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Empowering trainers: an experience from Bangladesh The REFLECT trainers' forum

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• Introduction

In Bangladesh, after a successful REFLECT pilot project on Bhola Island, a scaled-up project was started in November 1995. This involved setting up a REFLECT Co-ordination Unit (RCU) in Dhaka, which would provide training and support to a diverse range of NGOs, who were interested in REFLECT. Its prime concerns were:

- promoting and popularising REFLECT in Bangladesh;
- ensuring that REFLECT continued to link literacy effectively with an empowerment process oriented towards sustainable development;
- providing training for REFLECT practitioners, and,
- strengthening the institutional capacity of both governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in participatory approaches to literacy.

RCU now provides support to 19 different organisations across Bangladesh which are implementing REFLECT. These vary from grassroots/community based organisations to local or national NGOs. Collectively these are referred to as "REFLECT implementing organisations" (RIOs).

In May 1997, the REFLECT programme of Bangladesh was reviewed by DFID (Department for International Development - UK), ActionAid-UK and ActionAid-Bangladesh. Some of the major findings of this review were as follows:

- the quality of REFLECT programmes was inconsistent and some were mechanistically applying material from the REFLECT Mother Manual without changing or adapting it the context;
- training support was inadequate and too centralised. For example, one person, the REFLECT Training Co-ordinator in Dhaka, was responsible for the capacity development of REFLECT personnel across the whole country, through the various RIOs;
- there were no opportunities being created for the trainers to share their experiences and problems, or for them to be updated with new ideas and innovations generated elsewhere; and,
- trainers were often isolated and lacked the support of the wider management in their organisations, with managers treating REFLECT as a separate activity from their mainstream programme.

One of the key conclusions was that there was clearly an urgent need for a continuous process of capacity development, both for trainers and the management of the RIOs. Dependency on the RCU in Dhaka needed to be reduced and there needed to be a recognition that true expertise in REFLECT lay in the field, not in the capital.

The evolution of REFLECT Trainers' Forum

Following the review, a consultation was arranged with the reviewers and the representatives of the RIOs. The idea of organising a Trainers' Forum evolved through this consultation. The objectives of the Trainers' Forum were:

- to share experiences, anxieties and challenges being faced by the REFLECT Trainers and Co-ordinators among themselves and to learn from each other;
- to develop the capacity of the REFLECT Trainers and the Co-ordinators, strengthening their conceptual, technical and human skills for implementing REFLECT programmes effectively;
- to set up strategies and actions for encountering problems immediately;
- to share new ideas and innovations developed in REFLECT programmes within Bangladesh and abroad; and,
- to establish a decentralised pool of REFLECT trainers in different organisations in different parts of the country, all of whom could provide training to other organisations in future.

The Trainers' Forum is now the nodal point for the development and advancement of REFLECT in Bangladesh, generating continuous learning for the REFLECT trainers themselves and for others nationally and internationally who are interested in REFLECT. REFLECT trainers in Bangladesh are more than trainers, they also play the roles of capacity developer, academic supervisor, programme developer, researcher and advocacy worker. In some respects, the Trainers' Forum has become a union of trainers with a horizontal structure.

Increasingly new people are participating regularly in the forum. It acts as a magnet to attract other development practitioners who have diverse interests in REFLECT - whether as programme managers, evaluators, researchers, programme developers or advocacy workers.

How the trainers' forum functions

The REFLECT Trainer's Forum meets quarterly for a period of three to five days in a different location each time. Only the first forum was organised by the RCU. Since then all activities, from planning to report writing, have been managed and implemented by a rotating planning team of trainers. At the end of each meeting, a venue is chosen for the next meeting, a new planning team is constituted and the issues for the next forum meeting are

selected democratically. The planning team is then responsible for:

- unpacking and structuring the issues for discussion at the next forum;
- identifying suitable facilitators and resource people (either from one of the RIOs, the RCU or external sources);
- sending out invitation letters;
- arranging schedules and logistics (including food, accommodation and transport);
- preparing a budget;
- arranging field visits; and,
- arranging documentation and reporting.

Forum meetings over the past year have included the following focal themes:

- strengthening and diversifying the participatory process in REFLECT;
- post-literacy, continuing education and the literate environment;
- the great manual debate: national manuals, local manuals, facilitator-produced manuals or no manuals. What strategies are most effective for better conceptualisation and internalisation of REFLECT?; and,
- Paulo Freire - his theory and practice; how REFLECT has evolved from Freire.

Each Trainers' Forum meeting usually involves around 30-35 hours of work and will include some elements from the following range of activities.

1. *Field Visits:* the Trainers' Forum always starts with a field visit to see the REFLECT circles of the host RIO. Forum participants discuss the strengths and weakness of the circles they observe and offer practical suggestions for improvement at the field level. Forum participants are encouraged to analyse their own programme situation in the light of the findings from the field observation.
2. *Updates:* the trainers exchange major developments/experiences from their practice over the previous weeks and months.
3. *Anxiety and Challenge Sharing:* in the forum the trainers share their own anxiety and 'heart burning/feeling' (*Antarjala*) -

sharing concerns and forthcoming challenges with their fellow trainers.

4. *Analysis / Conceptual Strengthening*: in each Trainers' Forum, one focal issue for discussion is selected for wider conceptualisation, clarification and participation. The discussion helps the trainers in strengthening their conceptual, technical and human skills. As trainers develop their own understanding and feel empowered themselves, they develop the confidence and capacity to facilitate a similar process for empowering facilitators.
5. *Setting up Strategies and Actions*: the forum creates a space for the trainers where they can develop their own strategies and actions to resolve problems or limitations that have been identified. For instance, during the second forum, the trainers developed a post-literacy and continuing education strategy, which went far beyond what RCU had previously envisaged.
6. *Supporting Facilitators*: the trainers share the forum discussions with local facilitators from the host RIO, which helps them to pursue a similar process in their own organisations on their return. Whatever they have learnt from the Forum, trainers are encouraged to transfer/share this immediately, through their own fortnightly or monthly Facilitators' Forum. Facilitators are acknowledged to be at the heart of all REFLECT programmes and the Trainers Forum is thus seen as a means to strengthen those facilitators.
7. *Monitoring, evaluation and research*. up to date information on developments in each RIO is collated during the forum meetings and staff from the RCU use the opportunity to collect case studies, share approaches to evaluation and promote cross-project research.

• Outcomes

REFLECT trainers are now much more confident than they were before the review. Rather than feeling isolated, they feel part of a wider movement. Rather than seeing themselves as implementers of a programme brought from outside, they feel ownership of REFLECT and feel more respected as key

players in the development of the approach. Rather than follow something mechanically, they will question, challenge, criticise and innovate. The forum has generated inquisitiveness among most of the trainers. They are investigate and probe. They bring problems and ideas to the forum, rather than expecting to be passively filled. In effect, the trainers themselves feel empowered.

REFLECT is now expanding rapidly within Bangladesh, with 19 organisations having taken up the approach in different contexts. With this expansion, the number of trainers is, of course, increasing and it becomes difficult to accommodate everyone. For this reason, there are now plans to develop interlinked regional Trainers' Fora, to encourage local organisations to keep regular contact. Additionally, there would be strategic moments of exchange between the different regional fora.

If the present trend continues, the trainers' fora will take on a role beyond capacity building, to include wider programme development and strategic planning. This will be entirely consistent with the philosophy behind REFLECT, leading to increasingly bottom-up planning and participatory management. The danger of dependency on the RCU now seems much reduced, as ownership of REFLECT is genuinely broadened. The RCU's role in future is likely to focus more on networking, research and advocacy, rather than direct capacity building. Its authority will not derive from it being considered a concentration of experts or privileged 'holders of the truth', but rather from its capacity to be responsive to evolving strategies emerging from the grassroots.

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