

Section 1: Note to Users

These tools aim to help you to develop foundational skills such as listening, asking probing questions, managing conflict, and so on.

It is useful to engage with these tools before, during, and after the training workshop to prepare you for facilitation in a community-led approach. Extensive practice with reflection is needed in order to master the skills that these tools seek to develop.

The tools may be used individually or in small groups. This section enables individual reflection by providing space for reflective writing, using a workbook format. Each tool in this section requires 60–90 minutes to complete.

On an ongoing basis, it is useful to think about which skills you need additional practice on, which challenges (internal or external) make it difficult for you to use a particular skill, and how you will take steps to improve. In small groups, you may want to reflect with three to five colleagues, with group discussion of the questions posed in these tools and of what can be done to deepen particular skills within your agency.

FAC 3. Deep Listening

Listening is key for communicating and developing relationships with other people. Yet in everyday life, good listening can be quite rare. For one thing, we have many distractions and time pressures that make it difficult to listen. We may be so immersed in our smart phones or electronic devices, for example, that we may miss what other people say or not even hear when someone speaks to us. Or, feeling rushed, we may hear the words someone says and give a superficial response yet fail to understand their feelings or the meanings behind their words.

Fortunately, we also have the capacity to learn to listen in a deeper, more engaged manner, although this requires both effort and practice. The purpose of this tool is to stimulate reflection on what is good listening, its importance in the community facilitation process, and the obstacles to it. Also, the tool will help to identify steps or practices that will enable you to listen more deeply and to use these skills in your work as a facilitator.

What is Deep Listening?

Let's begin with everyday life. Thinking about yourself, your friends and family, and your daily activities, please take five full minutes to jot down what you think good listening is and why it is important.

Write below:

When you have finished, please flip to the next page.

In regard to good listening, did you identify or consider the following qualities?

- **Active:** Is not casual or passive but is energetic and probes for full understanding.
- **Attentive:** Pays full attention to what the other person is saying and communicates this nonverbally (e.g., through friendly eye contact where that is regarded as respectful, recognizing that avoiding direct eye contact is respectful in some contexts) as well as verbally by saying things such as “um-hm,” or “okay,” to signal one is following what is being said.
- **Open:** Eager to hear the other person’s ideas.
- **Respectful:** Avoids judging, arguing, or cutting the other person off.
- **Empathic:** Tries to put oneself in the position of the speaker, “walking a mile in the other person’s shoes.”
- **Caring:** Shows concern and care for the speaker’s feelings and well-being.
- **Adjusting to the speaker:** Adapts to the individual speaker, without forcing them to talk or to change their tempo, content, manner of expression, etc. This also involves being comfortable with silences.
- **Thankful:** Communicates appreciation and gratitude for the other person sharing their thoughts and feelings and taking time to talk.

Why Deep Listening Is Important

Deep listening has both practical and relational benefits. On the practical side, listening enables us to learn from what other people say, to work together to solve a problem, or to address situations such as being lost by asking directions and listening to and following them. Thus, good listening is part of human development, problem-solving, and even meeting our survival and protection needs.

Deep listening also plays a key role in developing and maintaining quality relationships. Deep listening enables the communication that is essential to our lives as social beings. Through listening, we learn about others’ thoughts, feelings, and subjective worlds, and we demonstrate the receptivity, respect, and caring that help to build positive relationships. Our attentive, respectful listening to others typically makes them feel affirmed and validated as people. Because they experience our attention as supportive and positive, they are likely to reciprocate by being respectful and attentive to us.

Nothing is more disrespectful or damaging to a relationship than speaking to someone only to have them pay no attention to you or your feelings. Also, if conflicts or divergences arise, listening to each other’s feelings is a valuable means of learning and handling the conflict in a constructive manner.

Applications to the Facilitation Process

Now think how deep listening contributes to the community facilitation process. Please take a couple of minutes to jot down below your initial ideas on this.

Write below:

Did you consider the importance of listening in regard to some of the main functions of facilitators in a community-led process? Some key points are outlined below.

- **Building trust and relationship:** A good facilitator establishes a sense of trust and relationship with many different people in the community. To do this, the facilitator listens well to different people, thereby demonstrating respect, care, and empathy, without judging or arguing with people.
- **Learning deeply about communities:** The facilitator needs to learn about diverse views within a community and about power relations and how people are situated. The facilitator does this in no small part by deep listening, which enables learning not only about what people think but also about their underlying values, feelings, and culture.
- **Enabling inclusive dialogue:** To help communities decide which harm to children they want to address, how to address it, etc., the facilitator must help to bring in the views of many different people and to ensure that no one is excluded due to gender, age, class, caste, ability, status, religion, or other source of difference. To help different people contribute their views, the facilitator must learn about the different views by listening and trying to make each person feel comfortable sharing her or his ideas, without tacitly or explicitly taking sides. The latter requires not only showing appreciation for different ideas but listening to people's concerns and feelings, their ideas about how it might be possible to speak openly, and being attentive to social norms and power relations.
- **Supporting collaborative problem-solving:** The facilitator works with community members to help them solve problems such as, "Which harm to children should be addressed?" and, "How could the community address that particular harm to children?" The process of collective problem-solving is organically connected to the process of inclusive dialogue. This entails intensive listening by the facilitator not only to which

harms to children or approaches to addressing them are discussed but also to who is discussing them and how they are discussed, with attention as well to who is not participating in the dialogues.

- **Enabling community ownership:** The facilitator works tirelessly to keep power concentrated in the hands of the community and to have all aspects of the process led and owned by the community. This requires careful listening for signs of community ownership or lack thereof. For example, if the facilitator heard people say, “This is really just another NGO project” or, “The discussions are dominated by the Chief and his family,” that would be a sign of low levels of community ownership and participation. Conversely, if people spoke consistently of the process as “our” way of supporting children, that would indicate a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Enabling Deep Listening

Deep listening is not just something that happens—it is a product of intentional steps and processes of self-awareness and self-management. Please think for a couple of minutes and then write down three key steps that you could take to listen more deeply.

Write below:

There are many steps that one can take to become a better listener—even simple things such as turning off one’s phones and tablets while talking to someone can help to enable deep listening. Three broader steps are creating space, being fully present, and being curious.

Creating Space

A monk on the Thai-Burma border stated:

There is a responsibility for foreigners to quiet their voice. Calm down and visit and get to know the people. Don't run in with your own agenda.¹

The same wisdom applies not only to foreigners but to anyone who works on child protection at community level.

Not much listening can happen if we are talking constantly, excitedly discussing our ideas and approaches. In communities, we need to create space for listening by being quieter than most people usually are and deliberately focusing on listening. In turn, this requires slowing down and breaking from the fast tempo to which we may have become accustomed.

Not talking so much also communicates that it is not about us but about the community—we are there to listen to and work with community members. At heart, what community members say and do is more important than what we say or do. This inversion of the typical focus on NGO voice and action is at the heart of keeping communities at the center.

Creating space for listening is also important in enabling constructive dialogues in the community. Imagine a group discussion in which the facilitator is designated by F, and the participants by P1, P2, and so on.

F: What do you see as the main harms to children here?

P1: Well, there are children who don't go to school and who gamble and steal.

F: Ok, so there are children engaged in bad behavior and are in conflict with the law. What are some other ideas?

P2: The biggest harm here is heavy work. You see boys even 9 years old carrying heavy rocks and working in the mines.

F: Thanks for that—this problem is one of child labor, right? And in this case, it's dangerous labor since the mines are unsafe.

¹ From p. 7 of Anderson, M., Brown, D., & Jean, I. (2012). *Time to listen: Hearing people on the receiving end of international aid*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

What do you see the facilitator doing wrong here?

Write below:

In this discussion, the facilitator is doing little listening. Without thinking much about what people are saying, he inserts formal child protection vocabulary for the harms the participants suggest. Also, he makes inferences about children being in conflict with the law and about the mines being unsafe. By inserting his own categories and inferences, he has tacitly asserted his expertise and the priority of his vocabulary, thereby marginalizing what community members think. Deeper listening could have been achieved by creating space for community members to say more and explain their ideas fully. For example, the facilitator could have asked what the gambling and stealing consist of, why they may do such things, etc. These probing questions open up space for the community members to explore their ideas more fully. This manner of active, engaged listening sets a good model and can help community members to use a similar process with each other.

Being Fully Present

Having space for listening does not by itself guarantee deep listening—we have to be motivated, ready, and able to listen. If our minds are racing with thoughts about how a report is overdue, what we will do after work, or how we fear not doing well as facilitators, we will not be in a good position to listen since our minds are somewhere else and are filled with other things. If our minds are like nonstop radios that present a steady stream of inner voices and ideas, it will be challenging to listen deeply to other people.

Numerous strategies exist for clearing your mind and enabling yourself to listen deeply. One is to move all the things you had been thinking of into the background so you are not consciously thinking about them. Or you could quiet your mind by meditating for a time, which often entails sitting quietly and observing thoughts and images as they occur but without picking up or focusing on them. After a few minutes, your mind achieves a relaxed state in which it does not attach itself to particular ideas. Staying in this state for fifteen or twenty minutes can help one to feel quiet, rested, and attentive.

Perhaps the most essential strategy, though, is to prioritize listening. To be a good listener, you have to make it a very high priority to listen fully and empathically to someone. Being highly motivated, you change your orientation away from being an “expert” to that of a learner who is

keenly interested in learning as much as possible from this person's words, experiences, views, etc.

It is a bit like being a student, with the community people being the teachers. If you really want to learn about other people's views, it becomes possible to listen deeply with gratitude and without judgment.

Being fully present and listening deeply requires ongoing self-monitoring and adjustment. For example, I may really want to listen to a particular grandmother and learn as much as possible about her views. Yet I may be so tired that I lack the patience and mental capacity required for deep listening, or thoughts about needing to get home may intrude. Catching myself not listening fully can help me to make needed adjustments.

For example, even though I am tired, I might remind myself of my goal to be a really good listener and that this grandmother has amazing life experience and wisdom to draw upon. Having boosted my motivation, I sharpen my focus on her, breathe more deeply to keep my mind alert, and bring myself fully into the present and the task of listening. In this way, self-monitoring and self-management go hand in hand.

Curiosity, too, plays a significant role in deep listening. In a community-led process, the facilitator seeks to learn as much as possible about other people's views and why they hold them. When a community member agrees to talk with us, we have a remarkable opportunity to learn deeply. We do this by listening, asking additional questions that invite the person to go deeper and explain more fully, or asking new questions that help us to learn about other aspects of the person's thinking about children. We follow the participant yet we are guided by our curiosity, which keeps us fresh and eager to learn. From this standpoint, listening becomes a pleasure, and we communicate this tacitly to the people we talk with.

This spirit of appreciative learning is at the heart of being a good facilitator, and it in turn motivates community people to form a relationship with us, trust us, and open up about their views, values, and practices. Appreciative learning is a reciprocal process as, over time, relationships deepen, more rich ideas are shared, and community members become appreciative of how we feed back what we have learned. When we listen deeply, the door opens.