence so that they would not feel the need to use a primer. It was also necessary to have the institutional confidence to create and adapt something for ourselves rather than follow the well-trodden path of other institutions.

• **Lessons learnt**

Although the *Chisa Kruskaisa* had a defined beginning, a participatory process had already been started in the area. SEACOW members and also many local facilitators had been practising and even innovating various participatory methods in their work. The use of diverse and culturally rooted methods helped to add an element of fun, informality and openness, whilst also enabling people to retain the ideas and analyse them in a non-visual way before or after they were transcribed. The in-built flexibility of REFLECT encouraged these culturally appropriate and innovative methods. Rather than mechanically focusing on the teaching of words and letters, participants spent time reflecting on the meaning of words and phrases before learning how to write them.

Facilitators were trained in the use of PRA, but they were encouraged to use it only when they knew why they were using it. The PRA tools are used to structure the discussion but are not an end in itself. In this sense, we are somewhat reluctant to boast about the sacredness of PRA as a technique, as it is often used before people have actually felt the need for processing such information. People have different means of analysing their situation. Even at the purely practical level, people are reticent to divulge critical information before you have earned their trust. Time and effort was put in to adapt REFLECT to the local context, ensuring that facilitators could implement the concepts that they felt were most important.

In addition, every effort was made to ensure that the training itself was participatory and that it served as an example for the facilitators to follow. This had a profound impact on eliminating the authoritarian image of teachers. It was not expected that everybody who participated in the training must be a facilitator, rather it was seen as an opportunity for interested people to learn about the REFLECT process and see what role they wished to play in it. Some people in the community were not comfortable with REFLECT as they felt that their dominant position within the community was being challenged. This was accepted as inevitable, as any process of change will generate conflict.

What is important is that *Chisa Kruskaisa* and other learning activities are holistic processes in the communities - fully linking literacy with people's lives. It will be interesting to see how the *Chisa Kruskaisas* develop in the future. We have yet to see how participants will emerge as a continually conscientised group of people over time.

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