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## Reality check: accountability, learning, and practice with the people who matter

by ASHISH SHAH

This article describes how one team in ActionAid working on HIV/AIDS is using 'reality checks' as part of their participatory monitoring and evaluation process. For the author, reality checks should not be one-off emotional experiences, but should be closely related to one's work, with the aim of building a long-term relationship with the host family. Reality checks allow development workers to check the relevance of their work with the poor and marginalised citizens they work with, and to account back to these citizens on the work they do and the money they spend in eradicating poverty and injustice.

### Introduction

*I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: recall the face of the poorest and weakest person who you have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to them. Will they gain anything by it? Will it restore them to a control over their own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to self-governance and emancipation for the hungry and starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away.*

MK Gandhi

There has been a lot of talk recently about immersions. The dictionary defines immersion as a 'baptism in which the whole body of the person is submerged'. It is precisely because of this that I choose to avoid the word:

- First, the notion of baptism or initiation conjures up even more horrid images of development tourism, as though one is visiting a zoo to discover an animal for the first time.
- Second, many development workers in the South associate the idea only with people in the North; it is not unusual to hear them say, 'we don't need to be immersed; we came from there'.
- Third, and more worryingly, several people working in the development aid industry argue that immersions are an indulgence – that the issues are known and people know what they are doing.
- Fourth, many immersions fail to recognise the exercise of power, when a rich international agency can tell a poor citizen to host one of their own. How many of us would welcome a stranger into our homes to live our realities?
- Finally, some think of immersions as a type of endurance test, similar to an initiation, which, once passed, can appease us for our lack of regular contact with poor citizens.

This is not just semantics. In development, the importance and meaning of language have always clouded good

**Mabel Takona, AAI  
HIV/AIDS Regional  
Coordinator Africa,  
with her host family.**



Photo: Ashish Shah

intentions. However, I am not going to talk about definitional challenges. Instead I am going to share some thoughts about what we call 'reality checks'. Reality checks are exactly what they mean: checking your work, ideology, and practice against the realities that poor citizens face.

The trigger for these reality checks was when a member of our field team asked a senior manager if he truly understood poverty. We began doing them out of a growing concern that there were too many 'upward' pulls in the organisation – staff spending increasing amounts of time meeting the demands of fundraising and visibility. But we also realised that we were often missing things: did we really understand how citizens survive on a quarter-acre of farmland, or how children who receive free primary education do their homework in the dark? The reality checks in western Kenya described here did not draw on resources from the wider organisation, but rather evolved out of a sense of individual responsibility among members of the team.

I share these thoughts and experiences from the perspective of someone who has worked in an international non-governmental organisation. Hence with that goes the usual disclaimer that I have little moral legitimacy to comment about others. None the less I hope that some of the thoughts here are useful.

### **Why check your relevance with poor and excluded citizens?**

I have wonderful friends in different parts of the development aid industry – in donor agencies, governments, community groups, philanthropic foundations, civil society organisations, and so on. Despite the differences between us, we have one thing in common – a desire to eradicate poverty and injustice. Therefore, at the centre of our existence are poor and excluded citizens. This is the first logic of the reality check. No matter who we are, or where we are located, there must be a constituency of citizens (either one or many) with whom our relevance must constantly be checked.

The second logic concerns citizen's rights. If a constituency of citizens exists, then they have a right to influence, question, and hold us to account. This implies that the purpose of an immersion is not to extract from or be baptised by the lived realities of citizens, but rather to justify and account for our beliefs, assumptions, and actions to those on whose behalf we claim to exist.

The third is a moral logic. Gandhi famously said 'Be the change that you want to see in the world'. We cannot expect governments to understand the daily toil of their citizens, to connect with them, plan with them, and account

**Jemal Ahmed,  
STAR Project,  
Manager, fishing  
with his host for  
6 hours.**



Photo: Ashish Shah

to them if we do not do the same. We cannot expect policy makers truly to engage with citizens' voices if they connect with them only through reports and lunches in hotels. Each change starts with us as individuals. In my experience, those who have had the greatest impact in contributing to change have been those who have sought to minimise the contradictions we all face in our lives. If we don't genuinely aspire to be that change, then let's end the rhetoric now.

The fourth logic is about human relations. In a world where teleconferences, workshops, reports, and emails have become the norm of organisational interaction we can easily forget the value of deep, face-to-face, human contact. It is actually technically possible these days to make a career in the development sector without ever having critically interacted with poor citizens. How do we build strong, solid relations with poor and excluded citizens, and what does this mean? A one-off emotional experience after which you never see your host again – or a lasting, personal relationship of mutual learning, struggle, and change?

A reality check therefore has as its base these four logics:

- the existence of poor and excluded citizens;
- their right to hold us to account;
- the moral imperative to practise what we preach; and
- the importance of meaningful human contact.

### **Reality checks in practice**

What does all this look like in practice? I will illustrate it by referring to our most recent reality check, and the seven steps involved.

In February 2007, a mixed group of ActionAid International staff working on HIV/AIDS spent a week with people living with or affected by HIV/AIDS in a village in western Kenya. Our group was made up of local and international staff from a range of disciplines, including the most senior staff in the HIV/AIDS unit. It makes a difference for field teams to see senior staff putting into practice a process of long-term connection with, and accountability to, citizens. Most of the men in the team chose to experience the realities faced by women, a request thankfully accepted by our hosts.

**Leonard Okello, HIV/AIDS Theme Head, overwhelmed by the wall of death – a whole family wiped out within a span of 5 years, leaving behind a widow.**



Photo: Ashish Shah

### Be clear about constituency

First let us identify a relevant citizen. Let us explain to them our work and purpose, and ask them if we can build a long-lasting relationship. If we work on education, let us spend quality time understanding what education really means for a child who lives near a primary school from which no student has ever passed into secondary school. If we work on agriculture, let us spend time with a farmer who is struggling to survive on one acre of land. If we are working on HIV/AIDS, let us spend quality time with a person living with HIV/AIDS in order to understand the complexity and challenges of their lives. In other words, build a relationship with people with whom you have something in common in terms of the focus and energy of your work. Don't do a general visit.

### Live and experience reality with an attitude of openness, reflection, and questioning. Make new friends!

Spend your time learning about and appreciating the truths of your host's life, while also questioning and testing the relevance of your work and practice against the realities you experience. Try and explain your work – what you do, why you do it, and the resources you use – to this one person. Listen, learn, and question your assumptions. Look for what is working and what is not. Keep your eyes open for what you might miss. Sleep every night asking what the day you have experienced means for the work you do.

In western Kenya we felt many things:

- anger about things we could have done differently;
- hope that there are some things to which we are adding value;

**The team listens to advice during a visit to the village to account back.**



Photo: Ashish Shah

- inspiring moments that reconfirmed for us the power of local citizenry;
- challenging moments that provoked us to question our own assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes;
- physically painful moments that showed us just how difficult it is to earn a livelihood;
- learning moments that opened our eyes to a whole new way of looking at things; and
- embarrassing moments that put us on the spot about how we use our resources.

Here are some of our thoughts:

*I've learnt more about HIV/AIDS and its impact in the last 24 hours than I have in the last 6 years that AIDS affected my family.*

*I've learnt more about women's rights and the struggle that*

*women go through by this experience than I have ever learnt through any gender training or workshop.*

*This is the start of a long-term relationship for me. We must see change in at least one person's life, otherwise all that we do means nothing.*

*I never realised that it is so hard to explain what I do to the people who I claim to work on behalf of. It's easier to write reports.*

*If one person's life is so complex – with so many factors causing poverty and injustice – aren't we doing more damage by reducing things into pieces we can manage in our offices? How do you put all this complexity into a logframe – and this is just the complexity of one person's life as understood in three days? (See Figure 1)*



**The team  
accounts back  
to the villagers.**



Photo: Ashish Shah

### Make sense of what you have experienced. Plan how you will account back to a wider group of relevant citizens and the village at large

After 3 days, come back together in the village with your team and reflect. Everyone will have a story to tell. Prepare together how you will account back to a wider citizenry in the village for the work you have been doing at all levels. Draw on your experience with your host to help you limit the usual jargon we use in development, and so that the facts and figures you share can resonate more easily with your audience.

In our case it was fantastic sitting with a mix of staff from all levels of the organisation, making sense of our experience and working together to account back. Just the process of doing so highlighted many of the disconnects that exist within our own organisation, with each level trying to do things separately rather than building on each others' work. Could this be a microcosm of the wider development sector? We twitched and itched as we wrote down our salaries, and the money spent on workshops, flights, and conferences. But we had to do it. After all, we had promised citizens we would account back to them for the resources we have spent.

Some of our feelings were:

*This means a lot to me. This is one of the very few times that somebody from the head office has actually tried to understand the context we work in, and is keen on working with these realities as the starting point.*

Field staff member

*I feel morally powerful, you know. I mean, of course it is scary trying to put all our finances and figures in the open, including our salaries. I don't know how the citizens will react. But behind that fear is my own strength and belief that this is the right thing to do... after all, this is exactly what I want my government to do – account back to me. So now I have some moral legitimacy to ask my government to do this.*

International staff member

### Account back to citizens for the work you have done in the name of eradicating poverty and injustice

A long-term relationship is built on openness, honesty, and trust. They say that, in the development sector, if you can talk about money openly, then you can talk about almost anything else. The more open we are, the more trust we

**“The more we create circumstances in which citizens have power over us and force us to account, the more these experiences will translate into increased citizen confidence to hold others to account.”**

build, the more real our work becomes, and the stronger our relationships become. Our moral legitimacy to question others and hold them to account increases or diminishes depending on our own transparency and accountability to citizens. And the more we create circumstances in which citizens have power over us and force us to account, the more these experiences will translate into increased citizen confidence to hold others to account.

In western Kenya we spent a day accounting back to over 100 citizens in the village. We did this from local, to national, to international. We engaged in dialogue, conversation, and questioning. We were given advice, challenged, and shouted at. At the end of it all, we gained more trust and mutual respect, and we made promises to improve our own work and practice at all levels. Citizens told us and asked us many things:

*Why are there less resources for local-level work? Why do you spend so much on conferences and workshops and flights?*

*You claim to have trained many women. Who decides who should be trained?*

*You noted that you successfully passed the HIV/AIDS Act nationally. How come no effort has been made to inform us of what this Act says? How come we don't know about this Act?*

*Every year we get so many different people here – NGOs, governments, etc. – you are all claiming to do one and the same thing. Why don't you all work together? There is too much duplication.*

*We really do find the work of the PLHA network to be useful. It's really supported us a lot.<sup>1</sup>*

*How do you make sure your international and national work is founded on facts and truths from what you have seen and experienced?*

*We don't mind you employing many staff... but pay them less.*

Many of us had often used the excuse that work at international and national levels is too complicated for citizens to understand or engage with. Our experience in western Kenya taught us the contrary. Villagers found it helpful when some of our international staff explained how the universal access agenda has been hampered due to the dilly-dallying of our health ministers. But they also questioned why we only wait for one-off events to apply pressure on them, and why we do not do this more consistently throughout the year.

*Today we will be asked 1000 extremely tough questions. Tomorrow 999 questions, the next day 997... When we reach zero, we know we will have passed the relevance test.*

Staff member

**Come back together in your team to reflect on what the process has taught you and plan for the future. Improve your practice**

The whole experience of living with citizens, experiencing their realities, accounting back to them, and learning from them is useless if it doesn't inform your future work. Sit together to re-plan. Commit yourself to tangibles that you can work with throughout the year, and then account back for these to the same group of citizens and to your host 1 year later.

We were challenged by our own disconnection – by how much more we need to be doing locally, and how we need to ground our national and international work in those local realities. We started to rethink what our experience means for our HIV/AIDS work. We found ourselves coming up with with new ideas, advice, and practical things we could do. This process is still continuing as I write. We hope that our practice will improve and become more relevant.

**Make a commitment that this is not a hit-and-run process. This is the start of a long-term relationship. It doesn't end here... this is where it begins**

If your work is about direct poverty eradication, do not take part in a reality check if you are not willing to commit to a long-term relationship with your host. This should be based

<sup>1</sup> PLHA: People living with HIV/AIDS

**Box 1: Extract from 'Stop and Pause: internal AAI reflection guide for HIV/AIDS staff' by Leonard Okello and Ashish Shah, September 2006**

- When are we going to stop and account back for all that we have been doing to the people that matter?
- When are we going to provoke ourselves and put ourselves in the uncomfortable position of justifying our existence to poor and excluded people?
- When do we listen and have our strategies challenged or approved by PLHAs?
- How do we judge and learn if what we are trying to do is actually relevant and necessary for PLHAs?
- When do we question what we could be doing differently?
- How do we share what we are proud of and the lessons and successes we have had?

With all our work, action, talk, it is possible for us to forget that it is very easy....

**It is easy:**

- **It is easy** for those of us within the organisation to be consumed by our own rhetoric and jargon.
- **It is easy** for us to get overwhelmed in a cycle of meetings, talking, travel, and top-level advocacy, all whilst we preside over increasing poverty and injustice facing people's everyday lives.
- **It is easy** for us to spend money, time, and resources on matters that, if poor and excluded people had the choice, would not be a priority nor would resources have been used on.
- **It is easy** for us to stop listening – particularly to PLHA's and their realities, to our own local staff and their daily challenges.
- **It is easy** for us to get stuck in a routine of processes – where planning, reflecting, reviewing are all mundane and lack rigour and depth, blocking us from really improving our practice and where processes stop being processes and become events.
- **It is easy** for us to get consumed in the trap of reporting to please hierarchy (whether these are manager, donors, or supporters) at the expense of learning and redefining our practice.
- **It is easy** for us to get overwhelmed and busy, yet in that busyness achieve little or miss out the smaller things that would make a bigger difference.
- **It is easy** to fly to conferences and meetings pontificating about HIV/AIDS whilst 8000 plus people die daily of AIDS and others live in harsh realities we often tend to forget.

on who you are as a human being, driven by your personal convictions and beliefs, not who you work for. Otherwise, reality checks risk becoming a one-off form of development tourism. Promise your host that you will come back next year (and if possible work with them throughout the year), and account back for what you have done to help improve their lives.

Since our experience we have all found ourselves in a continuing relationship with our hosts. This is not a monetary relationship: it is a relationship of friends, peers, and

comrades in the same struggle. We find ourselves asking 'What would our host advise?' before doing something. We know that next year we will have to explain ourselves to our hosts and citizens yet again.

**Share your emotions and experience with others, in the hope that the practice of accounting back to citizens begins to spread**

The biggest learning that takes place in a reality check is a learning of the heart. This is a personal learning, which is difficult for any one of us to share sufficiently with others. None the less, make an attempt to provoke and encourage others to take up a similar practice. Help them, guide them, and show them that it is possible, no matter where you are located.

Our group shared their experiences in western Kenya with the wider HIV/AIDS community in ActionAid. The reactions were mixed: some questioning why we should go through such a process and others embracing the idea. Work with those that embrace it. Increase the constituency of practitioners who believe in accounting back to citizens. Their experiences will encourage others, small steps at a time.

**Final thoughts**

So this, then, is our experience of reality checks. We learnt that it cost us less to account back to citizens and be evaluated, challenged, and provoked by them than it would have done to have hired an external evaluator. After all, the best monitoring and evaluation is done by those from whom we claim our existence. If we can improve our transparency and accountability to citizens, then our transparency and accountability to other stakeholders, be they donors, supporters, or our own colleagues, will also improve. But this kind of accountability should not be attempted unless a culture of mutual trust, power sharing, and questioning has been put in place. In western Kenya we have worked for the past 5 years to make financial information public and to give citizens the right to view and question budgets. This HIV/AIDS reality check was the first time that they had the opportunity to question national and international staff, but that was only possible because it had already been happening at a local level.

Almost all the reality checks in western Kenya have been with highly marginalised people, who have no beds, no latrines, and sometimes no roofs. In our case we decided as a team that this was something we could handle, although we recognise that when arranging reality checks for donors, more support may be required.

### Team reflections post accounting back.



Photo: Ashish Shah

However, reality checks are not just about reaching the poorest (even if the definition of 'poorest' were clear). They may also be about understanding the range of views and experiences within a community – for example, the reality faced by a rural government officer who has no resources to work with, or how the better-off members of a community support those worse off. The starting point should be to clarify the purpose of the reality check, and only then to decide with whom you engage.

If we are all truly fighting for one common goal of eradicating poverty and injustice, then it may be useful for different actors to do reality checks together, so that we stop duplicating and competing with each other, as one citizen pointed out. Next year we hope to spend time encouraging others to be involved in a similar process.

It also seems that the mutual understanding needed for harmonious and focused working relationships between local, national, and international staff can be strengthened in large organisations through this kind of process. This is made most effective when the organisation's leaders make it their personal responsibility to send an important signal: that our most important accountability is to the citizens we strive to achieve change with.

Call them what you like – immersions, reality checks. The point is: only spend time with poor and excluded citizens if you are willing to account back for what you have done (or not done). Otherwise, immersions run the risk of becoming appeasing substitutes for good, solid fieldwork, and masking many of the decisions we make in the name of eradicating poverty and injustice.

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#### NOTES

These views do not necessarily represent those of ActionAid International. The author accepts full responsibility for this text. ActionAid is not liable for any comments in this text. When writing this article, Ashish was working with ActionAid International. The Principlelink team has recently been working with Members of Parliament in Kenya to help them engage in reality checks and account back to their constituents.