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REFLECT and empowerment: our field experiences

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• Introduction

After four years of implementing REFLECT in Uganda, it is important to highlight issues that have emerged in communities which have had contact with REFLECT. There is currently a study being conducted on the long term impact of REFLECT on the lives of the participants and the communities surrounding the circles. Without pre-empting that study, this paper aims to just touch upon some of the experiences we have had with REFLECT and the empowerment outcomes that have been observed.

First, I would like to include our understanding of REFLECT. We define it as a democratic educational process that seeks to empower communities to critically question the inequalities in society and the dominant development paradigms. In so doing, they are

in a better position to take appropriate actions to create a just and equitable society.

In this paper, I focus on the reality of our experiences rather than on the abstract. I emphasise issues of gender, political, cultural and economic inequalities, as identified by the players: facilitators, participants, communities, and implementing organisations.

In Bundibugyo, where REFLECT was piloted, as in many communities of developing countries, women have little say in decision making, neither in their homes nor in the communities where they live. They are often regarded as second class citizens who implement, without question, other people's decisions and ideas. This status quo has reduced women to tools of labour and status symbols for men: the more women a man marries, the more wealthy he is regarded by society; and the more children a woman produces the more she is liked by her husband and is envied by her co-wives (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Evaluation of REFLECT circles in Bundibugyo showed positive outcomes on gender roles and relations (photo: D. Archer)



Women constitute the majority of our REFLECT participants in the circles - over 85% of participants are women in Bundibugyo. Like non-literate men in society, these women have not been given the chance to speak or are not listened to whenever they speak. The non-literate are considered to be ignorant, stupid, superstitious and lacking an ability to plan. As a result, when community leaders are elected, the non-literate are not considered. In community meetings, their views are disregarded. Many government functionaries or NGO staff issue communiqués (written messages) which the non-literate are told to implement. This phenomenon of excluding women and non-literate people from the mainstream of decision-making is what we sought to address when we started REFLECT in Bundibugyo. Our aim was to empower the socially and economically disadvantaged community members so that they can fully participate in their development process and shape their destiny.

The REFLECT process of empowerment started by communities (including both the literate and non-literate) selecting facilitators who lived in their villages. This meant that they understood the socio-economic, political and cultural status of their people. These facilitators were trained in participatory approaches to community development and went back to their communities to do a baseline survey on community needs, problems and priorities. They then received further training during which they worked to adapt PRA tools to address the problems that they had identified. The facilitators were thus able to open REFLECT circles with a solid foundation. Most circles consisted mainly of the non-literate, with a majority of participants being women. When discussions were generated in the circles they were based firmly on the community's own agenda and were not an outside imposition. The resonance and immediacy of the themes addressed, created a sense of ownership of the whole programme. This in turn made them feel comfortable to critically analyse some sensitive issues which would have been difficult to address in any other forum.

Emerging issues

For quite some time, persistent hunger in Bundibugyo was a problem due to poor agriculture practices and the growing population in the district exerting increasing pressure on the land. When the REFLECT participants discussed this issue using Household Maps, Agriculture Calendars, Rainfall Calendars, Natural Resources Maps, and Hungry Seasons Calendars, they were able to critically analyse the causes and effects on society, families, and individuals. These PRA tools helped the facilitators to systematise learning. The process was empowering as, for the first time, the women had the chance to give their opinion and be listened to by other villagers.

The outcomes from the discussions were documented by the facilitators and the learner-participants in notebooks. The graphics that they constructed serve as a record that can be used as reference materials during community planning. The analysis by participants and facilitators had many immediate and longer term impacts. First on the priority list of many communities was the lack of education available to children. Most children were not going to school because it was a long way from their village and the terrain was difficult to traverse. It was discussed and agreed in the circles that they should establish nursery schools in their villages where their young children could go for the first 2 years until they were old enough to attend the schools that are far away. It was decided that the REFLECT facilitators would teach the children. In a period of one year after the start of REFLECT circles in Bundibugyo, 12 pre-schools were established, entirely on the initiative of the REFLECT circles and without any external support. This was an indication to us that the communities, for the first time, were seeing the value of education and taking responsibility for managing their schools - they were even paying their facilitators allowances to motivate them to teach the young children.

Kabanyaka, a REFLECT participant in Busoru parish, who had been selected on the school management committee, had this to say:

“ ...I am 43 years old and I missed the opportunity to go to school when I was young

and when I got married, nobody listened to me when I spoke. Look at me now, I am the chair person of this school! It is great to lead the movement for education! Our children will never suffer the way we suffered..."

Another issue that was discussed by the participants, and later taken to the entire community for consideration, was that of giving out food to relatives and friends after a good harvest to show gratitude for the rich harvest received. This often meant that households were left hungry, as food had to be provided to the many relatives that helped during harvesting. I participated in the discussion where they sought the origin of the practice and its implications today. The circle came to the conclusion that the practice was no longer sustainable, given the growing numbers of large households and small plots of arable land. They discovered that some families were not cultivating their farms and as a result should not expect to live on other people's harvest. Some participants, however, said that the practice was good because it was a sign of good will and hospitality. Bakecura, a 37 year old participant from Nyakakindu village had this to say on the same issue:

" It is the hand that gives, that receives... If you don't give, God will not bless you with any more rich harvest. Even our ancestors will not be happy with us..."

At the end of the discussion, they agreed that they should cut down on the amount of food they give out, rather than abandoning the practice altogether. Six months later when I went back to visit them they told me that they were happy that the issue had been discussed and agreed upon. As a result, they now had some food in their granaries and they had agreed to construct a shelter to store food for use during the season of scarcity.

The REFLECT facilitators also felt the impact of REFLECT on their lives. As well as facilitating the circles in their respective villages, they have taken the responsibility of acting as resource people in their communities where their advice is sought for different development issues. When there are conflicts in the villages, the facilitators are to attend the conflict resolution meetings with elders and other opinion leaders. This has had a positive

impact on the facilitators because, although most of them are young men and women, they are regarded with high esteem due to their role as change agents and animators for development in their society.

Recently, when Bundibugyo was hit by rebels from the Democratic Republic of Congo, the communities were internally displaced and started living in camps. The facilitators were selected to be on the committees for relief distribution and helped to educate the people on how to avoid cholera in the camps. Some REFLECT circles were reported to be continuing, spontaneously (and without any external support) in the refugee camps

• Conclusion

The REFLECT circles have acted as community fora where communities meet to discuss pertinent issues. In the process, linkages are made to other players so that collective effort is strengthened through a process of mutual benefit from individual capacities. This process is encouraged from the start. During the training of trainers and facilitators, group work and team building is emphasised, so that later this can be replicated in the circles and in the communities. Ownership is fundamental at every stage: if the circles are not "owned" by participants then they will be following someone else's agenda not their own - and this could not be an empowerment process. Empowerment has to be generated from within; it cannot ultimately be led from outside. This is why we have moved beyond the use of PRA and have adapted the REFLECT approach - which involves handing over power and control to the communities themselves.

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