

How Are We Doing?

Reflective Dialogues

Introduction

ISOFI is based on the premise that self-reflection and personal exploration are necessary for organizational transformation. By organizational transformation we mean creating an organization that puts its principles of equity, empowerment and social justice into action in everything it does, from the way it implements programs to the way it treats its staff. An organization is made up of people, including the beliefs, attitudes and understandings of these people.

During ISOFI, we felt we needed, as CARE staff, to spend a lot of time exploring, thinking and talking about our own beliefs, attitudes and understanding of sexuality and gender, and how they impacted our relationships with each other, if we wanted to make CARE's sexual and reproductive health programming stronger. We took special time to explore, even challenge, deeply held social norms that often underlie gender and sexual inequities which impact not only sexual and reproductive health but also CARE's ability, as an organization, to carry out its mission.

The ISOFI methodology included reflective dialogues – activities for repeated periodic reflection and critical thinking, both individually and as a group. Usually, these reflective dialogues were held every three months, and included the following:

- Questioning what, why and how we do things, and asking what, why and how others do things;
- Seeking alternative options for action;
- Keeping an open mind, and comparing and contrasting different actions;
- Understanding things from different perspectives;
- Asking for others' ideas and viewpoints;
- Considering consequences, both good and bad;
- Synthesizing and testing new ideas; and
- Identifying and resolving problems.

“It is an ongoing process of sharing our experiences, clipping news items, discussing songs, films, current issues, etc. We're getting to know each other better. Also we're learning to debate and defend our views as well as understand others' views.”

CARE staff member



Sarah Kambou/ICRW

“The facilitation and efforts to bring shifts was handled delicately, our views were accepted without judgment. Not giving us answers for everything helped us to struggle.”

CARE staff member

The quarterly group reflective dialogue sessions helped staff to explore, analyze and document changes that were happening in their own lives and in the life of the project. Taking the time to stop and reflect allowed staff to think critically about learning and progress to date, and to brainstorm collectively about changes they might make in their project plans. This is a diagram of the cycle of learning, action, analysis and reflection that staff in ISOFI undertook, with analysis/reflection as the fundamental component in the cycle:



We also encouraged people to keep their own private notes about changes they saw in a kind of ongoing diary. We quickly found that people did not have time (or perhaps the inclination) to write routinely in this way. So we modified our approach and substituted personal note-taking with quarterly one-on-one interviews with staff to record personal reflections. We also used small group work in which each staff person told a short story about something that had happened during that quarter.



Jesse Rattan/CARE

How We Implemented Reflective Dialogues

During ISOFI, country office teams who were integrating gender and sexuality ideas and actions into their project met together for half-day to full-day meetings every three months to reflect on how things were going both personally and in the projects. The group reflection that happened as part of ISOFI was a process of:

- Posing questions;
- Internal reflection;
- Exploring as a group what people discovered during internal reflection;
- Weighing options for change; and
- Documenting conclusions and planning new strategies.

In India, the meetings included primary stakeholders from the district and state levels. This included staff working at the field level, in middle management and also at senior levels. In Vietnam, meetings were held with CARE staff from all geographic areas covered by the programs.

During a reflective dialogue, staff explored basic questions as:

- What did we set out to do?
- What actually happened?
- Why did it happen?
- What will we do as we move forward?

In the beginning, facilitators from CARE and ICRW led the reflective practice sessions. The role and skill of the facilitators was the most critical component. The facilitators asked the participants to challenge themselves with difficult questions, and ensured that discussions took place in a non-judgmental atmosphere. They kept track of issues from one reflective dialogue session to the next, and pushed participants to go a little further each time. The experience and comfort of the facilitators, both with this reflective technique and issues related to gender and sexuality, were critical to the success of the reflective dialogues.

“Each person has his or her understanding. So a knowledge sharing was continuously happening which enriched us and gave us new perspectives.”

CARE staff member

“My reflections today, after introspecting myself and sharing my experiences, led me to think that I have come a long way.”

CARE staff member

The facilitator for the group reflective dialogues used a similar set of questions with participants each quarter. This helped to analyze factors contributing to positive change, as well as barriers to implementation. Some of the questions included:

- Over the last three months, what have you done to integrate gender and sexuality ideas and actions into your project?
- What did you learn while doing these activities?
- What changes have you seen as a result of these activities at the personal, programmatic and organizational level?
- What were the factors that helped you (driving forces) in learning and changing?
- What were the factors that were challenges or barriers (restraining forces) to learning and changing?
- What role have your partners (communities, other NGOs, government staff) played in integrating gender and sexuality into projects? What were the challenges in working with them? What made it easier to work with them?
- Based on your reflections today, what will you do during the next three months?
- What support do you need to do what you are planning?

Once the group brainstormed helping factors, barriers, and changes, ideas were grouped into themes. These themes – driving forces or restraining forces – became the topics for new intervention strategies, which were then followed up upon during subsequent reflective dialogues.

In addition to the basic questions, each site adapted questions for group discussion that were specific to their particular situation. Facilitators added questions that were specific to the projects, as well as questions that addressed issues brought up in previous reflective dialogues. In Vietnam, reflective dialogue sessions ended with practical “action plan” steps, where staff put their ideas into a timeline for the next year.



Sarah Kambou/ICRW

Challenges and Lessons in Reflective Dialogues

For staff who are used to producing project results within a fast timetable, taking the time to reflect on changes – and give some attention to the process – was not necessarily easy. One person in India said:

“We are so involved in proving our competencies that we do not even want to honestly reflect.”

The seeming ambiguity of ISOFI, with a lack of pre-set agendas and work-plans, worried people. At the beginning, some staff said:

“But even after the first workshop or the “orientation workshop,” I was not clear about the concept, because at that time they didn’t provide the guideline of activities or objectives, [nor] the way we integrate sexuality and gender into the existing activities of the project.” (Vietnam)

“We need to spell out more clearly what we want. Like, you know, the objectives of ISOFI so that we can interlink it with programming.” (India)

Yet, over time, the chance to reflect on a regular basis, and try out incremental changes in one’s own life and in one’s work, allowed staff to adopt new ideas about gender and sexuality at their own pace. The ISOFI “style” of working encouraged both independent thinking and also team collaboration. Staff became more committed to the process of reflection, and over time, more confident that change could, and was, happening slowly within themselves, their relationships with each other and in the projects.

Examples of staff reactions later on included:

“In the beginning, I found it difficult to find the answers on my own. I wanted more guidance. But today I see the advantage of the ISOFI approach. I can do things on my own or together with the team. Now we would like our supervisors to have more confidence in us to take the next steps in ISOFI.” (India)

“ISOFI doesn’t push us to learn or integrate certain things in our projects ... it let us feel comfortable and if we feel it is necessary, we find a way to integrate it into our work.” (Vietnam)

Almost all staff who participated in ISOFI activities reported that personal transformation helped them to let go of old ideas. This had lasting effects in both their personal and professional lives. In their work, they found that issues related to discrimination around gender and sexuality had the potential to influence project outcomes, and staff had many ideas about how to address discrimination within the frameworks of their own projects.

“The regular meetings increased communication. Team members have given feedback to others. We always corrected each other in a jocular manner; this worked really well as no one was offended, we had a laugh also and finally the point could be made.”

CARE staff member

“We become open, and then become good friends, and then we trusted each other. This helps us to work better in a team. We did this kind of chatting earlier also but it was hush hush.”

CARE staff member

Further Readings and Resources

This document is not intended to be a step-by-step “how to” guide for facilitating reflective dialogues. Additional resources are available to help experienced facilitators become more familiar with the techniques.

Readings:

Davies, R. & Dart, J. (2005). *The ‘Most Significant Change’ (MSC) Technique: A guide to its use* (2005). Available in PDF format (1.236 KB) at <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.htm>

Ellis, G. (2000). Reflective learning and supervision. In L. Cooper, & L. Briggs (Eds.), *Fieldwork in the Human Services*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin.

Fletcher, G., Magar, V., & Noij, F. (2005). *Learning by Inquiry: Sexual and Reproductive Health Field Experiences from CARE in Asia*. Sexual and Reproductive Health Working Paper Series, No. 1. CARE USA. Available in PDF format (306 KB) at http://www.care.org/careswork/whatwedo/health/downloads/20050906_learningbyinquiry.pdf

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Grant, A. (1997). A multi-storied approach to the analysis: narrative, literacy and discourse. In *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 38, pp 31-71.

Katz, G. (1995). Facilitation. In C. Alavis (Ed.), *Problem-Based Learning in a Health Sciences Curriculum* (pp. 52-70). London: Routledge.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience As the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Mezirow, J. (1998). On critical reflection. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(3), pp. 185-198.

Moon, J. A. (1999). *Reflection in Learning and Professional Development: Theory and Practice*. London: Kogan Page.

Oakley, P. (2001). *Evaluating Empowerment: Reviewing the Concept and Practice*. INTRAC NGO Management and Policy Series No. 13. Oxford, England: INTRAC.

Peavey, F. (1999). *Strategic Questioning for Personal and Social Change..*

Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Schien, E. H. (1980). *Organizational Psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.

Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Wadsworth, Y., & Peavey, F. (2004). Strategic Questions, Conference on Community Development, Human Rights & the Grassroots. Melbourne, Australia.

Web and Other Resources

Action Research

Action Research is based on reflective learning. A key principle is that research should involve participants in: identifying their own experiences; deciding on a research issue (What is of most concern? What is of interest and to whom?); then identifying possible responses, talking through who could do what, and how; implementing change and reflecting on that change; and repeating the process in a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, responding and learning (Wadsworth & Peavey, 2004). In addition to defining Action Research, this Web site:

(<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html>) provides access to the international refereed journal Action Research International; an online action research and evaluation introductory e-mail course; resource papers on action research; and links to other relevant sites.

Crabgrass

Crabgrass is a small, U.S.-based NGO that takes a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. It works with an Indian environmental NGO, as well as a crafts project for displaced and refugee women in the former Yugoslavia. The organization's Web site (www.crabgrass.org) contains writings by Fran Peavey (a key contributor in the development of PAR) and links to some interesting organizations such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the Center for Third World Organising and the Association of Women in Development. Links are organized under: non-violence, human rights, social justice, women, conflict resolution and development.

Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB)

This NGO promotes and funds research on poverty alleviation, provided the research is in response to a community-identified need and is carried out by community members. RIB takes a very action research-oriented approach to its work; the organization is also involved in establishing a network of organizations working on poverty alleviation in Bangladesh from a participatory standpoint. The site (<http://www.rib-bangladesh.org/>) offers links to other Bangladeshi organizations working on poverty alleviation.

Institute of Development Studies (2000 – Research Overview)

The Institute is at the forefront of helping develop Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), which feeds into Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) and other methodologies that aim to promote active participation of target groups. Its Web site (www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/research/index.html) has a host of interesting articles, as well as links to research reports on participation and policy, citizenship and participation, the theory and practice of participation, and organizational learning and change.

Livelihoods Connect

This Web site (www.livelihoods.org/index.html), supported by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) and the Institute of Development Studies, aims to share learning on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach with distance-learning materials, organizational links and a toolbox “to help in using sustainable livelihoods approaches at different stages of the project cycle.” The tools fall under six main headings: Policy, Institutions and Processes (including a new tool for analyzing power); Programme Identification and Design; Planning New Projects; Reviewing Existing Activities; Monitoring and Evaluation; and Ways of Working (including Appreciative Inquiry, a qualitative research methodology linked to Action Research, Participatory Action Research, Participatory Learning in Action and Most Significant Change).

Exchange

Billed as “a networking and learning program on health communication for development,” this Web site (www.healthcomms.org/index.html) – hosted by Healthlink Worldwide and supported by DfID – covers five areas: HIV/AIDS Communication, Social Mobilization, Learning Evaluation, Integrated Communications and Capacity Development. It offers a wide range of resources such as discussion papers, reports on health communications field work and more theoretical work. The site also offers good opportunities for networking with other health communication projects, plus links to other sites. The Most Significant Change methodology featured in this paper’s case studies is also discussed.

Praxis – Institute for Participatory Practices

Praxis (<http://www.praxisindia.org>) is a not-for-profit, autonomous, development support organization (set up by ActionAid India in 1997) seeking to facilitate the promotion of participatory practices in human development initiatives in an integral manner. In the relatively short period since its inception, it has become recognized as an international resource agency at the forefront of participatory practices.

MSC Listserv

MSC is a qualitative monitoring and evaluation process that is becoming increasingly popular in development agencies. First developed in Bangladesh, this process uses participants’ own stories of change. An MSC listserv (online discussion group) offers access to documents on the use of MSC in numerous countries, including Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Finland, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, the Philippines and Zambia. There is also an easy-to-follow guide to using MSC, 2004 Australia: Jess Dart’s MSC Guide. To subscribe to the listserv, e-mail: MostSignificantChanges-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

MandE News

This is a news service “focusing on developments in monitoring and evaluation methods relevant to development projects and programs with social development objectives.” It is edited by Rick Davies, who, with Jess Dart, is pioneering MSC work. Its Web site (www.mande.co.uk) offers an open forum for discussion as well as e-mail updates. Topics covered include Evaluation Centers, M&E Units within Development Agencies, Evaluation Societies and Networks, and Networks on Analysis and Evaluation. (For the latest news on MSC, it is best to use the listserv mentioned above.)