

Evaluating *Reflect* for literacy

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In November 2007 participants from 20 countries gathered in Cape Town for a workshop on evaluating the effectiveness of the *Reflect* approach for adult literacy. The workshop was an opportunity to share different evaluations of *Reflect* that have been conducted in recent years, with a view to developing a new evaluation framework that can be used by *Reflect* practitioners in future.

Developments in adult literacy

In 2009 the global adult education constituency will meet in Brazil for the 6th CONFITEA meeting (a UN-convened meeting on adult education with ministers and CSOs that has happened every 12 years since 1949). As always, adult literacy will be a major part of the agenda, especially since very little progress has been made on reducing adult illiteracy in the past decade. The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008 recognises that adult literacy is the most neglected of the six EFA goals. To reverse the decades of under-investment there is an urgent need for new evidence about the effectiveness of literacy programmes and the links between literacy and other development goals.

One of the most exciting innovations in adult literacy that has spread rapidly since the last CONFITEA conference in Hamburg in 1997, has been the *Reflect* approach, which won UN Literacy Prizes in 2003, 2005 and 2007 and which is now used by over 500 organisations in 70 countries. *Reflect* has been successful in linking the literacy acquisition process with individual and community empowerment, strengthening the capacity of millions to secure their basic rights. Though initially focussed on linking literacy and empowerment, *Reflect* has evolved dramatically over the years. There are many contexts where *Reflect* practitioners do not seek to address literacy specifically, but focus instead on empowerment, on governance or on broader development goals. Even if literacy is not a conscious part of the agenda, these programmes still use and impact on literacy in many ways.

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Evaluating *Reflect*

However, there is a desperate shortage of effective evaluation evidence. *Reflect* programmes operate in diverse contexts and approaches to documentation and evaluation have been equally diverse, making it difficult to consolidate evidence and learning. Evaluations of *Reflect* in the past have been primarily *summative* (ie proving the value-added of the approach as compared to other approaches). They have also been highly contextualised, with organisations in different countries conducting specific evaluations to

suit their needs. In 2001 Abby Riddell conducted a review of 13 *Reflect* evaluations. Her recommendations included the need to better define outcomes (given the conflict between literacy and empowerment objectives) and to foster a culture of evaluation. Though her findings were widely shared, at this point in time ActionAid was striving to hand ownership of *Reflect* over to regional networks to ensure contextualised, bottom-up practice. As a result, evaluations continued to be summative (in order to promote *Reflect* to different governments and donors).

Today, the regional *Reflect* networks have grown in strength and the approach has been successfully contextualised in numerous locations. True to its evolutionary nature, advocates of *Reflect* are keen to continue to expand it to take into account new understandings of literacy which better respond to the real needs and priorities of participants. However, many practitioners have also realised that a new evaluation mechanism is needed to ensure that programme objectives and participants' own learning expectations are being met, while allowing some flexibility for these to evolve or even change throughout the course of the programme. This type of evaluation is *formative* as well as summative (in that it informs better practice as well as demonstrating the extent of its effectiveness.)

Crucially, this type of evaluation is also a pedagogy in its own right since literacy and other skills are enhanced by the very process of participating in the evaluation process. Involvement in such an evaluation will therefore enhance the ownership of programmes by participants, promoting sustainability and transparency. It will enable individuals to reflect on their own learning experience whilst the circle as a whole reflects on the collective learning experience. The expectations of participants are therefore just as significant as the programme objectives of implementers and the broader social goals of CSOs, governments and donors, all of which should be taken into account.

An evaluation framework

To initiate a process of developing a new evaluation framework, ActionAid developed a draft framework that was piloted in South Africa in May 2007. In October 2007 a workshop was held to sensitize UK-based research students to the initiative and critique the framework. This was followed by a one-week workshop in Cape Town in November 2007, convening *Reflect* practitioners from 20 countries.

A key starting point for the Cape Town workshop was to build an

understanding of the terms 'literacy' and 'literate environment'. Even when no official definition of literacy and the literate environment is used, we subscribe to certain understandings and assumptions. These assumptions implicitly or explicitly inform our objectives, the methodologies we decide to use and the type of evaluation process we embark upon. Coming to a broad consensus on a working definition is therefore important to ensure consistency between the understandings of different actors.

An understanding of literacy

Starting with a compilation of different understandings of literacy by all workshop participants and the establishment of a 'definition commission/understand band' who were charged to synthesise these into a provisional understanding, a working definition was arrived at:

"Literacy is the continuing process of acquiring and using reading, writing and numeracy skills, together with the critical understanding of the political, social and economic environment, which contribute to personal and community development."

The workshop did not arrive at an official 'definition' for the literate environment. However, over the course of discussions, some degree of consensus was reached:

"I think that the literate environment includes institutions, materials and processes. These environments enable people to use their literacy skills and motivate them to use their literacy skills. For example, women in Angola who sell food now are being asked to provide a bill and so they need to learn how to read and write. People criticise the government of Angola saying that it has a very high level of illiteracy but we say that there is not a strong literate environment. People don't live in a literate environment and they are excluded."

A literate environment might include three key aspects:

- Institutions
- Resources
- Processes (including knowledge/power relations)



Workshop participants

The *Reflect* programme provides learners with literacy skills, and other relevant practical knowledge such as life skills, agricultural production techniques, healthcare and income generation. Participants are also introduced to broader development concepts such as gender equity, legal frameworks and policies. This training gives people good understanding of rights and accountability, and enables them to make their voices heard.



Reflect participants sharing their experience on growing mushrooms

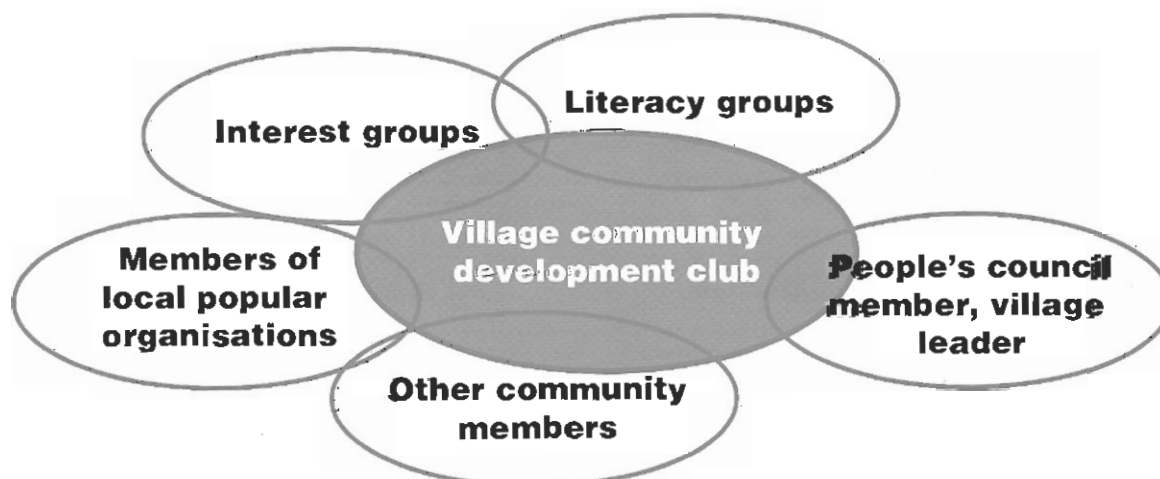
It is worth mentioning that some government literacy programmes are also being coordinated in the area, mainly for women. However, due to the poor quality of these programmes, once they end, participants often revert to illiteracy. This prevents them from accessing or understanding their legal rights to participation and information. In contrast, the *Reflect* circles have helped to change the very definition of education through teaching basic skills that lead to empowerment. So far, the *Reflect* experiences have been able to achieve the following:

- The programme has reached more than 12,000 people, mostly women of ethnic minorities in 12 provinces.
- 97 village community development clubs (VCDC) have been established.
- Four women have become members of the local people's council (there were none before).
- Many participants have become active members or leaders of local popular organisations such as women's or youth unions.
- A training pack on *Reflect* for adult literacy has been introduced and authorized by the Ministry of Education and Training.

Village community development clubs

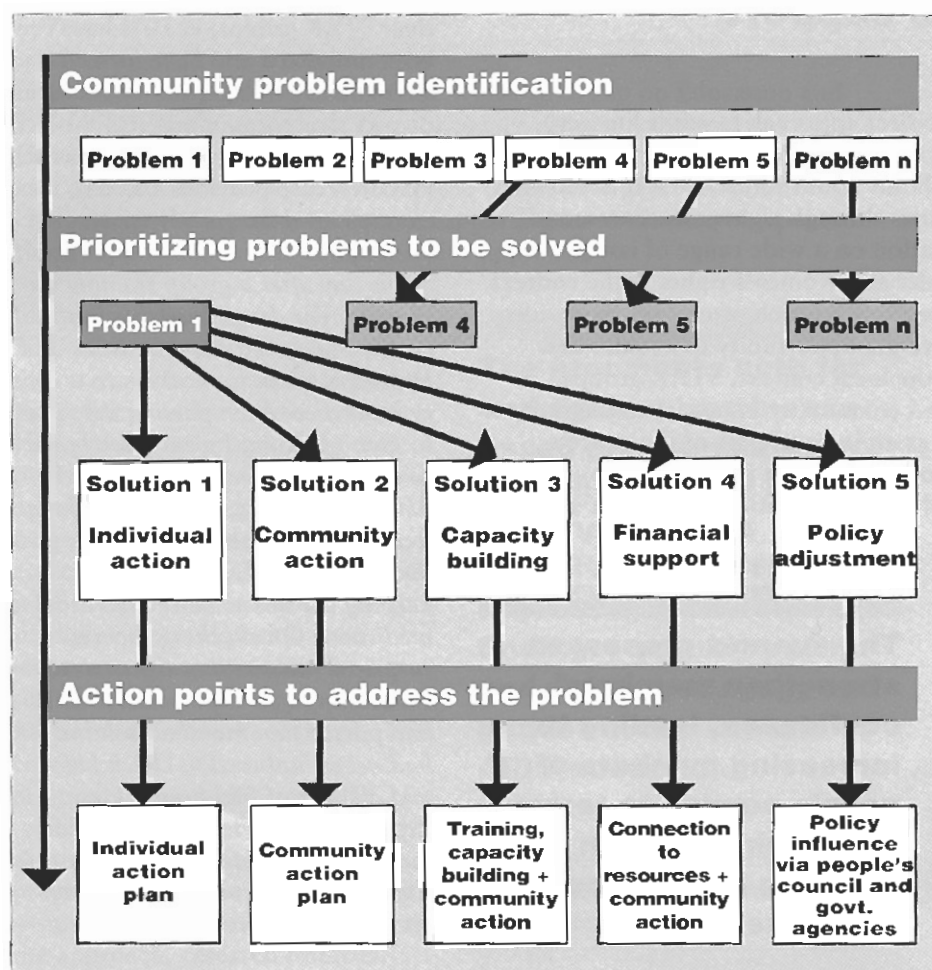
Work with the *Reflect* groups has resulted in the emergence of stronger popular movements, which allow for formal engagement between learners, communities and local government. In many communities, *Reflect* participants have organized themselves into village community development clubs, which are led by local facilitators and involve the extended membership of the wider community. The clubs are linked with other local bodies including the local people's council and the local community learning centre (CLC).

The place of the VCDC in the community:



The village community development clubs identify problems and possible solutions in order to develop action plans for the community. The clubs are also able to make direct demands for policy change to relevant government officials.

The *Reflect* cycle followed by the VDCs:



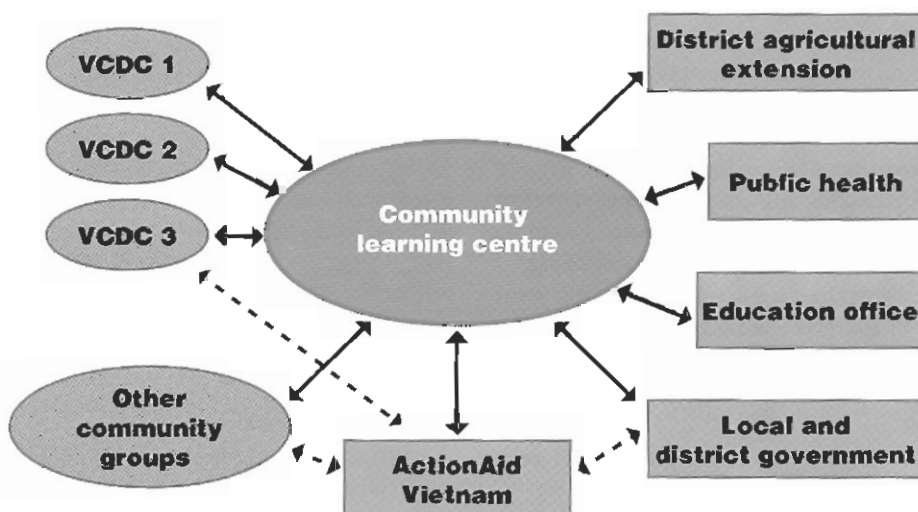
The CLC is essentially a resource centre offering training and cultural activities and established and supported by the government. The CLC's management board consists of representatives from the local government and from local popular organisations. It coordinates all non-formal education activities and development initiatives in the community. The CLCs liaise with VDCs on regular basis; they collect all the information, requests and demands from the community. The requests are later included in joint work plans based on which the community carries out its advocacy to the local government.



Participants show their commitment to maintaining the village community development club

Links between the VDCs, CLCs and local government:

Vietnam is a one-party communist state. It has moved from a war torn economy to one of the fastest growing economies in Southeast Asia. The country has made significant progress in poverty alleviation and social development, but it still faces the core challenge of establishing an egalitarian education system for its people that puts them at the centre of its development. *Reflect* provides a practical solution to this problem, increasing individual's and communities' capacity to play an active role in the development process.



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