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How can REFLECT be used widely without diluting the participatory nature of the process?

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• Spread too thinly?

This is the question that REFLECT practitioners have been facing ever since the launch of REFLECT nearly two years ago. It is a key question for all advocates of participatory methods as they become increasingly popular within agencies of widely varying political interests and capacities. This article tells the story of the spread of REFLECT and some of the lessons being learnt as this takes place.

At the heart of the REFLECT process is a collective analysis of social and economic issues interwoven with literacy. The analysis is done at all levels; from participant to programme co-ordinator, and is unique in every case. The purpose is to control the development agenda from within, reducing the power of outsiders (especially funders), and thus fundamentally challenging the status quo. The successful experience of this process in the pilot projects was documented and shared in the REFLECT Mother Manual and an evaluation report.

There are now manuals in dozens of languages in 82 countries; key contacts in 50 countries; people who have taken part in trainings in 37 countries and REFLECT programmes in 25 countries (including the UK) implemented by 95 organisations. These organisations range from local NGOs to governments. The largest programmes (of about 300 circles each) are in Nepal, Bangladesh and El Salvador, where NGO networks have implemented the approach in their own organisations. But the majority of programmes comprise between 20 to 60 circles. Having distributed the manual widely, however, informal channels of information

suggest that there may be many REFLECT programmes, which are not in, touch with others.

These 'facts and figures' show a very rapid spread of REFLECT. During the first year after the launch, the activities of resource people involved with the original three pilot programmes were largely reactive, including:

- two-week regional training workshops where people from different countries requested training either through the UK or through ACTIONAID in other countries. The majority of these were in Africa. Training was also done in national workshops;
- launches of the manual by REFLECT practitioners to audiences of government and donor personnel, and staff of national and international NGOs. These usually took place in the capital and were in response to hearing about REFLECT. The Press also attended in many circumstances;
- documenting interesting adaptations in *Education Action;* a magazine read by a wide range of development practitioners (as well as academics, donors etc., see In Touch, this issue);
- translation into Spanish, Portuguese, French, Nepali, Bengali; and,
- practitioners' fora for sharing experience and through this process, forming the human connections on which networking can be based. The purpose of this networking is to learn from others and to strive for a common goal of innovating and improving the approach.

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• **REFLECT review**

After this first year of 'reactivity', an informal review of the first generation of REFLECT programmes (i.e. those following the basic approach without major misunderstandings) seemed to fall into two broad categories. Programmes in the first category exhibited diversity through designing their own specific REFLECT programme, and even more interestingly, being innovative with the methodology (e.g. participants deciding on the language to learn rather than following a facilitators' manual).

Programmes in the second category exhibited standardisation. For example, programmes where the units are written in advance by the implementing agency and represent the standard development agenda in the area. The programmes showing diversity seemed to be following the principles of participation and empowerment, whereas the standardised programmes seemed to be diluting the participatory process and empowering the implementing agency more than any other player.

Perhaps the danger with standardisation is distortion. Clearly it is difficult to define what constitutes distortion (as opposed to creative adaptation/evolution), but there are some cases where organisations use the name "REFLECT" with little commitment to the basic principles of the approach and no intent to truly empower participants. This is particularly worrying because REFLECT, like PRA, could be an effective methodology for manipulating people to think a certain way; internalising the social or religious messages of development agencies.

Programmes exhibiting diversity

These reflections aside, it seemed important to understand the factors that promoted diversity or standardisation. A review of programmes in 15 countries by the International Education Unit of ActionAid concluded that organisations which had taken up REFLECT in innovative or creative ways tended to be working with local people in a non-hierarchical way (or be membership organisations). They were aware of social differentiation (gender, age, caste) and the consequent power relations within the community where the REFLECT circles were running. They followed an ideology of social justice, shared by staff following the same ideology within the organisation, such as in:

• Decision-making;
• having at least one or two individual staff members with the confidence and capacity to implement the new approach for the first time;
• familiarisation with the use of participatory methods in other development work; and,
• being familiar with the language of the REFLECT materials.

In summary, they were able to analyse the new methodology, take a critical approach to their work, prioritise evaluation and learning, and work in a network of organisations sharing and documenting their experience of adapting REFLECT to their own context.

Programmes exhibiting standardisation

By contrast, in the standardised category, people tended:

• to work in hierarchical ways with communities;
• to impose their own agenda for the 'good' of the poor;
• to not be using participatory methods (although perhaps claiming to);
• to not be interested in networking and improving through shared evaluation;
• to not prioritise social injustice as a cause of poverty; often they were more oriented towards a 'technical fix' for poverty alleviation;
• to have hierarchical staff management relations;
• to have no gender perspective;
• to have less committed and less confident staff: absence of creative individuals to adapt the new approach;
• to be unable to read the language of REFLECT materials, and therefore, less free to make their own judgement of the usefulness of the approach for their own work; and,
• to be funding-led - perhaps implementing REFLECT because funding was available.

Initially, all the implementing organisations were NGOs, but their size and sources of funding varied. The factors which, somewhat surprisingly, did not seem to make any difference to the participatory nature of their REFLECT programmes were:

- whether they had received training from trainers with first-hand REFLECT experience;
- whether they had any expertise in literacy before starting REFLECT; and,
- whether they used participatory monitoring and evaluation in the normal course of their work.

• Reflections and Implications

Having identified some of the elements that influence the quality of REFLECT programmes, the International Education Unit discussed the implications of this for our work. Some factors were largely beyond our control. REFLECT was not and is not our "property". It is not and should not be "owned" by anyone. It is an approach which any organisation can choose to take up and adapt.

Thus, some organisations who start REFLECT programmes will have real political commitment and capacity, but others will not. We cannot prevent or limit the spread. However, as a focal point for practitioners internationally, we can channel our energies and limited resources in order to reinforce innovation and diversity.

Below are a five key learnings that we have drawn out. Each of these elements can be important for promoting innovation in REFLECT in the future:

1. Networking

Networking seems to be particularly important in promoting innovation. Where effective networks exist there is less dependency on "external experts" and a greater potential for horizontal learning between practitioners in different organisations.
Networks may engage in this learning and sharing using many different approaches, such as:

- Exchange visits
- Secondments
- Workshops
- E-mail dialogue / network
- Documentation / dissemination
- Newsletters
- Mutual evaluations

Such horizontal exchange strengthens practitioners capacity to find creative solutions for themselves rather than expecting answers to come from on high. Networking can have a positive impact at a local level (e.g. within a district), a national level, a regional level (e.g. South Asia, Central America, francophone Africa) and an international level. Clearly there should be links between the networks at different levels - ideally with the agenda being set from the bottom upwards.

If a network (at any level) decides to employ a co-ordinator, this person's role should be as a facilitator, not as a leader. They might help disseminate information, analyse trends, promote evaluation and research, plan technical support, explore funding sources and encourage innovation. However, they should not become (or be perceived as) the "new experts". This warning needs to be spelt out as power relationships inevitably develop and need to be a constant focus for reflection (as they should be in REFLECT circles).

2. Training of trainers

A key to promoting innovation was felt to be in the way in which international training programmes were run. There was a need to change both the context and method of training. The training courses we conducted in 1996/7 were two week long, training of trainers workshops which we ran on a sub-regional basis (e.g. in East Africa, Southern Africa, Central America). Whilst emphasising participatory approaches they still included a substantial amount of outside input of knowledge, including 'information' on Freire and literacy. Now the more appropriate context for training inputs seem to be shorter orientation courses (e.g. five day courses) organised and co-facilitated by interested organisations, usually at a national or district level. The aim is to introduce REFLECT experience to date and let participants decide if it is likely to contribute to their work. After an

initial orientation, committed organisations can go ahead with trainings of a longer duration for staff and facilitators. If they request an outside trainer, then this is as a resource person working with others, not managing the training alone. The method of training more and more, mirrors the reflect process in a literacy circle; relevant issues (e.g. the link between literacy and power) being analysed in collective discussions structured by graphics, with participants producing their own texts and interpretations.

3. Targeting partnerships

In order to promote innovation, it can help to pro-actively seek grassroots organisations with some of the characteristics outlined above. Such organisations can be offered orientation and training and may become reference points for other practitioners.

4. Avoiding dependency

At national and international levels it can be counter-productive to manage any funds for the implementation of REFLECT. If such funding pots are established then it is likely that they will attract organisations who are motivated by funding more than by commitment to the approach. Organisations interested in REFLECT should fund a REFLECT programme by shifting existing resources or taking the initiative to seek new resources for themselves.

5. Radical revision of the REFLECT Mother Manual

The REFLECT Mother Manual, whilst seeking to promote diversity, by its very existence may promote standardisation. This is now being radically revised, making it more of a broad resource, removing all those elements where it slips into becoming a step by step guide. Case studies will illustrate diversity and a wider range of participatory innovations will be incorporated. The revision will be done by people from ten countries and the new resource materials (not a "manual") will be published collaboratively by various organisations.

• Conclusion

The question posed in the title of this article is not answered. Looking at the current challenges in participatory learning, and the wider debates about how to scale up NGO work more generally, it is not logical for anyone to give a definitive answer to the question. However, the analysis of the last two years of REFLECT experience seems to show that a cascade approach (from the top downwards) is likely to be less successful than a REFLECT approach spread through a diversity of local initiatives and grassroots organisations who share their learning horizontally. This provides a strong basis for innovation and can help to ensure a continuing evolution of REFLECT.

At the moment, it seems that REFLECT will continue to spread, if anything on a larger scale. The challenge to practitioners is to constantly review their support strategies; not being afraid to openly admit mistakes, and not to always label them as learning points. In this way we hope to achieve 'scale up' and 'replication' through a critical mass at the grass roots which has its own sustainable momentum.

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