12

Rejecting 'the manual' for more critical and participatory analysis: REFLECT's experience in El Salvador

Bimal Kumar Phnuyal

• Introduction

REFLECT is a structured, participatory learning process which facilitates people's critical analysis of their environment[1] (see *PLA Notes* 32). By constructing and interpreting locally generated texts, people build their own analysis of local and global reality, rethinking development and redefining power relationships. This process is guided by local facilitators, who in the early years of REFLECT, were trained by REFLECT trainers on the basis of the 'REFLECT Mother Manual'. This approach is now changing, away from the use of the original manual.

One of the most heated debates amongst REFLECT practitioners internationally concerns whether or not to use a 'manual' at all - and if so, what form it should take (see also Gautam in *PLA Notes* 32). Some say a manual is indispensable as a basic guide for local facilitators, particularly to ensure sequential learning about use of participatory techniques and promote thorough analysis. Others find the whole concept of a manual alien to PRA/REFLECT and focus their energies on developing the capacity of facilitators. Some have found a middle path, by developing semi-structured resource materials at a local level. The recent experience from El Salvador offers yet another option: at its heart lies a concern for a process that should allow critical and participatory analysis at all levels – including by facilitators.

• Evolution of REFLECT in El Salvador

El Salvador is one of the countries where REFLECT was first piloted and it is now a central reference point for Latin America-related work. One of the first organisations involved was CIAZO, which has taken up REFLECT as the axis of all their work. CIAZO is a democratically-structured specialist resource centre and national network of over 25 organisations involved in literacy and popular education work.

In the early 1990s, when El Salvador was still divided by a long running civil war, CIAZO launched a national programme 'Literacy For Peace' using a primer- (textbook-) based approach. In 1993 soon after the peace accords, CIAZO recognised some of the difficulties with primers and were keen to explore alternative methodologies. One of several experiments included supporting a pilot REFLECT programme in Usulutan. This proved very successful when evaluated against the original primer-based control group and so REFLECT became central in a new national strategy.

The main concern was that facilitators would find it difficult to adjust to a new approach. CIAZO also wanted a single national programme which could be managed easily, thus its first step was to produce a national manual. Themes were selected, based on an extensive knowledge of rural communities gained from many years of working with a primer-based programme - and learning was strictly sequenced following the same basic 'generative word' approach[2]. This manual was

---

[1] REFLECT initially focused on developing literacy skills but is now used more widely as a basic approach to community development.

[2] Use of a keyword which can be broken down into

used through 1996 and into 1997 by all the member organisations of CIAZO in their literacy and adult education work.

An internal review process and various workshops in 1997 led to a decision to initiate some major changes. Fundamentally this involved moving away from a fixed national 'package' which was felt to be misguided and even contradictory to REFLECT. Instead of nationally produced materials, the emphasis would be on developing capacities and materials locally through an ambitious programme of training workshops. This involved CIAZO going far beyond what is recommended in the REFLECT Mother Manual and highlights the urgent need to either radically re-write or abolish that manual.

• Organising the training

Previously, trainers had been trained to then train local facilitators. To turn round and radically decentralise the national programme, involving over 500 facilitators working in 25 organisations, was a major challenge. This led to one key training innovation - fusing the 'training of trainers' with the 'training of local facilitators'.

Two external facilitators led the first two field-based training workshops which were time-tabled to overlap and interweave. Each of these workshops was attended by 15 facilitators from local organisations. In addition, key trainers from another 12 organisations attended. They would undergo an experiential learning process of learning how to train facilitators 'on the job', rather than being trained separately and theoretically. After the workshop they would return to their own organisation and run their own facilitator training (with one additional resource person). Each workshop also had a few national resource people from CIAZO. Once the workshop was underway, the separate profiles and roles of participants were rapidly forgotten as everyone jointly learnt and explored the potential of REFLECT.

syllables to generate new and similar words, but should also facilitiate discussion and assist in the learning of related words.

The overall aim of the training was to create an environment in which all participants could internalise the basic principles and methods of REFLECT by using the approach for themselves. This involved taking an experiential learning approach at all stages and dividing the training into three phases.

Phase 1: Basic orientation on participatory techniques and processes

Following basic introductions and the sharing of objectives and expectations, participants started the workshop by mapping their respective communities in small groups. Each small group consisted of three to four local facilitators who came from the same area, and one or two trainers (who learnt how to facilitate a mapping exercise). There was no previous lecture on PRA or the mapping technique. Each group produced an elaborate map and displayed it on the wall for others to observe and comment on. Everyone seemed enthusiastic to explain their 'map' and only later realised that they were in practice explaining their perception of local reality.

Participants then produced a time-line identifying major events in local history. They then moved on to analyse key problems - such as deforestation, drug-addiction, delinquency, alcoholism and scarcity of water - using matrix ranking. Finally they constructed a gender workload calendar.

All of the tools and techniques used were ones which participants could construct drawing on their own lives, experiences, attitudes and passions. These were not simulations in which participants 'act out' the roles of villagers in a literacy circle [3]. They were fully immersed in the content of discussions and came to experience for themselves the meaningful ways in which different tools could structure and deepen a debate. Almost unwittingly they also learnt those techniques. When asked to reflect upon the techniques they focused on how and for what purpose each tool could be used. Discussions about the attitude and behaviour of facilitators flowed out quite naturally. Thus by first applying the method, and then analysing its purpose, learning took

[3] A circle is the learning group or the REFLECT 'class'.

place. Most training is based on the reverse logic.

Participants were then asked to identify how each of these tools could be used for some practical field research which would help to set up a literacy programme. They identified everything from mapping of literacy levels to gender timetables and calendars of availability, as well as matrices on the use of literacy. They also discussed other tools such as problem ranking and focus group discussions with different sub-sections of their community. Again, rather than being told the purpose of the method in setting up a literacy programme, analysis of their own experiences with each of the methods started a self-design process.

Phase 2: Participatory analysis in communities

On returning to their communities each participant shared their learning with colleagues in their organisation. With help from others they spent one or two weeks organising meetings with community members and using participatory methods to structure discussions. Many came up with rich material and reported that communities were keen to do more. Most left the maps and matrices they produced with the groups, bringing copies back to the next phase of training.

Phase 3: Planning for a REFLECT process

On returning to the training centre, participants displayed the materials they had produced around the walls and toured the room to observe each other's work. They then each exchanged their major learnings from the process - including problems, confusions, and excitement. This was followed by a more focused discussion on 'literacy' - based on the observation, information and analysis from the field. The uses of literacy, forms of literacy, gender differences in literacy and links between literacy and power, became dominant themes that were discussed in pairs and small groups.

The second day of the workshop started with participants being asked how they felt PRA can be used in learning literacy and also how learning can be linked to political awareness and social action. This enabled participants to discover the essence of REFLECT for themselves - rather than listening to a presentation.

The discussion extended to how facilitators could design a REFLECT process for their own specific context - and what help they would need, for example in sequencing learning (planning the sequence of themes and the links to methods).

The conclusion was that no manual, even one produced locally, could ever capture the different realities, problems and challenges of each specific community. After rejecting the concept of a local manual (even one written by themselves), the participants then started making their own circle-specific manuals! This happened in the following stages:

Community profiles. Referring to maps and other existing graphics, each of the participants wrote a few paragraphs about the basic characteristics of the community with which they were going to work, e.g. location, resources, demographic features, social infrastructure, institutions, literacy situation. They made specific observations about the particular group of people who would join the REFLECT circle. Most took two hours to write two/ three pages on this.

Exchange and feedback. After this, they worked in pairs exchanging their write-ups, giving feedback to each other and improving the work accordingly.

Defining themes. Each facilitator brainstormed and then prioritised major themes or issues from their community. For this, they again referred to the community map, problem matrix and other PRA products - as well as reflecting on their own lives. For example the facilitators in Chirilagua identified the following as their key issues: crime and delinquency, drinking water, employment, co-operatives, illiteracy, deforestation, health and diseases, family breakdown, alcoholism, prostitution, schooling, etc. These themes are used as starting points for group reflection and analysis (and the literarcy work, if applicable).

_____

Elaborating each theme. A short paragraph was written on each major prioritised theme - identifying how it was relevant to the specific community. Some did this as a short timeline, by showing how the issue emerged and evolved (e.g. there was no delinquency during the civil war and before). This helped participants to explore each theme further and understand in what directions it might be taken in community discussions.

Establishing core contents. Individually and then in pairs (and later discussed with all participants), the key themes were then broken down into different aspects or key contents, for example: types of delinquency, history of delinquency in the area, effects of delinquency, prevention measures, role of police, etc.. This joint work helped local facilitators to see the issue from a broader perspective.

Defining objectives. Each facilitator set objectives about what they wanted to achieve with each selected theme - to ensure that there was a clear purpose and direction to introducing each theme.

Critical analysis. Each facilitator identified questions which would facilitate a critical analysis and avoid leading participants to any pre-set answers. This involved finding appropriate open-ended questions, such as:

- What type of delinquency or social crimes occur in our community ?
- Who in this group has directly suffered from the problem ? When? How ?
- What have been the effects of delinquency in the community?
- What type of people are involved in such crimes?
- Why do some people choose such a path?
- How do they get weapons?
- When did such problems start?
- How do people take preventive measures against this? What preventative methods are effective?
- What can we do at individual and collective level?
- What has been the role of police/local authority/ politicians?

Although they agreed that there would be no fixed rules for the sequence or number of questions, they did discuss the pros and cons of open and closed questions. Open questions help involve all the participants and explore on the theme, while closed or leading questions would block it.

Tools and techniques. The next stage was to define appropriate participatory tools or techniques which can be used to facilitate critical analysis on the theme. The following tools were identified for different issues: social mapping, resource mapping, mobility mapping, time-line/ time trend, problem matrix, tortilla diagram[4], calendars, ranking, problem tree, small group discussions, songs/poems, skits/drama.

Reading and writing. The local facilitators then worked on how they could link the construction of the graphic and critical analysis to learning literacy. Under every theme, they selected a list of words, phrases and short sentences which might arise and which participants could use to learn to read and write. They put these in sequence, from simple to complex.

Numeracy. The local facilitators then discussed how people might use their mental/ verbal numeracy skills in the course of discussion on a particular theme - and what written numeracy uses/formats might be learnt.

Preparation of facilitators. Finally, facilitators thought about what sort of preparation would be required of them to get all the above things done. They planned for resource materials to be used at different stages of learning and participatory exercises, and the use of different local materials and objects. They also thought about who could be resource persons from within their community to discuss particular themes.

Eventually every local facilitator produced her or his own REFLECT process manual, covering all the above stages for a range of critical issues in their own communities. This process lasted three days with participants spending time each day writing, sharing, discussing and revising their work. In the end each person constructed his or her own unique text.

_____

[4] A more locally appropriate version of a 'Venn' or 'chapati' diagram!

_____

_____

- **Learning to facilitate through step-by-step analysis**

This process shows clearly the potential for facilitators of participatory processes to learn by experiencing, rather than by being taught. It challenges the conventional way of training facilitators through standardised texts, sequences, and applications. Instead, the work in El Salvador shows how analysis of the personal experience of methods can be used for 'trainee facilitators' to develop their own, context-specific approaches to community development initiatives, whether or not they have a literacy focus. The step-by-step analysis that they undertook has embedded in them the value of specific methods and sequences more strongly than any 'taught knowledge' would have achieved. They have, after all, now designed their own programmes.

> - **Bimal Kumar Phnuyal, International Education Unit, ACTIONAID, Hamlyn House, MacDonald Road, Archway, London N19 5PG, UK Email: bimalp@actionaid.org.uk**

> NOTES
>
> The REFLECT Mother Manual is available in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Bengali from the International Education Unit of ACTIONAID, UK£12 plus postage and packing
>
> Participation, Literacy and Empowerment. PLA Notes 32, June 1998. Available from The Bookshop at IIED, £8 plus postage and packing.

_____