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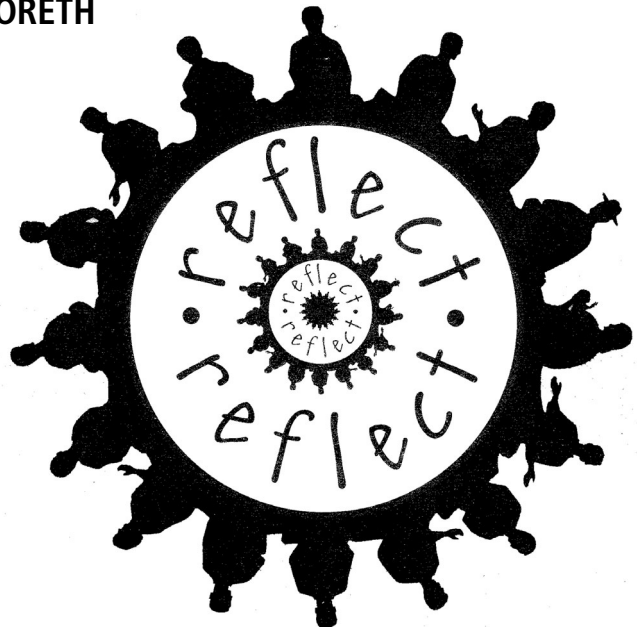
Participation, literacy and empowerment: the continuing evolution of Reflect

Cover of the Reflect Mother manual

by DAVID ARCHER and NANDAGO MARIA GORETH

In 1998 Bimal Phnuyal, Sara Cottingham and David Archer of ActionAid guest-edited an edition of *Participatory Learning and Action* (then *PLA Notes*) called *Participation, literacy and empowerment*. It focused specifically on experiences of the Reflect approach – which was developed through field practice in El Salvador, Uganda and Bangladesh between 1993 and 1995. There are other participatory approaches to adult learning, for example drawing on the use of learner generated materials or ‘real’ materials, but it is the Reflect approach that has uniquely drawn on PRA and which thus framed the original article (as well as this update).

Reflect was originally conceived as a fusion of Paulo Freire’s theoretical framework on the politics of literacy and the participatory (particularly visualisation) methodologies developed by PRA practitioners. Articles in the 1998 edition of *PLA Notes* were written by 26 different authors – 18 from the South, 8 from the North; 13 women and 13 men. At the time everyone involved felt that there had already been a huge accumulation of experience with the Reflect approach. When we look back today we see that we were still very much in the early stages. The Reflect approach has now spread through the work of at least 350 different organisations (including NGOs, CBOs, governments and



social movements) in more than 60 countries. In 2003 the International Reflect Circle was awarded the United Nations International Literacy Prize for the way in which Reflect has ‘revolutionised’ the field of literacy in the past 10 years. In this article we will try to capture the key moments in this continuing evolution of Reflect. The image below probably

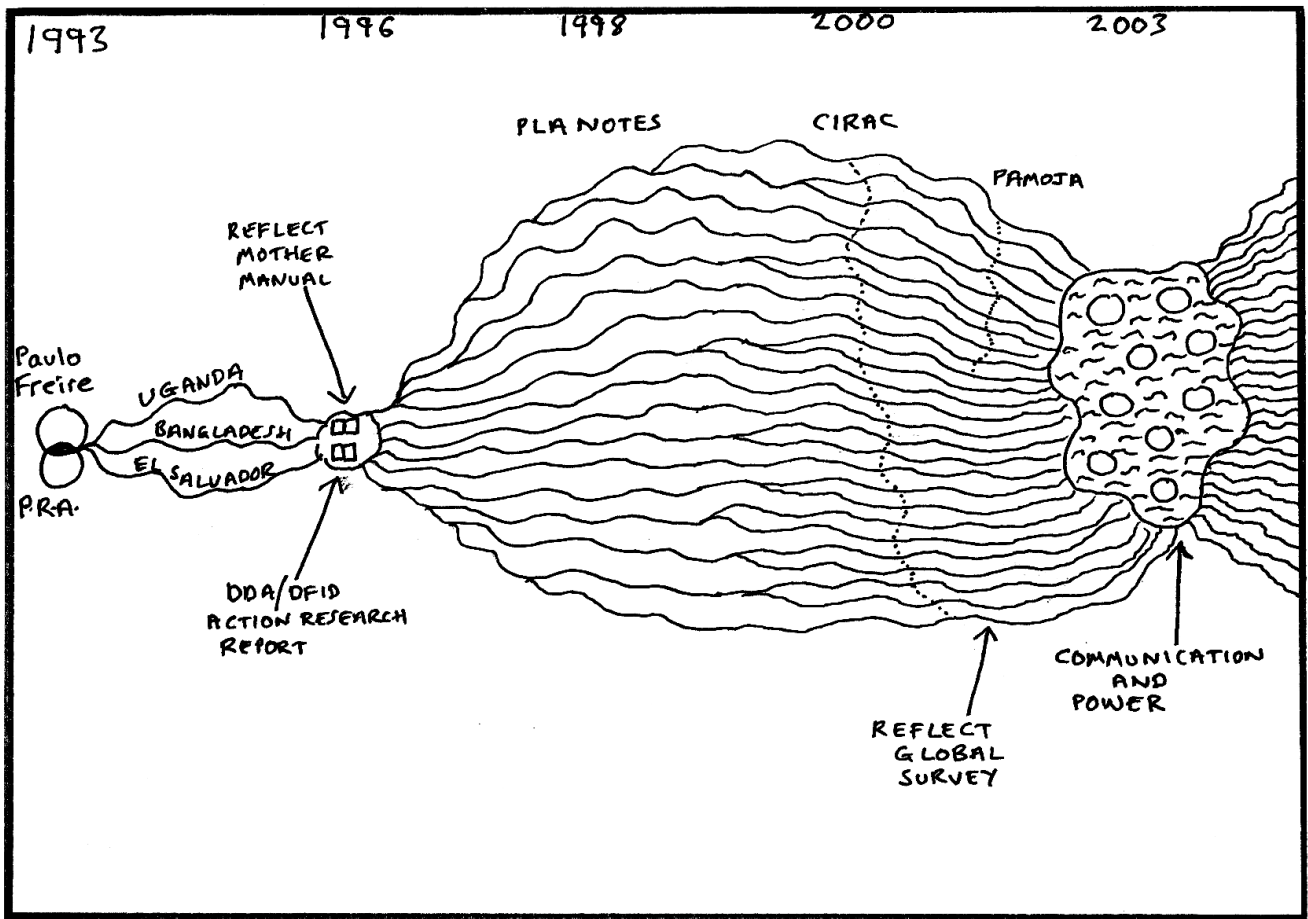


Diagram: David Archer

stretches the limits of how a river system flows, but it more or less illustrates the evolution of Reflect.

Reflect started through parallel action research projects in three locations. In Bundibugyo, Uganda the approach was developed in a remote multilingual area where three of the four local languages had never been written down (two were written down and popularised during the course of the project). In Bhola, Bangladesh, the Reflect pilot was in a conservative Islamic area with women organised into savings and credit groups. In El Salvador, the pilot was a partnership between a highly politicised national organisation (CIAZO) and a grassroots organisation (COMUS) led by ex-guerrillas, two years on from the end of the civil war. These three experiences were written up in an action research report published by ODA (now DFID) and the practical learning from them was fed into the Reflect Mother Manual for sharing with other practitioners.

Reflect then spread very rapidly. Trainers from each of

the three pilots and from ActionAid's International Education Unit ran regional and national training workshops. People from different countries visited the original pilots sites and went back home to adapt the approach themselves. Some people just picked up the Reflect Mother Manual and used it to produce their own locally relevant manuals.

By 1998, when we were asked to guest-edit *PLA Notes*, there was an emerging international group of Reflect practitioners communicating with one another, many of whom met in London in March 1998. The publication touched on most of the key themes that were being raised at that time:

- the need to have a permanent evolution in Reflect;
- the contradictions inherent in manuals;
- the need to strengthen gender sensitivity in Reflect;
- the historical baggage of 'literacy' and changing conceptions towards 'communication';
- the need to change our understanding of numeracy;
- approaches to the training of facilitators and trainers;

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION - BURUNDI

CHALLENGING CASTE DISCRIMINATION - NEPAL

OPPOSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE - PERU

STRENGTHENING LOCAL DEMOCRACY - SOUTH AFRICA

CONSOLIDATING LANDLESS PEOPLES MOVEMENT - BRAZIL

TEACHING REFUGEE WOMEN - CANADA

PEOPLE-CENTRED LOCAL PLANNING - INDIA

LISTENING TO STREET CHILDREN - PAKISTAN

MOBILISING FOR BASIC RIGHTS - NIGERIA

DEEPENING CULTURAL IDENTITY - BASQUE COUNTRY

350 RIVERS IN 60 COUNTRIES - EACH CREATIVELY
ADAPTING REFLECT TO THEIR OWN CONTEXT - AND
EACH BRINGING NEW ENERGY AND INSIGHTS INTO
THE WIDER RIVER.

“The Reflect process aims to strengthen people’s capacity to communicate by whatever means are most relevant or appropriate to them... the focus is on using these rather than technical learning. It is through focusing on the practical use that real learning takes place”

- institutional change in organisations using Reflect;
- Paulo Freire’s legacy; and
- adapting the approach for urban areas, for children and for work on a large scale.

Experiences were documented from countries as diverse as Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Uganda, Ghana, El Salvador, Nicaragua and the UK. Of the 26 practitioners who wrote articles at that time, 22 are still actively linked to Reflect practitioner networks and continue to contribute to the evolution of Reflect.

If we move forward five years to 2003 and look at a cross section of the river, we can see some of the experiences that have proved particularly influential in this continuing evolution of Reflect. Whilst not wanting to overdo the image, each new experience by each new organisation adapting Reflect to its unique context, focus and priorities, brings new nutrients into the overall river system, enriching the approach as a whole.

Building peace and reconciliation in Burundi

ActionAid has seven years’ experience of working with mixed Hutu and Tutsi circles, facilitated by two facilitators (one Hutu and one Tutsi). The focus is on overcoming the past conflict within communities – enabling people to find common ground and define common interests. Local traditions of song and dance are actively used within the process. One of the most dramatic impacts has been the return of refugees from camps in Tanzania following sustained communication with them by participants in the Reflect circles.

Challenging caste discrimination in Nepal

Reflect circles started with *dalits* (untouchables) in Saptari District in the late 1990s. Within a short time the circles developed an intense focus around shared experiences of caste-based discrimination. Moving beyond concerns about their

Box 1: Pamoja

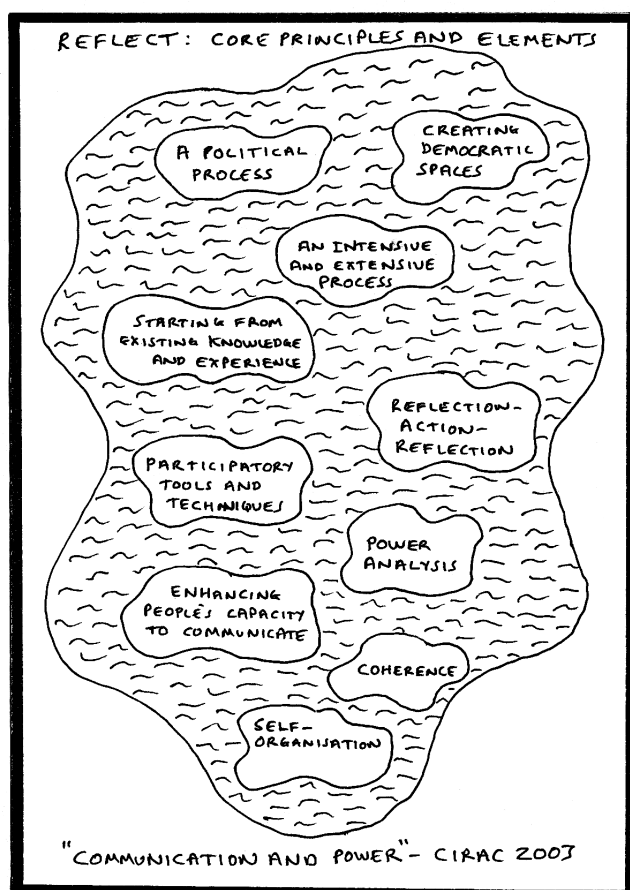
Pamoja, the Africa Reflect network, was conceived in 2001, formally founded in 2002 and secured full legal status in 2003. Pamoja exists to facilitate learning, sharing and the continuing evolution of Reflect experiences in Africa, in order to build a critical mass of men, women, boys and girls empowered to realise their basic human rights. Pamoja has rapidly established an excellent reputation:

- National Pamoja forums have been formed in many countries including Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, Malawi, The Gambia, Mozambique, Burundi, Rwanda and Ethiopia, Zambia, Sudan, South Africa, Mali, Senegal, Togo, Angola and Burkina Faso.
- Pamoja has published a widely respected regional review of progress on adult education for UNESCO’s global review (Bangkok, 2003).
- Pamoja played a lead role in the development of STAR (the fusion of Stepping Stones and Reflect to empower communities in the face of HIV/AIDS) – and is coordinating a large Comic Relief and EC funded programme to develop the approach further.
- It ran an excellent capacity building workshop in Tanzania on using Reflect for school governance and grassroots budget tracking (to which 11 countries sent participants).
- It has co-published a paper on Reflect Rights and Governance in Nigeria and South Africa – helping to re-frame the understanding of Reflect in Africa.
- It has provided direct support to training workshops in countries like Zambia, Sudan, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa.
- It has compiled research proposals on links between women’s literacy and girls’ education from six countries.
- It has played a leading role in international networking around Reflect and in the Global Campaign for Education week of action, helping to build links between Reflect networks and national coalitions/alliances on basic education.
- It has strengthened communication across the region through an e-newsletter and through the Reflect website – as well as supporting linkages between countries to respond to the overwhelming demands for training.
- It has built up exciting programmes of work around Reflect with pastoralists and Reflect in conflict situations.

economic condition, participants began to question their position in Nepali society and organised strategic actions of resistance, refusing to fulfil certain caste-based roles (such as disposal of animal carcasses). Within a short while a district-level *dalit* movement developed. There was a backlash from local elites but the Reflect circles linked to journalists in the national media to expose violations of their rights. Eventually the local *dalit* movement seeded a national movement, challenging parliament to act against caste-based discrimination, for example demanding the rights of *dalit* children to learn in mainstream schools and to be treated as equals.

Opposing domestic violence in Peru

CADEP, a Cuzco-based organisation, adapted Reflect with Quechua men and women to break the silence on taboo issues



of sexuality and domestic violence. Using a range of participatory tools, participants developed their own analysis of the underlying causes of domestic violence and prepared powerful personal testimonies from men and women. They then linked up with a range of local media, producing posters, radio programmes and TV 'spots' to raise the profile of the issues they had discussed and called for an end to domestic violence

Strengthening local democracy in South Africa

The national NGO Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) has adapted Reflect to deepen the relationships between elected officials in local government and their constituents. In the highland communities of Mpumalanga Province there is little culture of democracy, no history of active citizenship or engagement with local government. The Reflect circles offer a bridge between local people and those who are supposed to serve them – helping to define democratic norms and develop good models of governance in the post-apartheid era.

Consolidating the landless people's movement in Brazil

MST, one of the world's largest social movements, has adapted Reflect in the northeast of Brazil to build democratic practice within the settlements where their members have seized abandoned land. The movement has a significant presence nationally but there have been concerns that it is difficult to maintain accountability to the grassroots. Reflect processes have helped to ensure that families involved in local land occupations have a say in decision-making.

Teaching English to refugees in Canada

A local NGO in Calgary has five years experience using Reflect to teach language skills to refugee women whilst also helping participants to address social and economic issues. The national parliament has recognised the Reflect approach as representing a positive practice.

People centred local planning in India

In Balangir, Orissa, a district-wide process has strengthened the voices of scheduled castes and tribes in local planning – exploiting the powers of the *Panchayati Raj* that usually only exist only on paper. A big emphasis is placed on participants overcoming the intimidation they feel in situations (e.g. in government offices) where literacy is required or expected. Enabling people to deal confidently with power dynamics in such situations can be more important than actually teaching people to read and write.

Giving children a voice in Pakistan

Save the Children Fund have built up an impressive programme of work adapting Reflect to work with street children – enabling them to present their perspective on issues that affect their lives to agencies who rarely listen.

Mobilising for basic rights in Nigeria

A wide range of organisations, from grassroots community organisations to the government's national adult literacy agency, has adapted Reflect within an explicit rights-based framework. Following years of military dictatorship people are nervous about speaking out and demanding their rights; and the bureaucratic structures of government do not make it easy for people to secure their rights. The process and impact of Reflect in Nigeria is captured in *Reflect, Rights and Governance: Insights from Nigeria and South Africa* (Newman, 2004).

Deepening cultural identity in the Basque Country

Reflect has been used to strengthen the use of the Basque

“More and more ‘we’ are asking ourselves to be clear who the ‘we’ is when ‘we’ write like this... The only way ‘we’ can construct a meaningful ‘we’ is to constantly deepen our own reflection on power and our own democratic practice”

language in public spaces and workplaces, as well as celebrating Basque culture and improving local government communication with citizens.

There are so many other rivers that could be mentioned, that it seems crudely selective to have mentioned only a few. What about the wonderful Reflect process with sex workers in Bangladesh? What about the work with Reflect in community schools in Mali? Or with pastoralists in Kenya? Or with the women’s movement in Matagalpa, Nicaragua? Any attempt to highlight examples risks offending those not mentioned!

From publications to living networks

These diverse experiences would not be able to enrich the Reflect river system if it was not for the continuing communication between practitioners. In the early days of Reflect a big focus was placed on publications – including the twice-yearly production of *Education Action* magazine, which captured key stories and issues. Whilst these publications continue, there is much more emphasis placed now on human contact between practitioners. National inter-agency networks or forums have been formed in many countries, particularly bringing Reflect trainers together to share experiences. At a regional level networks have also emerged, including the Latin American Reflect Action network (with sub-networks in Central America, the Andes and Brazil) and Pamoja, the Africa Reflect Network (with sub-networks e.g. in francophone West Africa). CIRAC, the International Reflect Circle, was founded in 2000 at a meeting in Oxford (followed by meetings in South Africa 2001, Brazil 2002 and Bangladesh in 2004). There is growing belief that real learning and sharing takes place face to face and that only a limited amount can be achieved through publications and email. As well as meetings and workshops, exchange visits are also encouraged across countries and continents.

One of the most critical communication issues has been language. In most meetings, language emerges as the key factor in power relations (above gender and race) and so

commitments have now been made to ensure that there is concurrent translation between four core working languages: English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. Publications are likewise produced in these four languages (and sometimes then translated into national languages). It is the relative success in creating this multilingual space that has contributed to the continuing enrichment of Reflect.

Core principles

Despite the immense diversity of Reflect practice these living networks and the ongoing multilingual communication have meant that it has been possible to draw out some core principles and elements that underline all Reflect practice. In 2003, over 100 organisations actively contributed to producing new international resource materials for Reflect practitioners, called *Communication and Power*. This process, together with wider networking, has helped to bring all the diverse rivers back together within a single lake – from where they can flow onwards in new directions with renewed vigour. The introduction to this *Communication and Power* pack identifies ten key principles or elements that are the uniting elements in that lake:

Reflect is a political Process

Reflect is an approach premised on the recognition that achieving social change and greater social justice is fundamentally a political process. Reflect is not a neutral approach that seeks to promote a neutral vision of ‘development’ based only on improving people’s immediate material conditions or providing short-term responses to their basic needs. Rather it is an approach that seeks to help people in the struggle to assert their rights, challenge injustice and change their position in society. It is action oriented, not passive or detached. It involves working with people rather than ‘for’ them.

Creating democratic spaces

Reflect involves creating a democratic space – one in which everyone’s voice is given equal weight. This needs to be actively constructed as there is almost nowhere that people have an equal voice (people everywhere are stratified by gender, age, hierarchy, status, ability etc.). As such it is counter-cultural – always challenging local culture to the extent that power relationships and stratification have created inequality. It is never easy and may never be perfectly achieved but it should be a constant focus. The facilitator plays a critical role – exploring power dynamics within the group as a basis for deepening analysis of power in wider society. Conflict resolution becomes an increasingly important skill.

Intensive and extensive processes

Reflect is rarely a short or one-off process. A global survey in 2001 showed that usually groups meet for about two years – and sometimes they continue indefinitely. Often they meet from three up to six times a week – and rarely less than once a week. Each meeting may take about two hours. This ongoing intensity of contact is one of the fundamental ingredients for a process that seeks to achieve serious social or political change. Such a sustained timeframe is also essential in order to achieve changes in behaviour and attitude – which do not come about easily. Such an intensity of contact may be uniquely feasible for something broadly framed as being about ‘education’.

Starting from existing experience

Reflect involves starting with respect for people’s existing knowledge and experience. It is not about starting the learning process through importing or transferring knowledge. However, this does not mean accepting people’s existing opinions or prejudices without challenge – especially where these contradict the principle of creating a democratic space. Moreover there will always be a part of the process in which participants are enabled to access new information and ideas from new sources so as to contextualise and extend their understanding. The key is to give people control over that process, and confidence in their own starting point – so that they can be critical and selective. We have to avoid locking people into purely local analysis – but also avoid imposing an external analysis. Finding the balance between these is critical.

Reflection/action/reflection

Reflect involves a continual cycle of reflection and action. It is not about reflection or learning only for the sake of it, but rather reflection is always for the purpose of eventual action. It is not about action isolated from reflection as pure activism rapidly loses directions. It is about the fusion between these elements and it can start with either. In this process ‘action’ may be in the ‘public’ or ‘private’ sphere; it may be ‘collective’ or ‘individual’; it may be small scale or large scale – so long as it is linked to a continuing process or cycle. Some actions may be very local and precise; others may require linkages beyond the local level to national level mobilisation. The level at which action will be most effective, and the extent to which solidarity with others is needed, is a key area for reflection.

Participatory tools

A wide range of participatory tools is used within a Reflect process to help create an open or democratic environment in

which everyone is able to contribute. Visualisation approaches are of particular importance (maps, calendars, diagrams, matrices and other graphic forms developed by practitioners of PRA) – and they often provide a base structure for the process. However, many other participatory methods and processes are also used: theatre, role-play, songs, dance, video, and photography etc. The basket of tools is limitless: practitioners are encouraged to use any tools that they have found to be effective in other contexts – anything that works to bring out people’s knowledge and opinions, or stimulate discussion and analysis. There are no unique ‘Reflect’ tools.

Power analysis

All participatory tools can be distorted, manipulated or used in exploitative ways if they are used without sensitivity to power relationships. Reflect is a political process in which the multiple dimensions of power and stratification are always the focus of reflection and actions are oriented towards changing inequitable power relationships – whether that inequity is a result of gender, class, caste, race, physical or intellectual ability, hierarchy, status, language, appearance etc. A structural analysis is needed to ensure that issues are not dealt with just at a superficial level. Only through such analysis can effective strategic actions be determined.

Enhancing people’s capacity to communicate

The Reflect process aims to strengthen people’s capacity to communicate by whatever means are most relevant or appropriate to them. Although part of the process may be about learning new communication skills, the focus is on using these rather than technical learning. It is through focusing on the practical use that real learning takes place. So, the process may involve enabling people to deal with the power of literacy or access a second/dominant language. It may involve giving people meaningful access to new media such as video, radio or computers, or it may involve simply helping them to assert their own voice in places or on subjects where they have previously been silent. The focus may be on communication in the public sphere or in the private sphere. *Communication and Power* has resources on the spoken word and images as well as the written word and numbers.

Coherence

Reflect is an approach that needs to be used systematically. It is not just for use with others but also for use with ourselves and within our own institutions. The same prin-

ciples and processes need to be used whether working with a group of homeless people or with supposedly 'expert' facilitators, trainers, managers or national coordinators. Our starting point should be with ourselves and our own institutions though we should not become self-absorbed. The International Reflect Circle and regional networks like Pamoja need to apply all the principles outlined here in any space or piece of work if we are not to fall into contradiction.

Self-organisation

The focus of the process should always be towards self-organisation – so that groups are self-managed where possible rather than being facilitated by (or dependent on) an outside individual or organisation. In many contexts the starting point will be a process initiated from outside, but over time Reflect practitioners seek to construct spaces for people to organise for themselves based on their own analysis and their own agenda.

Future Directions

Some very exciting new directions that different organisations are taking with Reflect will doubtlessly inform future papers of this type (perhaps the 100th edition of *Participatory Learning and Action!*). A small selection of these initiatives or areas of work include:

STAR: Linking Reflect with the Stepping Stones methodology

STAR is a systematic approach relevant to working in a world where HIV affects almost every aspect of people's lives. Stepping Stones has proved remarkably effective in getting people to address sensitive issues such as sex and death – and has proved the effectiveness of working in peer groups (by age/sex etc.). It has emerged gradually over the past three years and is now being piloted systematically in Uganda, Mozambique and Nigeria, though practice is already spreading to other countries and continents.

Linking Reflect to governance and accountability

A recent paper by Kate Newman draws powerful insights from experiences in Nigeria and South Africa. Increasingly there is a recognition that Reflect is positioned as an approach to 'creating spaces' in contrast to the ever more prevalent (but limited) 'invited spaces'. There are strong links emerging with building grassroots capacity around budget analysis and tracking – as well as generating and using local statistics.

Box 2: International Reflect Circle coordination team contacts

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Critiquing the evaluation of empowerment

Earlier this year DFID published *Literacy, gender and social agency* by Anne Jellema and Marc Fiedrich which provides a radical critique of early Reflect practice and powerful insights into the problems with most approaches to evaluation of participatory projects. The book is critical as much of participatory monitoring and evaluation as it is of external evaluation processes – showing how the power dynamics around evaluation are much more complex than many of us previously assumed. This poses significant challenges for the future directions of evaluation work in Reflect.

Increasing the use of Reflect in the UK

ActionAid, other organisations, and independent practitioners are adapting Reflect to the UK context, with different initiatives emerging in London, Oxford, Sheffield, Wales and other UK cities. Experiences are being developed in the fields of community work, urban regeneration, anti-racist education, and refugee empowerment.

Reflect and information communication technologies

A DFID funded action research initiative in Uganda, India and Burundi is exploring how to ensure that poor and excluded people can both choose and sustainably access appropriate information and communication technologies (ICTs). The process starts from participants in Reflect circles doing their own analysis of existing information systems and communication needs and then linking the introduction of technology to the development of relevant basic communication skills. This initiative has already attracted global interest from those grappling with the ethics and practices of ICT for development.

Adapting Reflect to work in schools

There has been a tendency to assume that using Reflect with children needs to happen outside the formal environment of a school. Increasingly this is being challenged. Get Global is an approach developed by Oxfam, SCF, ActionAid, CAFOD, Christian Aid and DFID, adapting Reflect for UK secondary schools, for the citizenship curriculum. Rather than focus on content, the premise of this was that children choose their own issues, map these issues out for themselves, make local to global links, define actions within the microcosm of the school or their community, take those actions, reflect on them and evaluate their own learning. It was piloted in 30 schools where many teachers initially said it was impossible – but they later became the strongest advocates for the approach. This is now spreading nationally and in adapted forms even internationally.

Reflect for strengthening school governance

Many countries have started to adapt the Reflect approach to capacity building for school governance (whether for school management committees or parent-teacher associations). The aim is to enable local people to expand their present role and voice whilst reinforcing government responsibility for education. In this context, numeracy work focuses on monitoring and analysing school budgets, demystifying education statistics etc. There are many other examples also emerging of Reflect being used as an approach for pre-existing community groups to strengthen or deepen their process.

Using Reflect on a large scale

Many people assume that a participatory approach like Reflect cannot work on a large scale. Yet after the fall of the dictator Fujimori, the Women's Ministry in Peru's transitional government launched a national Reflect programme reaching 180,000 people across the country. We expect more large-scale experiences to emerge in the coming years.

Reflect within institutions

There is a growing body of work looking at how Reflect adapts to organisational change processes. A notable experience in this was the Participatory Methodologies Forum in Bangladesh 2001, where senior management from across ActionAid were immersed in reflections on their own power, and commitments were made to 'Transforming Power'.

Applying Reflect to ourselves: subjectivity

In much of Latin America, influenced particularly by feminist theory, Reflect practice is now centrally defined by a strong focus on personal behaviour – and ensuring consistency between work and home life. Known as Reflect-Action processes, they focus on the recognition of power relationships within our own immediate experience and work towards personal transformation as the essential foundation for building solidarity and sustained action. Such processes are based on an intense critique of the 'development industry' – of how poverty has become privatised so that it is now big business that serves mainly as a source of profit for the middle classes.

Reflect within coalition building and campaigning

ActionAid has an increasing focus on coalition and alliance building around education at national and international levels – bringing together diverse NGOs, parents associations, teachers unions, the women's movement, child labour or debt campaigners etc. – into broad-based platforms to place education higher up the political agenda and provoke public debate around the role of education. We find that precisely the same principles and elements need to be applied in facilitating the emergence of these alliances as we use within Reflect practice at the grassroots. We need to apply all ten of the principles outlined above – from building democratic space to using participatory tools and power analysis within our own process. This is equally true in national campaigns/coalitions as it is in regional campaigns and in the work we do with the Global Campaign for Education.

Final Reflections

There are other participatory approaches being used in the field of literacy and adult learning – and increasingly we have come to see the name 'Reflect' as double-edged. It helps bring practitioners together from across different institutions and contexts and makes people open to learning from others who otherwise seem very different (as everyone is united by sharing 'Reflect'). But, at the same time it acts as a barrier for others – who are doing participatory work but not using Reflect – who feel excluded. We need to build bridges with others rather than set up barriers. Yet we are also at a point of no return. If we tried to abolish Reflect and just say we are using participatory approaches for adult learning we should not be in any doubt that within a few months lots of people would also pledge themselves to this new and latest 'PAfAL' approach.

More and more 'we' are asking ourselves to be clear who the 'we' is when 'we' write like this. Can anyone write an article of this nature that truly captures the breadth of Reflect practice and the diversity of voices? Some practitioners will read this and feel that something essential is missing. The only way 'we' can construct a meaningful 'we' is to constantly deepen our own reflection on power and our own democratic practice. The International Reflect Circle now has a core coordination team (two people chosen each year by practitioners in each region – Africa, Asia, Latin

America and Europe). There is no formal or legal power but this team determines priorities and frames the work-plan of a part-time CIRAC Coordinator. This person is presently based in the International Education Unit of ActionAid, but this role will rotate in future so that there is no 'centre'. But the practice of power is complex and cannot be resolved simply through structures. Perhaps the most crucial thing is to be always open to a process of critical analysis – to ensure that at any moment we are within our own reflection-action-reflection process.

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KEY RESOURCES

Communication and Power: CIRAC 2003
Reflect Global Survey: CIRAC Working Paper
2001.
Reflect Rights and Governance: Insights from
South Africa and Nigeria, 2004 by Kate
Newman.
Education Action magazine (twice a year in
4 languages).
Transforming Power: Participatory
Methodologies workshop 2001
Website: www.reflect-action.org