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REFLECT and institutional change: the experience of CIAZO in El Salvador

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• Background to Ciazo

In April 1989, in the midst of the Salvadorean Civil War, CIAZO was established as the 'Inter-agency Committee for Literacy in the Eastern Zone of El Salvador'. As the name suggests, it was not an institution per se, but rather, coordinated work between the different organisations working in the East of the country. All these organisations were linked to the popular movement and were involved, in disparate ways, in literacy work. However, they lacked a clear or common methodology. CIAZO was initially based within FASTERAS (an umbrella foundation working for the self-management of Salvadorean workers) but after the National Peace Accords in 1993, it became an autonomous organisation and moved to working at a national level.

Acting as a form of network, CIAZO provides technical and financial support on literacy to over 25 grassroots organisations and cooperative federations (each of whom has representatives sitting on CIAZO's Management Board). It produces a wide range of educational materials, undertakes research, develops innovative approaches, and channels its experiences and learning into national level policy and decision making. Whilst adult literacy is a major focus of its work, CIAZO also has a Popular Education programme for children who are excluded from schools; it organises leadership training and cooperative capacity building courses, with particular experience in agro-ecological training. CIAZO now directly employs about 30 people and has close links to education personnel in each of its member organisations - all of whom work using volunteer teachers.

One of CIAZO's member organisations, COMUS (the United Communities of Usulután) received funding for a wider development programme from ActionAid, and in 1993, COMUS agreed to pilot the new approach to literacy which has subsequently become known as REFLECT. CIAZO agreed to provide some limited support to this pilot programme, as one of four innovative initiatives, which it was developing in the field of adult literacy at the time. CIAZO provided some technical support to developing the local manual and training local facilitators. It also became involved in the evaluation of the pilot experience in 1995, which involved comparing the outcomes of the REFLECT approach with the outcomes from the literacy work of CIAZO's member groups - all of whom were using CIAZO's national level programme 'Literacy for Peace'. The results of the evaluation showed that REFLECT was about as successful as CIAZO's national programme in respect of literacy work, but that it was massively more successful when it came to generating community action, empowerment and social change.

Despite very striking evaluation results in 1995, it was not until this year (1998) that CIAZO finally took up the REFLECT approach at a national level. The reasons for this delay were partly to do with a necessary process of ongoing learning and the need for evolutionary (rather than abrupt) change, but they were also partly due to fundamental institutional resistance.

• Resistance to REFLECT

Any process of change will encounter resistance, especially when that process challenges past behaviour and practice. The REFLECT approach required personnel in CIAZO to 'unlearn' ways and methods of working which had been developed over the years and which were perceived as the only effective way of working in the Salvadorean context. We needed to develop new ways of seeing and understanding social processes and new, more open, attitudes. The greatest resistance to the development of REFLECT in CIAZO came from the existing professional team, whose initial reaction was based on two openly declared arguments:

- REFLECT was seen (mistakenly) as a methodology imported from the North, which therefore would not respond to the needs and interests of our own context; and,
- REFLECT was seen as an approach which would be difficult to use and which would over-load facilitators, who, in turn, would be likely to reject it.

However, these arguments have gradually disappeared, as practice has shown them to be essentially false. However, underneath these concerns lay something deeper, a personal insecurity about taking on something completely new and a professional fear of losing the power and control which the production of primers represented.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that this fear and resistance was not a wholly negative force, as it produced an authentic (though painful) process of CIAZO discovering and assuming REFLECT for itself. It is clear that to impose REFLECT in a dictatorial or hierarchical fashion would have been contrary to the very essence of the approach. Working through a more horizontal process may have taken time, but certainly led us to enrich the approach. During this process, our good practice from the past was validated and maintained, rather than being dismissed in favour of the new approach. This was important, as the underlying theory of REFLECT is not wholly new. Rather, it is firmly rooted in the tradition of popular education in Latin America which has been in

existence for twenty five years. However, popular education has suffered over the years from excess theory and rhetoric, and a lack of methodological tools which allow its principles and ideas to be translated effectively into practice on the ground.

The process of transition

CIAZO's previous national programme 'Literacy For Peace' involved participants addressing a huge range of key issues; from human rights to forms of community organisation, from preventive health to appropriate technology, from women's rights to children's rights, from the causes of war to the details of the peace accords etc. However, this agenda was set by us as professionals and the methodology used rarely facilitated horizontal communication. After a nominal discussion on the surface of each topic, our literacy facilitators were likely either to move to the technical teaching of reading, or shift into lecture mode to tell participants more about what to think on each theme.

Following the initial success of the REFLECT pilot programme with COMUS, CIAZO was particularly excited at the potential of REFLECT to link the literacy process to serious reflection, analysis and action. A decision was taken to re-design the national programme and to abolish the primer. This was significantly inspired by the REFLECT experience, but also drew from other innovative experiences CIAZO had been undertaking in adult numeracy, gender analysis and collaboration with local municipal governments. The primer was replaced with a national manual (or 'methodological orientation book') for facilitators, called 'Education for Action'. The first level of this manual had ten 'units', addressing two or three themes each and most starting with the collective construction of a graphic. Facilitators received a few days of basic training (much along the lines of past training workshops), focusing on how to use this manual, and were then sent off to run their circles.

The results of this work in 1996/7 were both positive and negative. There were clear signs that circles were engaged in more community level actions, but the facilitators expressed

serious reservations about the use of some graphics, particularly maps. There was a reluctance to construct graphics on the ground, an issue with which the trainers themselves had reservations, which meant that facilitators were given few good examples and creative solutions. Facilitators were found to be following the manual rather religiously, even where a particular topic was of limited relevance in their area, and this would lead to a loss of group dynamic. Whilst the overall results in terms of literacy were consistent with past practice, there was a feeling that this was not enough.

In 1997, a series of workshops at a national level led CIAZO to decide that it was necessary to 'get radical' with REFLECT. They had replaced the old primer with a national manual, which was turning out to be much like a primer, so it became necessary to move away from this altogether. Facilitators were being treated as passive implementors, not creative agents at the heart of the process. Trainers themselves had not taken ownership of the approach and needed further support. Despite good intentions, it was clear that CIAZO had effectively distorted REFLECT, creating a hybrid which would not live up to our expectations. Nevertheless, during the experience, we had developed an understanding of some basic elements of REFLECT across CIAZO, which henceforth, could be used as a building block.

An ambitious plan was thus developed, involving training workshops with each and every member organisation. In these workshops, the idea was that local facilitators would produce their own local manuals, thereby creating new tools and techniques and internalising the approach. This was started with a workshop for 15 facilitators from one particular member organisation, together with one promoter from each of the other 15 member organisations. The workshop started with an introduction to PRA and then had a one week gap in the middle, during which participants went back to their communities to use PRA tools for background research. Then they re-convened and wrote their own local manual, adapting PRA tools to address the local issues they had identified - and working in small groups to write their own 'units'. Two similar workshops were conducted, until three

member organisations had produced their own manuals and at least two promoters from every other member organisation had observed the training process in practice. These promoters, with support from the national technical team of CIAZO, then facilitated their own workshops.

The impact of this training approach across the country has been the remarkable degree of internalisation of REFLECT by everyone involved, with people feeling a true sense of ownership of the approach and a high level of creative capacity being revealed. Production of training or resource materials is no longer seen as the reserve of experts in the capital and the horizontal exchange of materials between organisations has provided each facilitator with a huge resource base from which to draw. The level of confidence and commitment amongst facilitators is tangible and this is a powerful basis to enable them to engage in a process in which they will feel comfortable about sharing power with others.

From rhetoric to practice: moving beyond literacy

In contrast to the lack of discussion in literacy centres in the past, REFLECT is succeeding in creating a cultural dialogue between facilitators and participants, in which local knowledge is revindicated alongside universal knowledge. The communication is not just between facilitator and participant but also amongst participants. Individual and collective self-esteem (and thereby ultimately 'power') has been strengthened. Rather than being a process which is sealed inside four walls, REFLECT has linked the learning process to people's active participation as citizens in relation to local and national government. People have been demanding the delivery of services from relevant agencies; they have been insisting on transparent administration from all institutions (including their own local community organisations); and they have been fighting for active representation on public bodies. All of these actions should not be perceived as a consequence of REFLECT, but rather as an integral part of the REFLECT process.

REFLECT is therefore not just about literacy. It is a process which aims to strengthen civil

societies. This is crucial at a time when there is massive disillusionment with politics and conventional political processes. REFLECT does not bring a specific response or solution to the multiple problems and needs of communities, but rather it sets in motion a process of democratisation (in public and private spheres) and community participation. This may sound like old rhetoric, and it is certainly not a discourse which is unfamiliar to us. But for many years, we were using this discourse in trying to promote popular education, whilst using methodologies which were fundamentally traditional. At the time, we were hugely critical of government programmes and yet, those programmes were scarcely distinguishable in methodology from our own. REFLECT offers a fundamental shift in methodology and practice to match our different discourse.

• Restructuring CIAZO

Securing structural change in an organisation of the size and shape of CIAZO is not a simple task. Until 1997, the adult literacy side of CIAZO's work involved a team of 5 national technical advisers, 50 field promoters/trainers and 500 facilitators in 25 different organisations. The introduction of REFLECT on a national scale has led us to restructure, seeking more horizontal organisation. We have reduced the national technical team to 4 people and cut the number of field promoters/trainers to just 18. A new level of local promoters (or lead facilitators) has been created, who are REFLECT facilitators themselves, but have a role in providing additional support to other facilitators in neighbouring circles/communities. Financial resources have been re-directed away from the production of primers and towards training. Facilitators who were previously volunteers (which was more feasible in the highly politicised context of the civil war) are now given a nominal stipend. Overall, the salaried personnel at a national level have much less control and power than previously, whilst the member organisations are able to assume more control over the process. Rather than having nationally produced materials, facilitators in each member organisation are helped to produce local materials (through training workshops) adapted to their specific context and needs.

As CIAZO progressively discovers the implications of the REFLECT approach and adapts and internalises it more completely, we recognise increasingly, that it is much more than a packet of tools. We are seeing that the approach is diminished if it is conceived as, and restricted to, an approach to adult literacy. CIAZO's agro-ecological training programme and its leadership training courses are now increasingly influenced by REFLECT. Our gender training and children's education work are also strengthened by a genuine process of participation and empowerment. REFLECT is becoming a cross-cutting approach in all our educational work, ensuring an holistic approach which is both politically radical and explicit.

Between January and April 1998 CIAZO undertook a strategic planning process which will have fundamental implications for what we do and how we do it. We are seeing that the REFLECT approach is not just of value for promoting processes of change at the community level, but that it is also invaluable for changing institutions and how they work. Fundamentally REFLECT questions the lack of real democracy and the way in which power is constructed from above. It requires us to challenge existing power relations, whether in the public arena, in private institutions or even within personal and intra-household relationships. Although CIAZO has an impressive record of participation, having made continuous efforts to strengthen our internal democracy, we see the need for an even greater dose of participation at all levels of decision making, both operationally and strategically. We see ourselves pursuing an ongoing process of decentralisation - of both capacity and responsibility - so that people can speak with their own voice and be heard.

• Conclusion

As we approach our tenth anniversary, CIAZO has changed dramatically as an institution. The REFLECT approach has been integral to this process of change in recent years, as we have come to realise that the methodologies we use for promoting processes of change at the local level cannot be ignored, when it comes to our own processes of change. It is not only patronising if we use approaches with others which we do not feel are valid for ourselves,

but also ultimately contradictory. REFLECT provides an approach which can help to reduce the contradictions inherent in many institutions, which are supposedly working for development but which do not have equitable internal practices. However, it requires institutions to reflect for themselves and think through the implications on an ongoing basis and not to treat REFLECT as a project held at arms length.

Other institutions interested in REFLECT should draw from this lesson and ensure that they are ready to follow through its implications. REFLECT requires a radical change in your relationships with communities and partners, and that in turn, requires a radical change to your institution.

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