Reflections on the Reflect Approach and its Multiple Evolutions

David Archer

INTRODUCTION

The Reflect approach was developed by the international NGO ActionAid between 1993 and 1995 through a series of pilot projects in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador, leading to the production of the *Reflect Mother Manual* in 1996. The approach originated from a fusion of the theoretical thinking of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the practical visualisation methodologies popularised through Participatory Rural Appraisal (see www.reflectionaction.org). The original intention was to use these methodologies for adult literacy programmes linked to 'conscientisation' but the approach rapidly evolved into one that was used in wider adult learning, participatory research and popular mobilisation processes. The approach has continued to diversify with various spin-offs, though efforts are now being made to reassert the common threads around the core reflection-action process.

One central element of Reflect was the intention to hand over to communities themselves the visualisation tools developed by participatory researchers, so that processes of research, analysis and change were almost entirely community-led, involving local people as facilitators, supporting participants to develop detailed surveys of their own communities – using maps, matrices, calendars, diagrams and other visual forms – and through this process to strengthen literacy and communication skills. Organisations implementing Reflect were encouraged not to impose their own agenda or priorities but rather to create space for communities to drive the process – though of course, in practice, the nature and intentions of the different organisations implementing Reflect inevitably had an impact.

Being rooted in an education process, Reflect is both intensive (usually involving at least three meetings a week) and extensive (spread over at least two years). Participants produce their own community research and

local development plans in the process of either learning to read and write for the first time or strengthening their communication and organising skills. The Reflect approach effectively involves facilitating participatory research without involving any external researcher. Instead people who are usually the objects of research become active subjects, using structured dialogue to undertake their own research, which systematises and extends their own knowledge, and which is linked to transformative action. Continuing reflection on the emerging actions sustains the research and learning process.

THE ORIGINS OF REFLECT

The origins of Reflect lie with Paulo Freire (*Cultural Action for Freedom* 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 1972) who first came to prominence for his work on adult literacy programmes in Recife, Brazil, where he developed a methodology that challenged dominant literacy practices that were based on textbooks written in capital cities. He started with the premise that adults who could not read and write had significant knowledge and experience and that their illiteracy was just one manifestation of the injustices that they had faced through their lives. He worked with researchers to determine critical local issues, injustices and contradictions and then embodied these in complex images that he called 'codifications'. Participants would then be guided to de-code these through a critical dialogue that helped them to see the contradictions. Each image would then be linked with a generative word – a word that had particular power and resonance for people – and this word would then be broken down into syllables from which new words would be generated by people themselves. In this way, people learnt to read the 'world' at the same time as learning to read the 'word'. It was an explicitly political process which Freire called conscientisation,

through which people would come to critically understand the social and political contradictions around them. He insisted that there was no such thing as a neutral education, that all education was political, representing a choice between a banking model that would domesticate learners through monologues, reproducing inequalities and injustices, or a liberating model based on real dialogue that would enable people to contribute to transforming the injustices in their lives and in wider society.

Inspired by Paulo Freire, over five years in the late 1980s I conducted participatory research into the impact of his work across eight Latin American countries (published as *Literacy and Power: The Latin American Battleground* [1990], co-authored with Patrick Costello). We found that every literacy programme claimed to be inspired be Freire, including the revolutionary literacy crusade in Nicaragua, guerrilla-run campaigns in El Salvador and Guatemala, radical NGO programmes in Chile and Bolivia – but also the national literacy programmes run by extremely repressive governments in Guatemala and Colombia. Freire's ideas were too easily co-opted. Moreover, those who had progressive political intentions often used the programmes to seek to indoctrinate rather than promote critical dialogue. And even those who wanted to promote serious dialogue often failed in practice in rural communities or marginal urban areas because community facilitators struggled to structure a meaningful dialogue based just on a picture and a word. Despite attempts by some implementing agencies to attribute quasi-magical powers to pictures (by calling them codifications) and words (by calling them generative words) the literacy processes we observed ended up being horrifyingly traditional with only tokenistic efforts to promote discussion (often done to satisfy us as observers). Whilst convinced by Freire's ideas and theories I lost confidence in the methods being used.

I joined the international NGO ActionAid in 1990 (at that time with its headquarters in

the UK) as a Latin American Desk Officer with an informal cross-cutting role as an education adviser. Here I came across the work of Robert Chambers and we started to use the visualisation methods that were spreading, initially under the title of Rapid Rural Appraisal and later Participatory Rural Appraisal. I was aware of the common premise with Freire – that people had an immense amount of knowledge and experience and that development practitioners coming from outside would do more harm than good unless they started with dignifying and valuing people living in poverty. I joined various workshops and seminars, learning about the very diverse uses of these methods and was excited by the constant innovation of practitioners developing new tools. But something always bothered me. This was still about development practitioners extracting knowledge from communities in order to design better interventions – rather than being a process managed principally by communities themselves. And despite talking to a wide range of practitioners I never came across anyone who was applying these methods for an adult literacy programme. When Robert Chambers said he had not come across anyone doing this I was disappointed. A few weeks later I woke in the middle of the night and wrote frantically for about three hours, figuring out what could be done to apply the visualisation methods to design a literacy programme inspired by Freire's philosophy. It seemed to me that this could help to overcome the fundamental flaws I had seen in the way Freire's own methods had been applied in practice.

After writing up my ideas more formally into a concept note on 'PRA, Literacy and Empowerment', I circulated them to ActionAid programmes and asked if anyone wanted to experiment, joining a participatory action-research programme to pilot these ideas. Seven countries responded, and I chose three that were in different continents working in very different environments. We secured some funding from the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), which

later became the Department for International Development (DFID), and I travelled in 1993 firstly to Bundibugyo, in the remote west of Uganda, behind the Rwenzori mountains and on the border of DRC, where three of the four main local languages had never been written. Secondly, I went to the south of Bangladesh to a conservative Islamic area on Bhola Island. And thirdly I went to El Salvador, just after the peace accords where former guerrillas had formed a local NGO and were keen to bring about radical change through peaceful means. The precise shape of what was later named the Reflect approach was fleshed out in these three very diverse locations and through follow-up trips over two years to draw out what was working and what needed revising. In a meeting in November 1994 in Bangladesh where the three pilots exchanged experiences and shared their practice (including with interested people from other NGOs/grassroots organisations in several other countries), the approach was slightly clumsily named 'Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques' (REFLECT as an acronym – which, thankfully, rapidly became a name rather than an acronym, being simplified to *Reflect* or the Reflect approach). An evaluation of these action-research pilots was published by ODA (which later became DFID, now FCDO) in 1996 and the core approach was systematised in the same year into the *Reflect Mother Manual* (the idea being that the 'mother' manual was never for direct use but would give birth to the generation of many offspring – in the form of local, context-specific manuals).

KEY ELEMENTS OF REFLECT AS A PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND ACTION PROCESS

There were of course, from the start, many variations in Reflect practice, as there should be, based on the local context – and

variations also influenced by the objectives and interests of the diverse organisations using the approach. However, in the early stages some of the crucial common elements of the Reflect approach were identified as:

- Local communities would nominate a facilitator from their own community based on criteria that were developed jointly by the implementing organisation and the community themselves. The facilitators needed to be respected themselves and respectful of all participants. Being local was crucial as this was about initiating an internal community process of research, learning and action, not one dominated or overly-mediated by outsiders (though we later analysed in more detail the extent to which practice depended on the nature, politics and objectives of the implementing agency).
- Training of facilitators was crucial – and needed to follow the same methods and philosophy as the Reflect process itself – so that trainee facilitators were using the same participatory tools to systematise their own knowledge and reflect on their own lives and issues, going through an empowerment process themselves. Most initial training would be for a few weeks but with a great primacy given to ongoing exchange and support between facilitators in neighbouring communities. The facilitators needed to be part of an ongoing research and action process themselves – which in some cases they would self-organise and in others depended on the implementing organisation.
- The groups were called 'Reflect circles' and physical layout was important (not rows of desks but a democratic circle with the facilitator appearing as just another participant in the circle). There was a lot of discussion about how to ensure that circles were truly democratic spaces where everyone's voice was given attention – and how to involve those who were more passive initially.
- The initial year of most Reflect programmes would involve developing 20 or 30 visualisations (usually maps, calendars, matrices, diagrams, rivers, trees, etc.) – pulling together existing knowledge and experience on a wide range of issues, stimulating discussion and research, and adding up to a detailed survey and local development plan on everything from health to housing, agriculture to land tenancy, social structures to informal power relations, household gender dynamics to local history.
- There were at least two stages of dialogue which happened organically on each issue – a formative one as participants collectively constructed a large-scale visualisation and then a summative one as participants reflected on the completed product that they had made together. There were important insights into how many people participated more comfortably in the dialogue processes because eye contact was on the task at hand, not on each other – and people were actively moving around not seated in a manner that would allow formal hierarchies to assert themselves. There was increasing attention to exploring power issues in all the discussions on every topic.
- Once the visualisations had been constructed on a large scale (often starting on the ground with sticks, stones, leaves, beans – any locally available material) they would be labelled with pictures (drawn by participants) and then translated to large sheets of flipchart paper). This transition from 3D to 2D is itself a fundamental step in literacy and the manual skills needed to draw with a pen help build skills needed for writing.
- The written word would only be introduced once a visualisation was complete – and whilst initially just one or two words might be introduced, as literacy skills developed each visualisation could introduce a whole written vocabulary on a theme.
- After each topic, participants would identify actions that they could take to address the issues discussed – and in many cases these actions might include writing letters to people in authority – giving practical use to the literacy skills being developed. Letters would be collectively written with the facilitator as a scribe writing on flipcharts, so everyone could read what they had collectively written. Effectively participants were learning literacy in the process of writing their own, meaningful texts. Inevitably some participants learnt to write more quickly than others – though there was a lot of peer support and solidarity within groups to help everyone reach a basic level.
- After taking any action participants would reflect on what they learnt from the action – providing another stage of dialogue. Sometimes neighbouring Reflect circles would meet to discuss their analysis of an issue and identify large-scale

actions. Data were sometimes compiled across communities to build a larger evidence base for change – or to compare and contrast the different priorities and contexts that emerged. The core materials (both the graphics and associated texts) that were developed would always remain in the communities themselves – often in rolls of flipchart paper stored safely, that would be pulled out when needed. When we wanted to collect examples to share internationally, circles usually produced copies for us, keeping their originals as their own property.

The Reflect approach evolved very rapidly. Even as the pilots were underway in the three countries, people from other countries started to pick up on the approach. By the time we launched the *Reflect Mother Manual* in 1996 there were programmes in 20 countries and this then mushroomed to at least 70 countries by 2000 – and beyond that it was impossible to keep track. By having its own name or brand, Reflect was not restricted to ActionAid and was quickly picked up by many other international NGOs, who used it with their partners. Some regional and national governments started to adapt the approach as did social movements, community-based organisations and people's organisations. In the space of 10 years organisations using the Reflect approach won five International Literacy prizes from UNESCO, and Reflect evolved far beyond its initial focus on literacy.

EARLY VARIATIONS IN THE APPROACH

Even in the early stages the Reflect approach was evolving beyond its initial focus on literacy. It was moulded by the imperatives of different actors and implementing organisations taking on the approach in different contexts, but always retained the link between participatory research and action. In Burundi, the focus was on peace and reconciliation between Hutus and Tutsis working in mixed circles with one Hutu and one Tutsi facilitator. In Nepal, the emphasis was on building social movements – notably for Dalits, the landless and bonded labourers. In Orissa, the approach was linked to micro-level planning, disaster-preparedness and recovery after sustained droughts. In Canada, Reflect was adapted for immigrants wanting to learn English as a second language. In Peru, feminist groups used the Reflect approach to document and mobilise on domestic violence. In post-Apartheid South Africa, there was a focus on strengthening local democracy. In the Basque country, the focus was on deepening cultural identity. In Mali, Reflect was used specifically to strengthen democratic practices in school management committees. In Bangladesh, Reflect was used to help to organise sex workers. Indeed, in each of the countries above the approach was used in multiple ways by multiple organisations (which might range from community-based organisations to INGOs, from social movements to government agencies).

Whereas the pilot programmes had all included a clear dimension of strengthening basic literacy skills, this dimension evolved to address different 'literacies' and different communication skills, sometimes including learning a second or dominant language, sometimes accessing new media or technologies, sometimes purely about asserting one's voice in public spaces or other times seeing organising as a key means of building a collective voice. In 2000 a second attempt (after the *Reflect Mother Manual*) to compile international resource materials led to the production of a loose-leaf resource pack titled *Communication and Power*, produced by the International Reflect Circle.

POWER ANALYSIS AT ALL LEVELS

Despite the diversity of practices, Reflect practitioners remained connected through the creation of national networks, the

development of regional platforms (notably Pamoja in Africa) and the formation of the International Reflect Circle (CIRAC). Some of the national networks sprung up spontaneously by different organisations using Reflect within a country coming together to create forums to share experiences. The regional and international spaces were supported with some funds from ActionAid and a couple of foundations (most notably the Banyan Tree Foundation). These networks followed the same logic as that which drove the training of facilitators, namely that whenever practitioners met the same methods and approach should be used to define the space as those that were used in community-based Reflect circles. We should start from the knowledge and experience of people in the room, work to create a democratic space, address shared issues and be oriented to link reflection with action. Perhaps most acutely we needed to be aware of power dynamics within the group and to support critical reflection on our own power.

This sensitivity to power at all levels became a particularly defining quality of Reflect meetings. In national networks this often translated to ensuring that international NGOs were not dominant over community-based organisations or social movements. In international spaces this was manifested in difficult discussions about language and power – with meetings having to work with concurrent translation in at least four languages (English, French, Spanish and Portuguese) with Arabic, Hindi and Bengali sometimes added. There were no formal interpreting cubicles (which would be impossible for a participatory space) but this was done informally with participants having the right to bring their own interpreter if needed, with lots of whispering in ears and everyone having the right to speak in their language of choice. Agendas would be developed collectively with representative planning groups often going through their own intensive reflection-action process – sometimes meeting for several days before a meeting and

usually for several hours each evening during a workshop. It was extremely intensive for those involved in facilitation, as they were effectively engaged in two concurrent and interconnected processes with continual reflection on the power dynamics involved in both.

This effort to ensure coherence at all levels of training and networking made the critical analysis of power at every step of a Reflect process ever more important. There was growing attention to the reality that every community is heterogeneous. Even if all participants came from the same community, all shared limited literacy, were even all Dalits or all women, there would still be differences in the power of some over others – even if connected to relatively small nuances of relative poverty/wealth or their social status, their position in relation to local religion, their family background, the shade of their skin or other physical attributes, their employment/livelihood or lack of it. Earlier practice seemed to be premised on the relative ease with which collective actions could be defined on common priorities – but now there was more awareness of the need to actively construct a democratic space on a continual basis and not to assume that all actions would reflect fully shared interests. This of course is an insight that was also discovered by later generations of PRA, especially those who took on a feminist and intersectional analysis.

CHALLENGING INSTITUTIONAL POWER

One of the consequences of more reflection on power was a rise in the number of cases where community-based Reflect circles challenged the organisations implementing Reflect programmes. We had first seen this in the original pilot in El Salvador where Reflect was one programme among various others run by COMUS (the United Communities of Usulutan). After a year of running Reflect

circles some of the communities started to protest that other projects run by COMUS were not addressing the priorities that came from their own participatory research and analysis. COMUS was run by former guerrillas who were accustomed to quite vertical forms of organising and command, believing that they knew what was best for local people – and it took some time to adjust to working in a more horizontal, responsive and democratic way. A similar challenge emerged in many other contexts where NGOs running Reflect programmes found there was a contradiction between having organised annual plans and budgets, whilst remaining responsive to the issues coming up from Reflect circles. This led to discussions about the importance of 'block-budgeting' so that there was flexibility to respond to new issues, supporting the actions coming from the research and analysis of the Reflect circles – that could never be anticipated in advance. This of course ran into further problems in the context of donor-funded projects where priorities and activities would often need to be defined well in advance, limiting the scope for responding to a participatory research and action process.

Within ActionAid this tension between institutional systems and community priorities coming from Reflect processes contributed to the development of a radical new Accountability Learning and Planning System (ALPS, ActionAid 1998). This shifted the focus from planning to reporting – and from budgeting to accounting. It challenged the norms of where staff and partners at local, national and international level were spending huge amounts of time planning and budgeting (constructing fantasies on paper), with much less attention paid to reporting (reflecting or learning based on real practice). A driving force behind ALPS was the desire to shift our focus away from upwards accountability to donors towards downward accountability to people with whom we worked. This shift was reasonably realistic for an organisation like ActionAid that had

a long-term funding base from public supporters. However, it was much more difficult for organisations largely dependent on donor funding, who had to constantly construct projects that would define, often in detail three years ahead, the specific inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact. Over time the gulf between the fundraising environment (and expectations of donors) and the responsiveness needed for good participatory research and action has become ever more acute.

The reflections on power within Reflect practice in the late 1990s and early 2000s was one ingredient, among many others, that led ActionAid to look at its own institutional practice of power more deeply. Internal power dynamics became a central focus of the Participatory Methodologies Forum, hosted in Bangladesh in 2001, from which the *Transforming Power* report emerged. Beyond aligning our planning and reporting systems in line with downward accountability there was a need to shift power to the frontline, following a logic of subsidiarity – that decisions should be made as close to the ground as possible. Participatory research and action would be undermined if institutional decision-making remained detached. This (amongst many other factors) informed ActionAid's internationalisation process where governance and management were decentralised, a new global headquarters was opened in South Africa, national boards and assemblies were formed in most countries and an annual general assembly was established as the supreme decision-making body (with a clear majority control with countries from the South). The aim was to break the links between money and power and change the post-colonial North–South dynamic which plagues most of the development industry. Of course, such wider shifts in power are continuing work in progress, but the need to address this was strongly informed by our Reflect practice which sought to shift power in communities. There was a recognition that power could not be shifted locally in the absence of

wider shifts in power. Moreover, you cannot credibly encourage others to talk about and shift power if you are not willing to critically reflect on your own practice of power and work towards transforming it. In more recent times, as ActionAid takes on a more explicit feminist approach, this connection between the personal and political has become ever more important.

The reflections on power within the International Reflect Circle created some additional challenges for me personally. I became aware how my own voice and my own perspectives were given disproportionate weight by others involved in Reflect practice. As the person who was attributed with developing Reflect I was regarded in some contexts as a guru of sorts, and my word was treated as inherently right or truthful. I came to find this increasingly problematic and limiting, so in 2005 I took an active step back from day-to-day engagement with the Reflect networks, seeking to create more space for others.

Sadly, we are now living in more difficult times for pursing this critical analysis of power. Even whilst it may be more important than ever, the external environment makes it more difficult. The audit culture of neoliberalism and the increasing rhetoric around fiduciary and legal accountabilities have led to a new assertiveness of donor interests at the cost of good community-based participatory practice. The shrinking political and social space in many countries exacerbates these challenges.

THE CONTINUING EVOLUTION OF REFLECT

Over time the adaptation of the Reflect approach to different contexts led to more fundamental evolutions with people working across similar contexts coming together to better define how the approach could be used for specific research or action purposes. For example, those working in communities vulnerable to disasters developed Participatory Vulnerability Analysis, which took the principles and approaches of Reflect and systematised them with the help of a leading Reflect practitioner, Maria Nandago from Uganda. This participatory research process became a foundation for wider work in disaster risk reduction and community-based disaster preparedness. In a separate development, those working on budget analysis saw huge opportunities to draw from Reflect processes to build people's confidence in numeracy – and that evolved into the development of Economic Literacy and Budget Analysis Groups (MD Denmark 2010) – which focused on participatory research and action around government budgets, promoting transparency and holding institutions to account. There were also separate developments with participatory approaches to work on gender and HIV led by Alice Welbourne who developed Stepping Stones (which was developed around the same time as Reflect). Various efforts were made to merge these approaches – first as 'Reflect Plus', then as 'Stepping Stones and Reflect', then as STAR (Societies Tackling Aids through Rights). Each of these innovations linked participatory research and action, promoting a wider range of innovative practices but always with some points of contact back into Reflect.

There were also country-specific innovations with the Reflect approach. One such case was in Myanmar where Shihab Uddin, a Reflect trainer from Bangladesh, started to run Reflect training workshops in the late 1990s, eventually building up a whole programme for ActionAid and becoming its first Country Director in Myanmar. The programme adapted to the unique political context of Myanmar as it went through a transition from military dictatorship towards democracy. There was space for a progressive redefinition of the relationship between people and the state – with people increasingly less fearful of participation and the government showing new openness to

people-centred planning at all levels. Shihab developed a fellowship model, building a frontline cadre of young community facilitators who were given intensive training and support for facilitating a community empowerment and planning process over an eight-month to one-year period, using a range of key participatory tools including resource maps, seasonal calendars, mobility maps, power-diagrams, problem trees and pairwise ranking. This culminated in the production of a village book and an action plan for addressing priority issues. Village books became a form of comprehensive baseline providing a people's led analysis and agenda as well as a point against which to measure change. Once a village book had been produced there was a systematic approach to ensuring these were shared directly, in face-to-face meetings, with government officials and politicians – and some even ended up on social media with their own Facebook page. This created a new dynamic in the context of Myanmar, helping people to overcome their fear of speaking out and helping politicians and officials understand that people can articulate their own development priorities. It created a model of bottom-up research and planning that showed officials and politicians a different path to the dominant top-down approaches. The demand for training from ActionAid in different states, from powerful politicians and senior officials as well as many major donors, created incredible opportunities for scale-up.

There were of course challenges in Myanmar. Village books sometimes failed to articulate the distinct needs of different groups within a community (too often assuming communities were homogeneous). The emphasis on each village meant problems and solutions tended to be overly localised and there was limited space for second-level analysis of wider issues across villages, at district or national level. As demands for scale-up grew there was too much focus on the 'product' (the book) rather than the participatory research and empowerment process that lay behind the book. This was

especially the case where government officials wanted an accelerated version that could be completed in a matter of days. This became a way for government officials to claim they had engaged in people-centred planning without actually supporting a true process of participatory research, empowerment and critical reflection – a phenomenon which will be familiar to many other participatory practitioners. The challenges of maintaining the quality of facilitation as the programmes scaled up were also considerable. However, there were many elements of the methodological innovation in Myanmar that excited Reflect practitioners in other countries, perhaps most notably the very systematic building of a cadre of young (largely female) fellows whose own learning process was intensively supported. Pulling together the participatory research from each community into a more formal 'book' to frame dialogue with government officials and other development actors was also something that others picked up and adapted.

RE-SYSTEMATISING REFLECT UNDER REFLECTION-ACTION

While the diversification of approaches linked to Reflect was valuable in some regards, it also created challenges. We noticed these first within ActionAid's own practice around 2010 where different teams became closely associated with different methodologies. The emergencies team worked with Participatory Vulnerability Analysis, the governance team worked with Economic Literacy and Budget Analysis, the HIV team worked with Societies Tackling AIDSs through Rights, the land rights and agriculture team developed a Territorial Development approach and the women's rights team supported a Gender and Rights-based Approach. All of these drew on the same philosophy and the same basket of participatory methods but practitioners of each saw themselves as doing

something fundamentally different. We became aware that in some communities where ActionAid was working there would be different community groups formed, each working with one of these branded approaches, doing their own participatory research and action. The consequence was that we risked fragmenting people's analysis and undermining a more unified and collective process. As we developed a wider reference book on ActionAid's Human Rights Based Approach (called *People's Action in Practice*, which was published in 2011, see references at the end of the chapter) we decided that the time had come for a radical de-branding and for us to highlight the common threads across all the approaches, bringing different practitioners back together to learn from each other. Although the common origin of these methods was in the Reflect approach we did not want to name this 'Reflect' as that was just another brand. We chose instead to unify the trainers and practitioners by using the descriptive term 'reflection-action processes'.

There were risks in this harmonisation. We did not want to lose the specificities and insights of each of the previous approaches or end up creating something too homogeneous that wouldn't fit with the diversity of reality. We also wanted to build the common threads in a participatory way, with practitioners from across the ActionAid federation. So, we created a steering group, facilitated by an ActionAid colleague, Emma Pearce, with representatives from the ActionAid International Secretariat and ActionAid countries, all experienced practitioners of participatory methodologies. We conducted a detailed practitioner survey which was completed by 80 people and we created an online forum (the Reflection-Action Basecamp), linking over 200 practitioners of participatory methods in ActionAid and partners. We then ran an international workshop in Johannesburg in October 2012 from which a strong commitment emerged to support a marriage of the methodologies, progressively

de-branding our work, referring instead to Reflection-Action processes, reducing silos and duplication of efforts. This then led to the agreement of key concepts and the development of curriculum materials and capacity development plans. Reflection-Action was thus born (or re-born), defined as ActionAid's integrated participatory methodology, drawing on the best from the various participatory methodologies previously used in the organisation and elsewhere, bringing practitioners together under a single banner. An internal Reflection-Action Concept Note, finalised in late 2012, observed:

> Inside a Reflection-Action process, we are able to facilitate comprehensive analysis by people living in poverty, analysing power relations, rights, women's rights in particular, vulnerabilities, different actors and institutions, their own communication skills and risks. The process always starts from people's analysis of their own context and builds in a cumulative way, looking at the connections between local, national and international levels. Reflection-Action is the bedrock for building people's agency, starting with their own conscientisation.

This same concept note laid out how the Reflection-Action process:

- is based on a collective reflection-action cycle;
- draws on a basket of participatory tools and methods;
- relies on skilled local facilitators who require ongoing support;
- continues to adapt to different contexts and to evolve;
- is intensive and extensive;
- involves a comprehensive power and rights analysis;
- supports learning and the building of communication skills;
- has an explicit change agenda;
- involves empowerment, solidarity and campaigning;
- is applied across all our work – not just at community level;
- involves ongoing participatory monitoring and evaluation;
- is based on transparency, accountability and sustainability.

Core methodological elements of Reflection-Action have been identified to align with the principles of ActionAid's Human Rights Based Approach. The starting point is forming circles with the most excluded people in the community (with separate spaces for women, children or young people, as appropriate), investing in creating and sustaining a democratic space. The focus is always on participatory research, respecting and building on people's existing knowledge, supporting community-owned conscientisation processes and helping people to strengthen their capacity to communicate (in whatever form is most relevant/desired). We promote comprehensive power and rights analysis and particularly a gendered analysis of power. Documentation from the community level processes is increasingly the backbone of our evidence-based policy and rooted campaigning work.

Of course, de-branding is never easy and, in some respects, inevitably Reflection-Action itself becomes a brand. However, by being named after the core process, it says what it is and resonates back with Freire's work. Freire observed how reflection alone can become indulgent and purposeless – and how action isolated from reflection becomes pure activism that rapidly loses direction (Freire, 1972). The essence of Reflection-Action is thus a reassertion of the never-ending cycle of reflection and action, with each action leading to new reflection that guides new action. Seen through the lens of participatory research this means ensuring that research is oriented towards catalysing change and that the actions and processes of change become a focus of research themselves. We learn by doing – and by learning about doing.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to draw any simple conclusions from Reflect processes over the years as the approach has continued to evolve and has adapted to so many different contexts. Each Reflect practitioner would have their own reflections to share and one of the challenges is to create a space where everyone can do so in an open and interactive way. One way in which this is being done is through the website www.reflectionaction.org, which is presently being relaunched as a practitioner-focused and practitioner-led space (evolving from the old www.networkedtoolbox.org).

One of my own key areas of learning and reflection continues to be around power. Participatory processes must continually seek to challenge power and practitioners must continually reflect on their individual and institutional power. Often, especially when working with a human rights-based approach, we focus too much on the visible power of the state as duty-bearer. This is important, but we must increase the attention we give to hidden power (e.g. of corporates/international financial institutions) and invisible power (such as patriarchy/traditional beliefs). Asking ourselves about all of these forms of power consistently is key and we need to use multiple lenses to understand people's experiences of power – taking an intersectional approach so that we are aware of gender, class, caste, income, location, ability, sexuality – and how these impact on people's relationship with power. Importantly we need to recognise that power never gives up without a struggle. When we are really challenging power there is likely to be a backlash – and indeed this could be used as an indicator of impact in our Monitoring and Evaluation frameworks. Participatory research processes need to be actively oriented towards shifting power and achieving change – but change never follows a simple linear path; it is complex, often messy and it takes time. Understanding how change happens and how power shifts should be a central concern of any participatory process. We still have much to learn from Paulo Freire's analysis of the complex dynamics between the oppressors and the oppressed.

Linked to reflections on power are reflections on organising. Change will rarely come from one-off individual actions. Sustained collective action is key and this means working with or linking to people's organisations and social movements – particularly organisations and movements that represent and engage with their constituencies and which can make connections beyond the local level to national and even international change. Participatory methods can play a key role in organisation building and organisation-strengthening.

It is increasingly evident that traditional development projects running on short-term time frames are ill-suited to grappling with the complex nature of change processes. Indeed, the dominant donor discourse (not least 'payment by results' and donor-based definitions of 'value for money') is increasingly in contradiction with genuine participatory processes that wish to contribute to transformational change. Too often development projects are framed simplistically and a-historically, seeking narrowly framed and predetermined measurable outcomes, paying little attention to processes and undervaluing shifts in power (because they can be difficult to measure). The institutional structures and internal systems of most organisations often equally contradict the best intentions of those committed to participatory and transformative processes. And too often the personal practice of power by committed participatory practitioners falls short of being fully coherent with the change we want to see. All of us who are committed to participatory research need to engage in a continuous process of reflection and action, working to transform our personal, political and professional practice of power.

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