

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 5. Developing a Reflective Practice

Being a good facilitator requires many skills—empathy, listening, building trust, promoting useful dialogue, analyzing the ethical course of action, and so on. Being a good facilitator, though, does not mean that one has mastered all these skills and has somehow “arrived” as a master facilitator. Over time, the context, the issues, the actors, and relationships change, introducing new complexities that may require ongoing learning and adjustment.

As the context changes, for example, one might find that something that had worked well previously no longer works very well. Or, doing things in the old way is suddenly seen by local people as not helpful. In this respect, the facilitator is on an ongoing journey of learning and can never sit back and rest assured that everything is going fine.

In fact, one of the most important skills of facilitation is that of critical thinking, which aims to help strengthen practice. This consists of two important processes: critical reflection and using what is learned through reflection to strengthen one’s practice.

Critical reflection means stepping back from a task and taking stock of how it is going and of what might need adjustment. It is related to self-awareness, yet self-awareness is only part of it.

The second process is using what is learned to guide improvements in one’s work and practice, including improvements in one’s own behavior, demeanor, and relationships with local people. In this regard, the aim of reflection is not to tear things down and criticize harshly but to learn from our mistakes and take steps to facilitate in a more effective manner. Done over time in an authentic, learning-oriented manner, the reflective approach to practice can move one from being an average facilitator to being a consistently excellent facilitator.

Creating Space for Reflection

Because facilitating community-led action entails so many activities, it is easy to slip into a mode of work best described as “doing-doing-doing.” We slip into this mode readily because our work is dynamic and complex, seldom asking questions such as: “Is this the most effective or appropriate way?” We may even joke with ourselves or friends by saying, “There’s no time to think!” When this happens, we risk doing things in ways that are less than effective or even making the same mistakes repeatedly.

An important step toward developing a reflective practice is to create space for reflection each day in a context that is relatively quiet and conducive to looking back and thinking how to improve.

A simple way of doing this is to sit in a particular chair for 10 minutes a day specifically for purposes of reflection (some people prefer a quiet walk without distractions or interruptions).

Creating the space, though, refers also to having psychological space. If we sit for ten minutes with our minds racing, our thoughts will crowd out reflection. A useful way to begin, then is by asking a very simple question:

- How am I right now? Are my thoughts racing, or am I ready to reflect on how I did today?

If your thoughts are racing, it is useful to pay full attention to your breathing until your mind is quiet and you are ready to reflect.

Thinking Back, Asking Questions, and Reflecting

Now think back on today. For a moment, think of two things that went well in working with the community. These could be as simple as conversations you observed or helped to facilitate. Ask yourself, “How were they good?” and, “How did I support them or not interrupt them?”

Next, think of one or two things that did not go so well. Maybe two or three people dominated a discussion when twelve people were present. Maybe girls and women participated well, but men did not get involved. Or an argument erupted and you felt uncertain what to do.

In reflecting on one of the things that did not go well, ask yourself, “Why did this likely happen?”, recognizing that you may not have the complete answer. Pay particular attention to whether something you did or did not do may have contributed to the situation. Then ask, “What could I do differently to help address this challenge or to avoid it from happening again in the future?” Jot down a couple of notes in response to each question.

Why did this happen? _____

What could I do differently? _____

Often when you reflect on why things happened, you may see that there are things that relate to what you did or did not do. If men were not getting involved, maybe it was because the idea for the discussions came from girls and women, who were highly excited and did not take time to ask whether it would be useful to bring men into the discussions. Or, thinking back, you might realize that it was okay for girls and women to talk among themselves first and that it is the next logical step to invite them to reflect on whether, when, and how men could be engaged as well.

The point is, now you are no longer doing things robotically—you are stepping back daily, reflecting on what happened, and identifying possible ways for improving your facilitation and the community process.

In reflecting, it is useful to think about important questions, looking back over a time period of several days or weeks. Some useful questions that relate to you, your role, and your relationships with community people:

- How do community people see me? Do females see me differently than do males, and why?
- Is my behavior, dress, and demeanor appropriate for different people in the community—elders, girls, women, men, boys?
- How do children see me? Am I enabling enough participation by girls and by boys? Is that upsetting the power balance in the community?
- Who is doing the organizing at community level and the center of action—is it community people or me?
- How am I as a facilitator? What are my strengths and weaknesses as a facilitator? Am I more like a guide and is that appropriate?
- Thinking back to the ethical issues discussed in the training workshop, how am I doing? What are the challenges and what do I need to do differently?
- Is the community process inclusive enough? What could I do to enable people to take an even more inclusive approach?

Take a few moments and write a reflection for today, with one or more of the above questions in mind.

Write below:

In reflecting on these and other questions you can think of, it is natural not to find definite answers in any one reflection session. Today, you may think that the community process is highly inclusive and you don't need to adjust much in regard to how you facilitate inclusivity. Yet, having reflected on that, you may be more likely to look carefully tomorrow at how inclusive the community process actually is. One of the greatest benefits of reflection is its ability to raise questions that then invite you to see things in a new light or to probe further in

your thinking. In this sense, honest reflection is an excellent stimulus for learning and for making improvements.

Reflecting Together with a Mentor

Some of the most valuable reflection is done jointly with a trusted other. Reflecting together with a mentor, for example, enables you to check your ideas and views and to benefit from the perspective of an experienced, supportive other person who has greater life experience and deep powers of observation and reflection.

Not infrequently, a mentor can help to increase the accuracy of your own self-assessments. A facilitator, for example, might think that the community has a highly inclusive process, whereas the mentor might be able to point out the various people who are not included. This observation by the mentor is not intended to tear down the facilitator but to remind them that there is still a lot of work to do to enable a fully participatory, inclusive process. Also, mentors can sometimes help to moderate our views of our own shortcomings or things we think we need to work on.

For example, a facilitator might say that they are really bad at managing heated arguments because they get very tense and doesn't know what to say. Yet a mentor who has seen them in action in such a situation may be able to comment that their nervousness doesn't show and the things they said were helpful in the following respects, which are then explained. Thus a mentor can provide a check on accuracy and also avoid the tendency to dwell on one's mistakes. The adage that "we learn as much from our mistakes as from our successes" is useful in regard to facilitation.

Reflecting together with a mentor is also useful in thinking through options for handling challenging situations. Having greater life experience, a mentor can often help to identify options that a younger facilitator may not have considered, or may offer suggestions about implementing options in a way that most people are likely to see as respectful and appropriate.

Last but not least, a more experienced mentor can offer support for you as a human being working under challenging circumstances. An experienced mentor can help you take stock of whether you are working too hard, taking enough time for yourself, and achieving the balance that enables the equanimity and openness of a skilled facilitator.

Becoming a Reflexive Practitioner

The essential first step is to accept your responsibility for becoming a reflexive practitioner. Next is to set aside ten minutes for this every day, engaging in the activities suggested above and being authentic with yourself rather than praising or denigrating everything you do as a facilitator. Perhaps most important is to use the reflective process as a means of doing a better job as facilitator. Finding enjoyment and insight in this process will make reflection something to look forward to—it is, after all, your time. And it will help you to intermix doing and thinking in a powerful, enriching way that helps to achieve your goal of being an effective facilitator.