



Community action groups

At a glance

Members of community groups can support each other to achieve social change. This tool gives advice on how this can be done:

- Identifying and training facilitators with the right approach
- Identifying what groups already exist within the community
- Supporting a community group in becoming a group who can lead local change
- Building relationships with trust
- Agreeing group rules and ways of working
- Going beyond the original focus of the group
- Focusing on learning
- Learning from doing
- Bringing about social transformation

'You can't release us from poverty, we have to find our own way out, but when we do, then we're really really strong. We are equal to men and we are equal to rich people, and we are doing it for ourselves.'

A member of the 'Sisters' self-help group' in a town southeast of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 2014



Why use this tool?

Groups often develop in a community around a specific purpose, such as savings and credit groups, livestock groups, grain bank groups etc. This tool is intended to help existing groups to be even more effective, and to provide guidance on establishing new groups. It will help groups to think about broadening what they do. For example, addressing different causes of poverty such as sanitation and hygiene, education or health, or bringing about local social change, such as reducing domestic violence, advocating for women's rights or reducing the incidence of female genital mutilation/cutting through awareness raising.

Awareness-raising

Children & youth

Climate & environment

Conflict & peace-building

Corruption & governance

Disaster risk management

Discrimination & inclusion

Food & livelihoods

Gender & sexual violence

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Influencing decision-makers

Migration & trafficking

Water, sanitation & hygiene



A brief description

This tool includes guidance for facilitators working with communities to start community groups, or helping existing groups to improve. The keys to success are based on learning from evaluations of the *Self Help Groups* supported by Tearfund in Ethiopia, but are applicable to other types of community groups. There is a separate tool on savings groups. Please see **Tool C2 - Savings and credit groups**.



Time taken

Training for groups takes a number of weeks, and it often takes many months or several years for the group to reach its full potential in bringing about social change.



You will need

- A group of people committed to meeting regularly. They may already be meeting around a common issue, for example a savings and loans group, or a disaster management committee.
- Someone who can support the group as they learn, plan and take action (the facilitator).



The words we use

Empower – to help people take control, authority or power in a situation or context.

Fairness – not favouring any one person or group.

Facilitator – someone who is trained to help community groups establish, develop and learn.

The role of the facilitator

This tool places more emphasis on the role of an external facilitator than other *Reveal* tools. This is because learning from Tearfund partners suggests that trained facilitators often play a crucial role in setting up, supporting and encouraging community action groups. A good facilitator communicates from the start that they are not a member of the community action group nor leading it in any way, and will ensure that the group does not become dependent on them.

Typically the facilitator is involved for a number of years, but they tend to provide active support on a weekly basis for somewhere between three to six meetings as the group establishes itself. This reduces to approximately once a month, then approximately once every three months. The timings are decided by the group and the facilitator together. Once groups are running well, the facilitator may just be in contact occasionally, or they may leave it for the group to ask for input. Sometimes groups want more input from the facilitator as they become self-governing and set up additional layers, such as cluster level associations of their own representatives overseeing a number of different groups.

The role of the facilitator and the approach they should take is discussed more fully throughout the tool.



Keys to success

- **Facilitators need to have the right approach.** Good facilitators will help groups realise that they can learn for themselves and develop their own vision for their future. See the **Introductory tool – Facilitation skills** for more information.
- **Ensure participation.** Include people of different ethnicities, religions, castes and abilities in groups. This can help to build trust and understanding, and reduce community conflict.
- **Strengthen relationships and trust amongst group members.** Encourage the group to spend time together. This helps to build relationships, relationships build trust, and trust helps the group to work together to achieve something greater than each person could on their own.
- **Allow groups to set their own rules and ways of working.** When groups decide their own rules early on, it can help prevent problems arising. An external person should not set the rules, but can help suggest different types of rules if needed.
- **Encourage groups to address problems beyond their original focus.** When the group has successfully achieved some of their original objectives, a good facilitator can help them realise that they can achieve more than this. They may then choose to address other needs in their community.
- **Encourage learning.** Facilitators should support groups in learning for themselves, and avoid being dependent on other people's knowledge.



What to do

Identifying or training facilitators with the right approach.

Facilitators are needed who will support groups in developing their own vision for their community, in effectively gaining knowledge and learning for themselves, and in taking action.

Facilitators are **not** usually:

- The person with all the right answers.
- The person who controls access to information or external resources.
- The one who sets the rules of the group.



Instead, facilitators need to believe that the group members are able to plan, decide, act and learn for themselves, without being dependent on external support. Facilitators should see their role as helping to unlock people's potential in these areas. Sometimes, starting something together as a group can be a challenge, and the role of the facilitator is to support the group and encourage them as they develop and implement their ideas and plans. The facilitator should reduce their involvement in the group as the group establishes itself. Once facilitators are identified and trained, following the guidance below will help them support community groups to reach their full potential.

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Identifying what groups already exist within the community

Are there already groups established? For example, savings and credit groups, a disaster management committee, a water management group, members of a community grain bank, or a group who have been implementing their own church and community mobilisation process? Could these groups be supported in becoming more effective in bringing about community change and transformation?

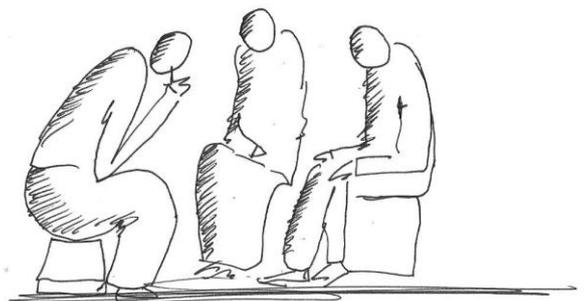
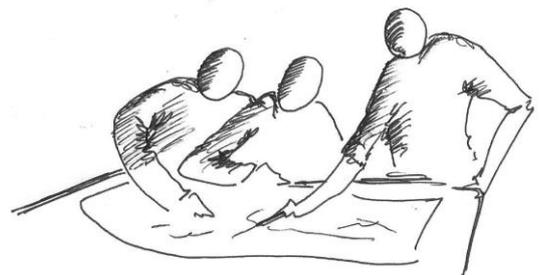
If there are not already groups in the community, new groups could be established. If new groups are being set up, it will be useful to follow the principles in this tool from the very beginning. For example, if savings groups or livestock groups are being created, this tool could help them be inspired to achieve more than savings or livestock management. It could help them see that they can also help bring about other social changes such as increased access to education or infrastructure, or a reduction in domestic violence. The earlier a community group is envisioned to have a greater purpose to bring about social change, the more deep-rooted this will be in their identity.

Supporting a community group in becoming a group who lead local change

Once you have decided which existing groups to support (or once a new group has been established), facilitators can support groups to review what they have achieved in the past, and to think about what they would like to achieve in the future. These are some of the steps that a facilitator may help a group to take:

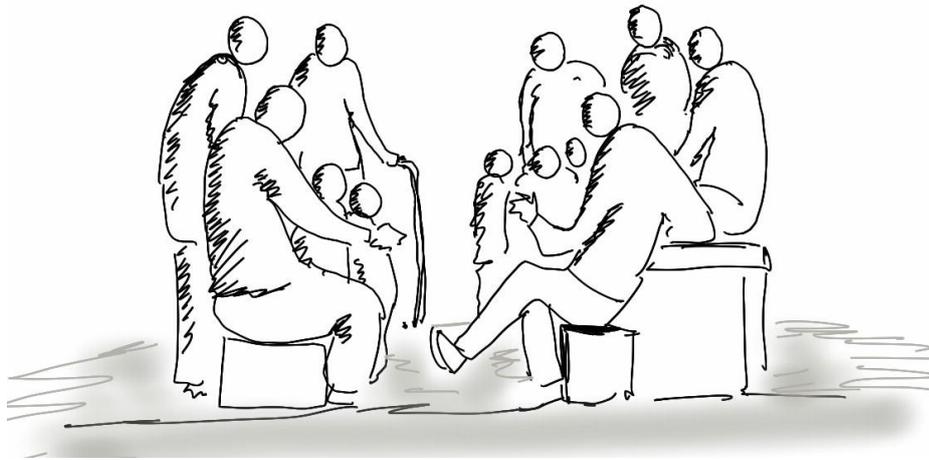
- Reviewing how they have succeeded against their original purpose. Has the group achieved what they set out to achieve? How successful have they been in the past? Is the group satisfied with what they have accomplished?
- Reviewing what other issues they and their community face, such as social concerns (corruption, crime, violence, abuse), environmental or health problems, or lack of infrastructure or livelihoods opportunities. (You may find the tools in **Section A** of *Reveal* helpful in exploring some of these issues.)
- Deciding what they want to achieve in the future (their 'objectives').
- Exploring any new skills they need to learn, or resources they need to access, in order to achieve their objectives.
- Learning to manage themselves, for example reviewing their rules, membership and relationships.
- Taking time to build good relationships and trust before they start to work towards significant actions or change.

Some of these points are explored more fully, below.



Building relationships and trust

Meeting together regularly is essential for group members to get to know each other and build relationships and trust. Facilitators can help this by encouraging respect and acceptance between members, encouraging people to share openly during meetings, and encouraging members to listen to each other. When people really trust each other, they will be able to support each other better as they try to change some of the social or economic problems around them.



Agreeing group rules and ways of working

It is easy to provide a group with a list of rules but the process of a people within a group agreeing these rules together is much more effective in helping them learn to work together and take responsibility for the changes they want to happen. Group rules are usually simple and relate to attendance at meetings, respecting each other and membership. The rules can either be recited orally or written down in a group book to ensure that there is a record of them. Deciding group rules helps to prevent problems arising in the future. It also empowers group members who may not normally have a voice in decision-making and helps members feel it is 'their group'. Many groups decide that all members should be present if anything is agreed. The group can evaluate the rules as they go along and change them as needed.

Going beyond the original focus of the group

Over time, groups often realise that there are many needs in their community which are not being addressed through the original purpose of their group. For example, a savings group may find that there are needs which cannot be addressed through financial means. Groups can decide which they feel are the most important issues, and then think together about how to address them. The needs within a community may change over time. It is therefore important to be flexible and allow priorities to change according to the changing context.



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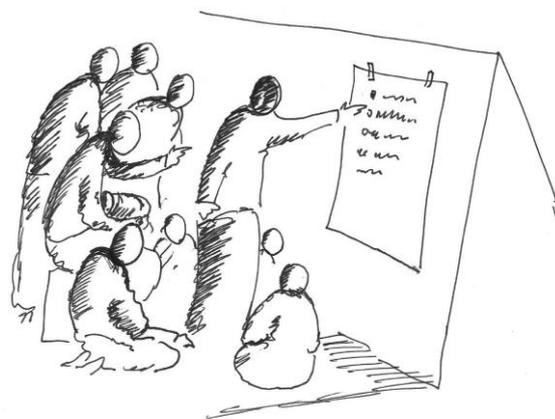
Water, sanitation & hygiene

Focusing on learning

As groups decide to address different issues, they may realise that they want to learn how to do something new such as a new livelihood activity. How can the group access this knowledge for themselves?

Are there local experts who could provide advice? For example, a group could invite a health worker to share their knowledge on an issue such as malaria prevention or good hygiene. Facilitators do not need to

be experts in all subjects and should encourage group members to decide what and how they want to learn. It is very important that a group doesn't become dependent on an external person or agencies' knowledge. This would be disempowering, and can leave the group thinking that they can't bring about change, but need others to do it for them.



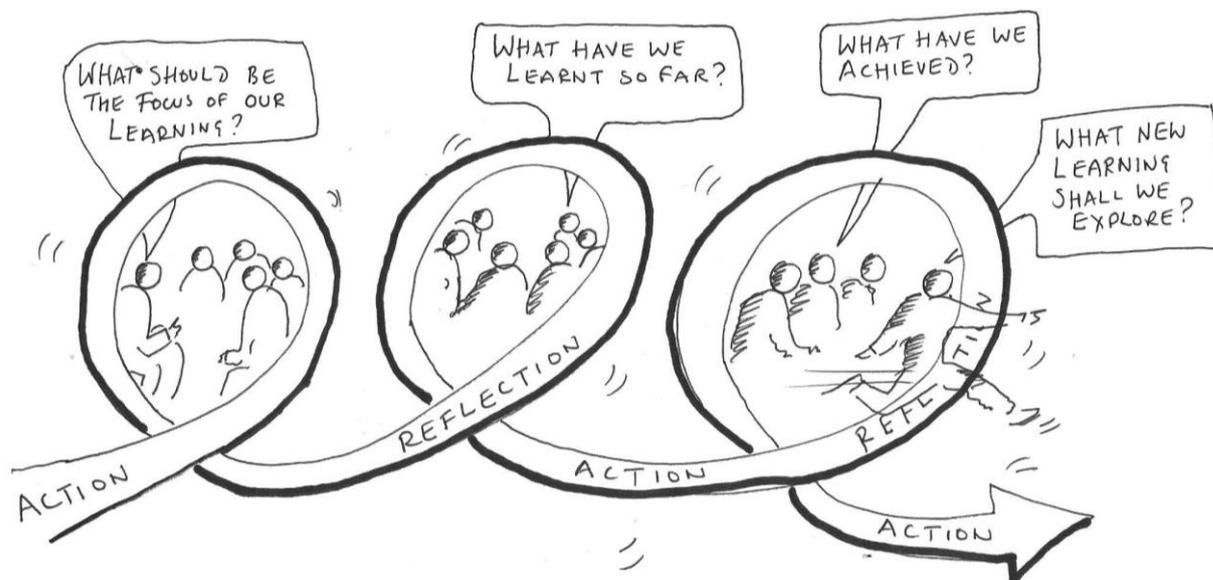
Learning from doing

Many of us think we need training in order to learn. This isn't true. We learn best when we try for ourselves, and all of us learn most when we don't get something right the first time. We shouldn't be afraid of failure – it is how we learn! Learning is about people trying things for themselves and building their own knowledge through experience.

It is often useful to stop and reflect on what lessons we have learnt from a certain set of actions. A facilitator can help a group be **intentional** about their learning by reflecting on what went well, and what could have gone better. For example, a group could discuss:

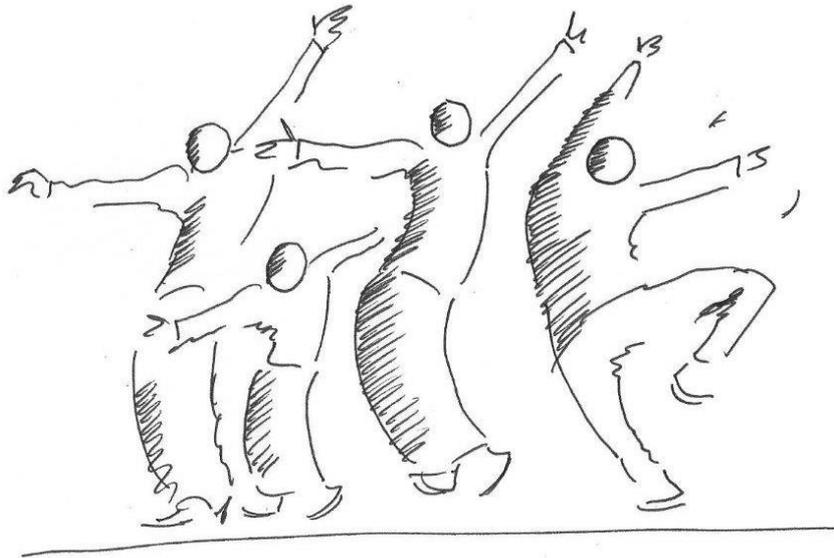
- Have they achieved their original purpose?
- What have they learnt?
- Do they think they need to change the action they are trying to achieve or change their approach?

When a group plans ahead, they should be supported in building on the lessons learnt from past actions. This means that future actions will be more effective.



Bringing about social transformation

As the group learns by doing they will become more effective at working together. This means they can start to think about bigger changes they want to make. Groups we have worked with in Ethiopia, India and other countries have taken on big activities such as opening schools, and sought to bring about significant social change such as reducing domestic violence, advocating for women's rights and reducing the incidence of female genital mutilation/cutting through awareness raising.



Finding out more

- Tearfund (2013) *Releasing potential: a facilitator's learning resource for self-help groups* – currently in draft form only
- Tearfund (2001) *PILLARS Guide – Building the capacity of local groups*
http://tilz.tearfund.org/en/resources/publications/pillars/building_the_capacity_of_local_groups/

Related tools:

- Introductory tool: Facilitation skills
- C2 - Savings and credit groups [C2: Food & livelihoods-1]

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