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# Facilitator training and innovation in REFLECT: experience from Nepal

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### • Introduction

The issues raised in this article are drawn from an independent research project carried out for the Policy, Research and Advocacy Department of ActionAid Nepal between October and December 1997. The aim of the research was to investigate how facilitator training can contribute to the capacity of the REFLECT methodology to adapt to local conditions. The research process included observation of REFLECT circles in two districts of Nepal, semi-structured interviews with community groups and individuals and workshops with national level practitioners of non-formal education.

The research project made two initial observations. Firstly, strong resistance to the use of a primer has been central to commitment to the REFLECT approach in Nepal. On conceptual grounds, it is believed strongly that the use of any kind of manual is prescriptive and can never be as relevant to local realities as the words and issues that REFLECT circle participants generate for themselves using participatory tools. Criticism extends to the use of a guidebook for facilitators and, consequently, facilitator training has not featured the production of a local facilitator manual, as the ActionAid Mother Manual recommends. Secondly, there are certain innovations taking place in facilitation in Nepal. These involve the use of participatory tools (such as song, drama and myth) other than, and in addition to, PRA. This seems to suggest a high degree of facilitator ownership of the methodology.

This article summarises some of the issues emerging from research into these two areas and looks at the possible link between training and facilitation.

### • The dynamic of facilitator training

The principles of the REFLECT approach include the following:

- a belief that the acquisition of written literacy skills can help people demand certain rights (e.g. the ability to read a ballot paper), thereby redressing inequality;
- promotion of a participatory process of literacy acquisition which is based on analysis of local conditions and which promotes action to mobilise resources within the community; and,
- a conviction that in a participatory approach to literacy, it is not possible to isolate the process of literacy acquisition from the empowerment process. Because written literacy is not an inherently superior tool for communication to oral literacy, for example, the ways in which people are disadvantaged by illiteracy is an issue of power and discrimination.

The techniques which are used to serve these principles are PRA for group analysis and the key word approach to literacy. The key word approach to literacy suggests that adults can learn to read and write better starting with words, rather than learning individual letters: a, b, c, and d. It also emphasises that key words need to reflect the learners' life reality. Facilitator training communicates these principles and techniques which together constitute REFLECT.

## • **Training methodology: course content & training relationships**

Facilitator training in Nepal involves a certain amount of what we might call 'technical' input, which forms the course content. This includes an introduction to Freirean concepts, the key word approach to literacy and PRA training. However, REFLECT training seeks to share technical knowledge from the outside, without devaluing the local knowledge and experience of the facilitators.

Ideally, facilitators should not leave training courses knowing 'how to do' REFLECT. Rather they should have had the chance to explore the principles in which REFLECT methodology is grounded, and have developed the strategic skills and confidence to use practical ideas to run circles in their communities (including how to generate key words and conduct PRA). This demands a training approach grounded in negotiation and an organic relationship between trainer and trainees.

Observation of facilitator training in Nepal showed that course content, process and relationships cannot be understood in isolation from one another, and drew attention to two sets of mutually reinforcing tendencies. If the course content was predominantly technical, then the training process tended to be exclusive and the training relationship was hierarchical and authoritative. In contrast, if the content was 'experiential', the process was inclusive and resulted in a negotiated outcome. The following examples serve to illustrate this observation.

Facilitator training in Nepal commonly explores the concept of non-formal education (NFE). However, the question 'What is NFE?' immediately establishes a dichotomy between NFE and formal education. NFE becomes defined by differences in relation to formal education. The range of systems and the process by which local knowledge, value systems and cultural norms are communicated, are excluded from the agenda. Although termed 'non-formal', NFE is usually a timetabled event, its distinction from traditional schooling being the degree of formality.

The link between the technical and the hierarchical can be examining one group brainstorming exercise, used to address the question 'What is NFE?'. The following definitions were fed back in plenary:

- there is no fixed time or place;
- we can discuss the community;
- it is for men and women of oppressed groups, those who cannot go to school; and,
- everything that we learn from the community and our families is non-formal education.

This was then used by the trainer to produce the following definition: 'NFE has no certain time, place or content, it is a place where people can think about and discuss their situation, interest and needs. Whatever they discuss, they also read and write about'.

This definition excludes the final point made by the trainees. As the question demanded a definition of NFE, it did not open debate about the nature of education in the broadest sense. The trainer already appears to have 'the answer' and the trainees seek to match it by drawing on their experiences of schooling. The activity reinforces a hierarchical relation between trainer and trainees, since there are certain answers which are more correct than others. This is not to advocate inclusion to the extent that 'anything goes', but to demonstrate that the *process* of deciding what is and is not a legitimate definition of NFE, in this instance, is not fully negotiated between trainer and trainees. That is to say, the opportunity for the trainees to challenge the idea that education is a timetabled classroom event, analyse why this is so and take ownership of a revised notion of NFE, is lost.

In contrast, some training revealed a highly inclusive process of negotiation. In one example, the following question was set: 'I have an MA qualification and am married with three children. I often come home drunk and beat my wife. My daughters do not go to school. Am I educated?'. The trainees were animated by this question, which the trainer used to facilitate a debate in plenary over the definition of education. During the course of the argument, the trainees shared similar examples from their own experience, which helped the trainer to elicit conceptual

distinctions. The debate ended with the simple but powerful consensus that a 'literate person may not be considered educated'.

- **Language as a barrier to communication**

Communicating new ideas is challenging, and can be hindered by cultural and linguistic difference. Trainers of facilitators often speak of the difficulty of communicating conceptual issues in training. For example, they say that they find it hard to explain Freirean concepts using language which is 'simple' enough for trainees to understand.

Observation of a training course in Nepal indicated that, by using games and visual aids, complex notions such as oppression and empowerment can be explored. The key is to ground the concepts in the trainees' realities, to make them meaningful to participants in terms of their own experience. This may be experience they have gained in the past or it may be simulated through training activities. The issue is not so much that of simplifying complex ideas as making them *meaningful* to participants, who are not familiar with the technical discourse that is associated with 'professional' ownership of knowledge. Rather than requiring trainees to adopt the language in which such ideas are expressed, inclusive participatory techniques allow trainees to measure the validity of new ideas against their own experience and to express them in their own terms.

Using technical terminology before drawing on experience can raise expectations which are difficult to meet in REFLECT training. The facilitators who arrived at one training course had participated in a community orientation on REFLECT<sup>1</sup>. One of their expectations from the course was to receive an answer to the question 'What is REFLECT?'. By the third day of the course, one of the trainees expressed the concern that she still did not know what REFLECT was, so how was she going to be able to use it?

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<sup>1</sup> Community orientation is the process of meetings and discussions between the NGO and the community which precede the commencement of REFLECT circles.

In another approach to facilitator training in Nepal, the word REFLECT is simply not used, in the belief that the process of the training course communicates the REFLECT approach incrementally. It cannot, therefore, be introduced definitively at any one point. This NGO terms REFLECT as 'a participatory approach to literacy'. Facilitator training conducted by the Nepali NGO SEACOW includes an exercise for the trainee facilitators to name the methodology themselves (see Bhattarai et al, this issue). Emphasis is firmly on the process, rather than on a name, which has been legislated outside the community.

- **Facilitator ownership of the REFLECT methodology**

Sensitivity to language is one way in which facilitator training courses in Nepal are working to reduce the alien apparatus of the REFLECT methodology, and PRA to communities. This is part of a commitment to adaptability, which goes beyond the relevance of key words and issues or the use of the local language in written literacy. Flexibility in the use of terminology indicates a wider need to adapt to local methods of analysis and communication: to integrate participatory techniques other than, and in addition to, PRA in REFLECT.

PRA is a tool designed to facilitate analysis and communication. However Mosse (1994) has shown that the success of PRA can depend on familiarity with the techniques. Similarly, because it is based on visual literacy, PRA may not be immediately accessible to people who cannot read and write and whose indigenous systems of communication rely on oral literacy, developing different cognitive strengths, such as memory-based skills. PRA may have to be 'learned' before it can be used (Robinson-Pant, 1995). Visual literacy is an unfamiliar concept in one geographically isolated community in Nepal. In this community, SEACOW has implemented a REFLECT circle, using other participatory tools, including song, story telling and drama, to generate both key words and social analysis. This approach focuses on the need to view analytical techniques, which are used in addition to PRA, as integral to the empowerment agenda promoted by the REFLECT approach.

Innovations in Nepal suggest that facilitators have taken ownership of REFLECT and are exploring ways of using local literacies (e.g. traditional songs) to serve the principles of community empowerment underpinning REFLECT. For example, they are combining visual literacy techniques, such as social maps, with forms of communication and analysis which are indigenous to communities. The function of these techniques may differ. For instance, one facilitator used songs to energise participants and to generate an issue for debate, as a way into PRA. In other circles, songs are used after analysis has taken place to communicate opinions (such as opposition to gender discrimination in schooling) to a wider audience in the community. The meaning of the songs may have changed as the words are changed, but their function as an indigenous form of collective expression is built upon. One facilitator (Save the Children Fund Japan) has been deconstructing traditional songs to conduct analysis and generate key words.

The extent and way in which training can contribute definitively to innovation merits further study. The research showed that some facilitators were using REFLECT critically, judging PRA to be inappropriate and using songs or drama to conduct analysis instead. Others did not feel confident enough to conduct PRA activities, so were 'falling back' on traditional activities with which they felt more comfortable. Innovative facilitation techniques in Nepal may be due to the promotion of creativity through training methods but they may equally be intuitive coping strategies, employed by facilitators who did not feel confident enough following facilitator training, to use PRA in communities with no experience of visual analysis.

### **Links between training and facilitation**

In REFLECT circles, the relationship between the technical and indigenous, the alien and the familiar, is brokered by the facilitator. The ambivalence of the position of the facilitator, as both insider in the community and (by virtue of association with REFLECT) outsider, is key. The success of any literacy programme is dependent upon the relevance of written literacy to peoples' lives. It is the task of the facilitator to achieve this by adapting the tools

of the REFLECT approach according to her/his inside knowledge of the community.

If hierarchies are established within the training process, they may be reproduced in REFLECT circles. In the absence of a manual, the approach to facilitator training in Nepal is consistent with the impulse not to be prescriptive. However other elements in training can foster dependency on a uniform, methodological approach.

For example, many training courses include a biography of Freire's life in lecture form. One facilitator said that he had repeated this information in a lecture to his circle participants when he did not feel that they were learning quickly enough. In this situation, where REFLECT, as it was being practised, did not seem to be producing results, the facilitator reasserted his own authority by displaying his 'knowledge' to participants. This mirrored his experience in facilitator training.

We cannot say, however, that this means that it is wrong to use Freire's biography in REFLECT training. If biographical information is used in an inclusive, participatory way, it may equally promote a culture of creativity. Several trainers spoke of using biographical information as a means of motivating facilitators to take a leadership role in the community through education.

Similarly, there is evidence that communication problems feed down from training to facilitation. In the past, ActionAid facilitator training introduced PRA social mapping by name and this was followed by practical exercises. In circles, facilitators were having difficulty using the graphic because the word 'social' in translation was unfamiliar in this context to participants and therefore, acted as a barrier to using the technique. Having had the graphic introduced as a 'social map' in facilitator training, they introduced it as such to circle participants.

Recently, ActionAid Nepal facilitator training was adjusted so that participants made a social map first and then decided what to call it. The combination of changing the order and allowing trainee facilitators themselves to name the map, met the dual objectives of

emphasising the *process* of producing the graphic (rather than the finished product) and devolving ownership to the trainees. In the event, participants called the graphic a 'village map'. This trainer responsiveness is significant in itself and indicative of a symbiotic training process, in which technical input is balanced against recognition of the validity of REFLECT as it is being practised in communities.

### • **Concluding comments**

As Pretty et al. (1995) have written: '*training does not happen in a vacuum. It happens within a particular policy context and organisational culture with its own management structures, professional norms and field practices (p. 63).*' It is beyond the scope of this article to suggest how facilitator training interacts with other processes, such as facilitator selection, or monitoring and evaluation of REFLECT circles. Training is just one of a range of influences which may affect facilitator capacity or behaviour in any particular context. It is also only one of several fora in which the principles underlying REFLECT are communicated.

Consequently, this article has raised more issues than it has addressed. However, acknowledgement of the need for inclusive participation in the processes surrounding REFLECT, of which facilitator training is just one, is of vital importance. There is recognition among ActionAid Nepal staff that REFLECT is an evolving development phenomenon, defined as much by practice in particular circumstances, as by paradigms of literacy acquisition. In a working environment where pressures to scale up have led to a growing number of requests for training from increasingly diverse clients, inclusive participatory approaches to facilitator training should be seen as a means of promoting the qualitative aspects of REFLECT.

Some of the above observations generated from the REFLECT experience in Nepal are relevant to discussions on PRA:

- Participatory training is not the remedy for all the problems. It needs to be supplemented by other components, such as participatory monitoring and evaluation.

- Empowerment of local facilitators (attitude and behaviour, skills and techniques, vision and organisation) is very important for a sustainable participatory process, particularly in the context of scaling up a programme.
- There can be no blue-print for participatory training. Trainers and participants should work together for the process to be designed for each context and the needs of participants. The most important point is the need to be clear about how training will fit with the overall plan of action.

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