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Challenges in facilitator recruitment and training

Maria Nandago

• Introduction

REFLECT programmes depend on the use of local facilitators who come from the same communities as participants. In this way, the REFLECT process does not create or encourage dependency on external agents, but rather generates a dynamic within the community. However, identifying suitable facilitators is far from easy and training them effectively over a limited time period is a major challenge.

The norm is to provide facilitators with about two weeks initial training. At a glance, this may seem both too long and too short: too long because time is a precious commodity for local people (who have their own livelihoods/families to consider) and too short because REFLECT involves much 'un-learning' and the development of many new capacities and attitudes. There is a temptation to balance out these tensions - but the key may not be compromise so much as achieving clarity over the criteria to be used to determine the length of training. This has been a key issue in my work with facilitators in ActionAid Buwekula Project (ABP), ActionAid Uganda's second Development Area.

Background

REFLECT was introduced in Buwekula in 1996 after the successful development of REFLECT in a pilot project in Bundibugyo between 1993-5. ABP's adult literacy programme had been using a traditional Functional Adult Literacy approach. This involved using a primer with about 20 lessons. Each lesson started with a picture which was supposed to generate discussion. The picture was related to a key word or phrase which was

to be copied, broken into syllables or letters and re-built into new words.

In practice there was never much discussion. The programme was at a very low ebb, characterised by few learners and high instructor absenteeism. This paved the way for REFLECT, although REFLECT was not introduced following a systematic critical review of the Functional Adult Literacy approach. There was no specific appraisal of the potential of REFLECT for resolving the existing crisis, nor was there any detailed analysis of how to adapt the REFLECT approach to the local context. REFLECT was effectively used to replace the Functional Adult Literacy approach, without wider ownership from senior management or any adjustment of the wider development programme in the area. As will be seen, this contributed to several difficulties in the future.

Facilitator profile and selection

The identification and selection of facilitators for the REFLECT programme was done by the local community structures (elected local councils) with which ABP works, supported by our own staff, particularly the Field Development Co-ordinators (FDCs). The FDCs had received only limited orientation in REFLECT and were thus unable to apply relevant criteria for selecting facilitators (see below). A recent review of the facilitators that were recruited identified a number of major problems:

- Some of the facilitators were simply 'un-trainable';
- Some had worked previously as Functional Adult Literacy instructors and found it almost impossible to change their

attitudes or their relationship with learners; and,

- Some were elderly men and lacked the dynamism necessary for promoting a participatory process - they were not people who could accept even the basic premise that adult learners (particularly women) were able to contribute to their own learning.

Whilst there was a strong feeling that we should believe in the possibility of changing people's outlook and behaviour, a two week period would almost certainly be insufficient for such a task. As one community intermediary commented: "*Trying to straighten a bent stick may just result in breaking it instead*". Many of the literacy centres, which did have such facilitators, have subsequently closed and there is now much greater awareness of the need for clarity over the criteria and process for facilitator recruitment.

In selecting facilitators, people (whether from in or outside the communities), often prioritise criteria such as 'experience' or 'educational level'. It was on this basis that past Functional Adult Literacy instructors were selected in ABP.

But experience has taught us that this is a serious error. High educational levels can be an obstacle to being a good facilitator, as it may be associated with 'social distance' from participants. Furthermore, educated people are likely to have a basic belief in a formal education system, as they have been through it themselves. 'Experience of teaching' is also often counter-productive, as this usually signifies someone who is accustomed to assuming (and enjoying) a 'professional' role. Such people are often manifestly unwilling to give up their old status and its associated methodologies. They will regard the construction of graphics as essentially 'unprofessional'. Where they do incorporate elements of REFLECT, they will be doing so within a predominantly 'banking approach' (see Archer and Phnuyal, this issue), continuing to look down on learners as empty-headed individuals who need to be filled with deposits of 'real knowledge'. For example, they may use the construction of a disease matrix as an excuse to lecture people,

demonstrating their knowledge about health issues and undermining learners as being ignorant.

In the light of this, it is clear that the duration and nature of the training process cannot be separated from the selection of facilitators. It is worth spending time in identifying the right individuals at the start, rather than being left with a nearly impossible task of training unsuitable facilitators.

Initial training

The content of the initial training programme can easily become overloaded. There are times when trainers feel the need to communicate such a bulk of information about REFLECT, that they miss its essence. Early training workshops tended to suffer from this problem, with long presentations on PRA and Freire - which were ultimately contradictory.

A review of the impact of such training in Buwekula has led us to focus much more now on the REFLECT *process* rather than the content in the initial training. This enables people to experience something of the process for themselves so that they can understand and internalise the approach. A big emphasis is placed on practical experience with PRA tools and on facilitators discovering for themselves the potential of the approach for literacy and numeracy work. Facilitators are introduced to a range of PRA tools and then work in small groups to adapt the tools to address specific local issues - so that they end up writing their own Units.

However, whatever the scenario, it is important not to hold too high an expectation of the outcome from an initial training workshop. As one participant said at the end of a course: "*we have acquired a lot of skills which we shall try to put into practice...*" In this context we should see initial training as little more than the means for sparking off an initial interest, but we should accept that it is something that will need careful monitoring, if it is not to die prematurely or be stunted. There is a desperate need to provide follow up support to strengthen the skills acquired.

Ongoing training and support

One of the key challenges for any literacy or participatory programme is to maintain facilitators' confidence in what they are doing. One widely used way of achieving this is follow-up on-site visits. These visits usually play an important role in boosting motivation and confidence but they can also be useful for monitoring progress and identifying ongoing training needs. However, in some cases they can become counter-productive, particularly if they become purely supervisory visits, in which trainers or support workers pass judgements and wield their 'power' or status over facilitators. On the whole, this has been avoided, but much depends on personal relationships and attitudes within the field team.

In ABP, we have found another mechanism to be more effective at maintaining and boosting facilitator morale. This is facilitator-to-facilitator exchange meetings, which are initially held bi-weekly (and later, monthly). These are chaired by one of the facilitators (elected/nominated by the others) and usually meet without any external resource person (see Figure 1.)

The key to the success of these meetings is the 'magic' of first-hand information. Facilitators share their experiences on all issues concerning their circles. They bring in the graphics that have been produced and compare and contrast them. Where someone has experienced difficulties, other facilitators offer practical solutions. The lack of an external presence ensures that this becomes a supportive, rather than judgmental, process. This facilitates horizontal communication in working through problems and prevents any sense of dependency on 'experts'.

These exchange meetings are also the means for planning exchange visits between circles so that facilitators can see each other in practice and support each others work. In some cases, facilitators have assigned each other a circle to monitor (outside of their own). This 'twinning', ensures that facilitators can attend each others sessions on a regular basis to offer help, feedback and advice.

One good example of the impact of these exchange meetings and visits was in the two sub-counties of Kakindu and Busimbi, where the facilitators identified a key obstacle to progress as being the lack of support from local leaders. As a group of facilitators, they planned and implemented a series of sensitisation meetings for the local leaders. These introduced the basic elements of REFLECT and enabling the leaders to see how they too could become involved. This paved the way for community assemblies, attended by all local people, where the relationship between the REFLECT circle and the wider community was the focal point for practical discussions.

Figure 1. Facilitators everywhere require on-going support if they are to maintain momentum and direction. Here a facilitator in Bangladesh makes her way to an exchange meeting with other local facilitators (Photo: D. Archer)



Another practical example of an issue that has arisen in these exchange meetings is the concern on how to deal with participants who enter the REFLECT circle at different levels:

- some already knew how to read and write;
- some have some basic knowledge of letters; and,
- some are illiterate.

On this occasion there was a need for special input on how to handle a ‘mixed ability’ group. This issue could not wait until refresher training (see below), and so a resource person was invited to help the facilitators work through some teaching strategies which could accommodate this diversity.

One of the practical problems with these facilitators’ meetings is, as always, logistical. Facilitators often have to travel some distance from their homes (even if they are meeting facilitators from relatively nearby centres) and this can affect attendance. In Buwekula, facilitators have tried to overcome this by rotating their meeting venues so that they share the burden of travelling.

One evolution from these basic facilitator’s meetings in Kitenga, has been that the facilitators have formed themselves into a Savings and Credit group. They have set aside time at the end of their meetings for discussing issues pertaining to savings interest. This has given them motivation to attend the meetings and an additional bond as a group.

A final means for continuing support and training is refresher workshops, which are held a few months after the initial training and last between three and five days (depending on the context). These workshops have their agenda set in a consultative way with facilitators, who channel ideas through to ABP. In practice, facilitators often spend a significant amount of time improving Units they had previously developed and creating more Units to address issues that have come up in the previous period.

• Conclusion

The impact of careful selection of facilitators and systematic training and support can be seen in the way that facilitators start to assume

a wider role in their communities. Most become much more vocal in community meetings, stand for leadership posts and are highly regarded by others. As an indicator of this, in the recent Local Council elections, several facilitators secured posts on development committees. There is, of course, a danger of this reaching extremes, with facilitators being expected to do everything and assuming so many responsibilities that they cannot do anything effectively. For example, one REFLECT facilitator has been elected secretary for the Parish Development Committee, is an executive member of Kitenga Counselling Aides, is also a member of the Local Council Executive and has a key role in the Church. Whilst the ideal is to have active facilitators, there is a danger that facilitators assume all the action on behalf of REFLECT participants, and this has to be avoided.

It would be wrong to claim that we have resolved all the problems concerning facilitator capacity and motivation. We have made many mistakes and we have learnt from those, but there are continuing challenges. We are confident that PRA practitioners in other contexts must have shared many of our concerns and would be addressing the same challenges. We would welcome any suggestions from other practitioners on how such issues have been addressed in their practice.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maria Nandago, REFLECT Co-ordination Unit, Mubende Office, ActionAid Uganda, PO Box 676, Kampala, Uganda. Email: abp@imul.com (Mubende Office); actaid@aau.uu.imul.com (Kampala Office). |
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