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The REFLECT process at an international level

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• Introduction

Two years since the publication of the original Mother Manual, there are REFLECT programmes in 25 countries, working through 95 organisations, and many more countries and organisations are planning to start soon (see Figure 1). The original REFLECT Mother Manual, written in 1995 (based on the consolidated learning from 3 pilot programmes, in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador) and published in March 1996 is still a definitive starting point for most REFLECT programmes. However, it is already out of date. Innovations in practice in many countries have stretched REFLECT further and improved our understanding of everything from the training process to monitoring and evaluation. Moreover, the theoretical underpinning of REFLECT is becoming stronger, but this is not strongly articulated in the manual. Although it is widely well received, there have been some concerns about the bulk of the manual, the design and layout.

In early 1998, it was concluded that there was a desperate need to pull together all the concerns that have been raised and all the innovations that have been developed in practice since 1996. We felt the need to reflect further upon the theoretical side and think through the best way to make the manual user-friendly. To this end, a workshop was organised bringing together fifteen leading REFLECT practitioners from 11 countries (4 Latin Americans, 4 Asians, 3 Africans and 4 Europeans).

The workshop was designed to echo the principles and processes of REFLECT and as it proceeded, we became aware that the workshop was the operational expression of our own REFLECT circle which has been evolving through international interactions over the past years. It became clear that we need to regard REFLECT not just as an approach to work at a local level, but as an approach which was equally valid for ourselves at an international level. Indeed, we emerged convinced that conceiving REFLECT as a process at all levels was integral to the approach itself.

We have already learnt that the most effective approach at the facilitator level is not to 'train' facilitators as if they are delivery instruments; rather facilitators have to be actively engaged in constructing their own texts, taking ownership of the approach and internalising it. Without this internalisation, they will have very limited ability to effectively facilitate a process for others. Equally, training of trainers has proved most effective where trainers have become co-facilitators and horizontal relationships have led to an equitable practice of power within the process. This logic is now being followed through to the national and regional level through trainers' fora (see Rahman, this issue) and REFLECT networks (see Cottingham, this issue). The Manual Revision workshop sowed the seeds of a similar process at the international level. The workshop was based on reflecting upon our experience, critically analysing it and constructing new texts.

Figure 1. REFLECT action around the globe

Source: PLA Notes (1998), Issue 32, pp.31–35, IIED London
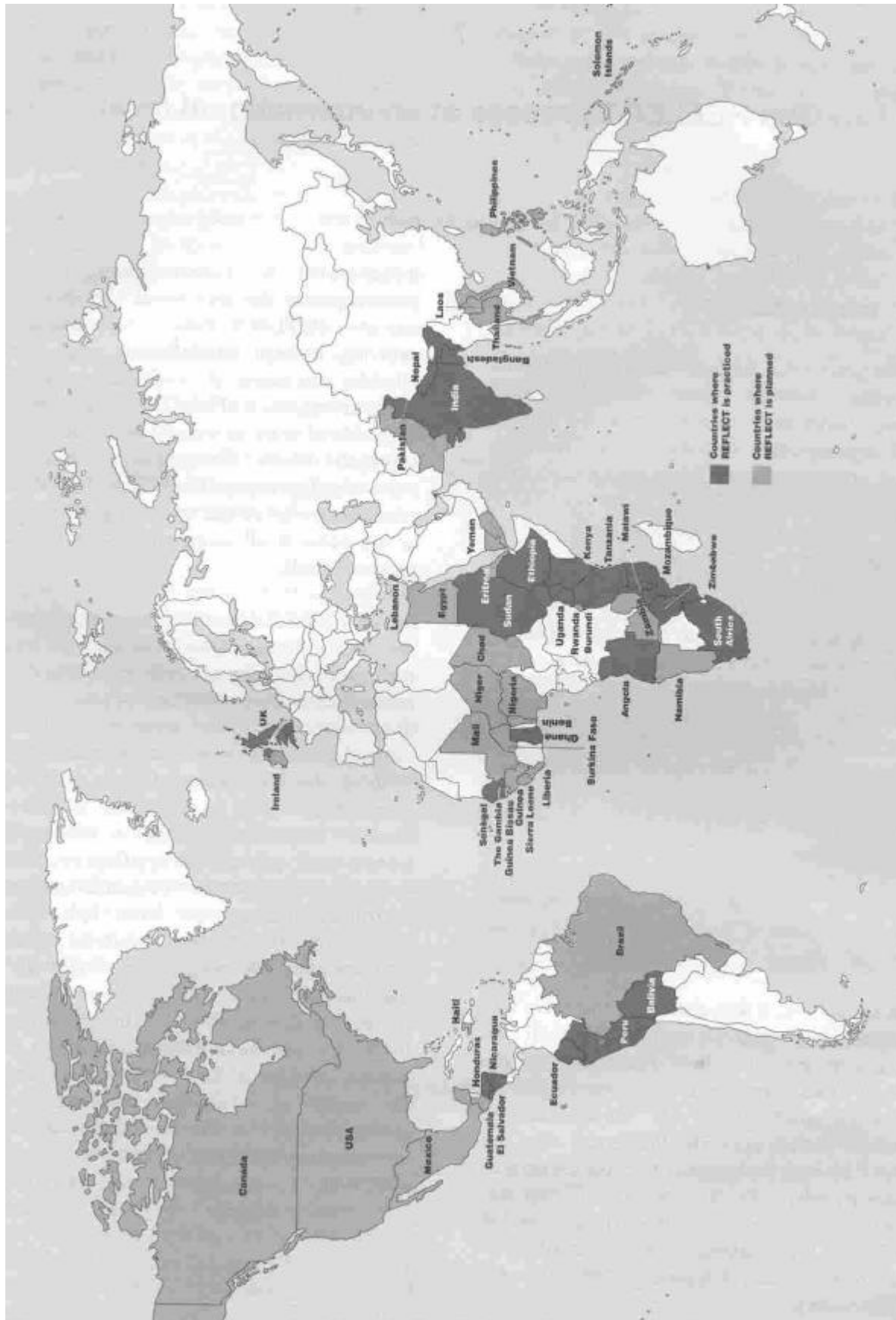
This multi-layered process is crucial for ensuring effective REFLECT practice at the local level. If there is an inequitable practice of power at the macro level, then this will be replicated (even amplified) with power distortions all the way through the system. However, in addition to this, it is important to consider the REFLECT process at each level as having a value in itself (not always oriented towards the micro level practice). At each level, the REFLECT process can lead to individual change and often to processes of institutional change, which are both an integral part of the learning process and of immense importance in themselves.

• The mother manual

The focus of the workshop was on the REFLECT Mother Manual. It was felt that this document was effective in disseminating REFLECT, but was also potentially a seed for the distortion (see Gautam, this issue). It had become, by accident, a 'sacred text' which was all too easily interpreted mechanically and used by trainers to assert their expertise (and power) over facilitators. Whilst it was designed with the intention of in-built flexibility (requiring organisations to create their own local manuals, adapted to their own local context), practice has shown that the best REFLECT programmes are those which have virtually ignored it (or at least transcended it) and the worst are those which have used it mechanically (even to the extent of copying the sample units).

The workshop began with a critique of the Manual, identifying strengths, weaknesses and gaps and with a view to rewriting it. However, it became clear that a more radical shift was required, abolishing the whole concept of a manual. Certain resource materials are needed at an international level, pulling together learning and providing an overview of REFLECT for new practitioners, but this should not be conceived of, or structured as, a manual. An equal focus needs to be given to a series of discussion papers on key issues which can draw on case study experience and explore critical themes from the perspective of diverse practitioners. Furthermore, a focus needs to be placed on much wider dissemination of local and national case studies, evaluations and learnings, in order to reveal the diversity of

practices and minimise the risk of standardisation.

Learnings

The workshop also explored some fundamental questions concerning how we conceive literacy, power, knowledge, development, gender and stratification. There was vigorous discussion on each of these, always drawing from our diverse field practice, with an emerging consensus that:

- the REFLECT Mother Manual fails to acknowledge sufficiently the stratification that is inherent within all communities and which is present in all REFLECT circles; we need to focus more on how REFLECT creates a democratic space in which these stratifications become the focus of reflection and analysis;
- gender needs to be fully integrated into the approach, rather than being a casual add-on. Unless we internalise gender analysis as an integral part of REFLECT, the gender outcomes will depend on the gender sensitivity of implementing organisations. Recognising that discussion of all issues can be enriched by a gender perspective and that social transformation cannot be complete without change in gender relations, we agreed the need for a substantial re-think of the gender dimension of REFLECT (see Gomez and Metcalf, this issue);
- we should avoid romanticising local knowledge and acknowledge the complex inter-weaving of 'official' and 'unofficial' knowledge which REFLECT participants draw on in analysing local issues;
- development favours a functional literacy approach which enables marginal people to be incorporated into established economic and social values and practices. By contrast, a process like REFLECT enables people to critically analyse those values and practices;
- if we are to talk coherently about empowerment, we need to have a much clearer sense of what we mean by 'power'. Power has often been conceived of as a quantity but this is not adequate, and we need to move towards an understanding of power as an attribute or a process; and,

- we need to re-conceive 'literacy' as encapsulating a wider range of communicative practices (including speaking, listening, gestures, language, discourse and even media), although it may be necessary to avoid the word literacy altogether, as it is inevitably interpreted in reductive ways (as the 3Rs - Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic) in most contexts.

Definition

Following this analysis, the participants came up with a new agreed definition for REFLECT:

"REFLECT is a structured participatory learning process which facilitates people's critical analysis of their environment, placing empowerment at the heart of sustainable and equitable development. Through the creation of democratic spaces and the construction and interpretation of locally generated texts, people build their own multi-dimensional analysis of local and global reality, challenging dominant development paradigms and re-defining power relationships (in both public and private spheres)."

- **Basic principles**

Each participant individually wrote their own list of the basic principles of REFLECT. These were compiled, reviewed, fed back and critically analysed, resulting in the following list of principles:

- Gender equity is integral to all aspects of REFLECT, as it is essential for social transformation;
- The REFLECT process explores and analyses the causes of power inequalities and oppression;
- Stratifications and power relationships affect everyone involved in the process; REFLECT should seek to provide the space, time and process by which these stratifications can become an integral part of the process of critical analysis;
- Conflict is a reality in people's lives and should be addressed constructively within the process, not suppressed or avoided;

- REFLECT is an evolving process, which must be continually recreated for each new context. Innovation is integral to the process;
- Individual transformation is as important as collective transformation;
- The equitable practice of power at all levels in the REFLECT process, is essential for determining empowerment outcomes; and,
- Institutional and individual change at all levels are an integral part of the process, making the networking of participants, facilitators, trainers, staff and organisations an essential part of REFLECT.

REFLECT characteristics

REFLECT draws upon and has evolved out of a diversity of theories and grassroots experiences including: the work of Freire, PRA, Gender, Popular Education, empowerment-based approaches to development, and the lived practice of over 100 organisations in 25 countries who have contributed to its continuing development.

REFLECT is a political process, creating a democratic space in which existing cultural norms and power relationships are challenged.

REFLECT challenges the view of communities as homogenous entities, recognising diversity, stratification and power imbalances (by gender, class, caste, race, age, language, physical ability etc.) which it is committed to transform.

REFLECT aims to provide the space, time and tools for an internal community process, which challenges the traditional externally-dominated model of development. It aims to enable people to see knowledge and social relations, not as 'givens' but as constructs, which can be re-constructed and changed, facilitating a process through which the oppressed can re-write their reality.

REFLECT is a learning process that starts from people's reflection on their socio-economic, cultural and political environment and aims to promote change in individuals, communities, organisations and societies. It is

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an intensive and extensive, horizontal, educational process.

REFLECT draws on a wide range of participatory tools and techniques, including a range of visualisation tools, theatre/role play, story-telling and diverse forms of cultural communication.

REFLECT is based on the generation of texts (in both visual and print forms) by participants themselves, through which they can identify their problems, needs, interests, capacities, expectations and priorities.

The REFLECT process recognises literacy (in the sense of reading and writing) as part of a wider set of communicative practices (including listening, speaking, language, discourse and media), all of which are crucial to either maintaining or challenging power relationships. REFLECT seeks to promote a multi-dimensional approach to literacy and these wider practices.

REFLECT adapts to the different conceptions of 'literacy' which exist in different contexts.

REFLECT is an approach to transformation, which seeks to impact not only communities but also the people and institutions involved in the process, making the networking of participants, facilitators, trainers, staff and organisations an essential part of the REFLECT process.

• Conclusion

Based on the analysis in the workshop, a detailed plan has been drawn up for the coming months to develop new resource material on REFLECT. As well as a new international resource book on REFLECT (to replace the Mother Manual), a strategy has been developed for dissemination of local and national case studies, to promote diversity. We are also planning a series of Discussion Papers which will be produced by different individuals drawing on REFLECT case studies and contributions from around the world. Each of these will be led by the following different individuals who welcome your contributions (see Box 2).

BOX 2
SUBJECT LIST AND LEAD CONTACT FOR REFLECT DISCUSSION PAPERS

Gender: Geni Gomez, (Nicaragua) Kate Metcalf (UK)
Numeracy: Nicola Foroni (Italy)   Kate Newman (UK),
Knowledge: Anne Jellema (UK)
Language: Sara Cottingham (UK), James Kanyesigye (Uganda)
Stratification and Power: Keshav Gautam (Nepal) and N. Madhusudan (India)
Literacy / Communication Practice s: David Archer (UK), Habibur Rahman (Bangladesh)
Development Paradigms: Anne Jellema
Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: Bimal Phnuyal (Nepal), James Kanyesigye (Uganda)
Training and Institutional Change: Bimal Phnuyal (Nepal), Nicola Foroni, Dahar
Large Scale Programmes: Salifu Mogre (Ghana), Marden Nochez (El Salvador)
Generations / Youth and Older People: Teresa Casteneda (Peru), Geni Gomez

See REFLECT Contacts (p124) for contact details

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