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LITERACY, GENDER AND SOCIAL AGENCY: ADVENTURES IN EMPOWERMENT

A research report for ActionAid UK



by Marc Fiedrich and Anne Jellema
with Nazmul Haq, Jessica Nalwoga and Fazilatun Nessa

September 2003

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Acknowledgements

Our first thanks must go to the many people in Bangladesh and Uganda who have taken part in this research and spent time receiving our visits, answering our questions and sharing insights into their lives with us.

We are grateful to ActionAid, and in particular to Feisal Hussain, former Country Director of ActionAid Bangladesh, Meenu Vadera, Country Director of ActionAid Uganda, and David Archer, Head of International Education at ActionAid, for allowing us unrestricted access to programmes and personnel, for encouraging us to ask unasked questions, and for agreeing without reservation to the full publication of our findings.

We are also grateful for the support and patience extended by the Department for International Development (DFID) throughout this research.

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Glossary

BAWPA	<i>Bangladesh Agricultural Working People's Association - NGO in Sylhet</i>	NGO	<i>Non-Governmental Organisation</i>
BCDP	<i>Banda Community Development Project</i>	NRA	<i>National Resistance Army</i>
Circle	<i>A group of learners (term used by Reflect practitioners)</i>	NRM	<i>National Resistance Movement</i>
Facilitator	<i>Person who coordinates a Reflect circle / "teacher"</i>	Panchat	<i>Local governance structure</i>
Freire	<i>Brazilian educator, author of "Pedagogy of the Oppressed"</i>	PRA	<i>Participatory Rural Appraisal</i>
GOAL	<i>Irish NGO</i>	RCU	<i>Reflect Coordination Unit</i>
INGO	<i>International Non-Governmental Organisation</i>	RDC	<i>Resident District Commissioner</i>
		SUS	<i>Sabalambly Unnayan Samity - Local NGO in Netrakona District</i>
		Thana	<i>Term for a local district in Bangladesh</i>
		TLM	<i>Total Literacy Movement</i>
		UPE	<i>Universal Primary Education</i>

Executive Summary

This is a study of participatory development in practice. Looking at four adult education projects in Bangladesh and Uganda, it investigates why NGOs offer them and why women join them, what they do there, and how they and others around them perceive the activity. Lastly, we investigate how far the actual outcomes mirror the visions of “empowerment” so seductively articulated by development theorists in recent years. The study focuses on *Reflect*, an approach to participatory adult education that aims to stimulate a wider process of change in individuals and communities. We do not evaluate either the strengths or weaknesses of *Reflect* or the benefits of literacy per se. Instead, we focus on the meanings and uses of the literacy *programme* as an institutional setting within a larger social and cultural system.

Our purpose is to provoke a fundamental debate on the aims and ideologies of participatory development. From this perspective we argue that claims of “empowerment” made on behalf of most participatory methodologies, including *Reflect*, are often empirically exaggerated and internally contradictory. Although participatory approaches are usually presented as a fundamental break with “top-down”, ethnocentric paradigms of development, aid agency reports tend to suggest that *Reflect* participants spontaneously adopt the very same attitudes and practices long championed by the development community.

While *Reflect* practitioners’ accounts emphasise how participants “take control of their own lives”, learners are more likely to anticipate prestige and material rewards from association with a rich and powerful institution. Few practices in the classes would have given learners reason to assume that they were involved in anything radically different from “school” or “education”. This leads us to question how much conceptual difference there is between current efforts to empower “local communities” (particularly women) and earlier, now discredited, ventures to modernise nations. Just as “underdeveloped” nations before them, women to be empowered are now presented as resourceful and capable. At the same time, their continued impoverishment is still explained by some blockage within *their* make-up, which prevents them from sharing the fruits of capitalist society.

Empowerment thus enshrines a particular ideal of how to be(come) an independent, autonomous individual. We aim to illustrate some of the frictions arising from this ideal. For example, staff efforts to create participatory structures that privilege the autonomy of poor people end abruptly where these same poor people seek patron-client relationship with staff members. Steadfast refusal to act as a patron is difficult for staff although they will, of course, always remind poor people that the project is ‘theirs’. In practice, field staff juggle contradictory pressures. On the one hand, they must demonstrate professional enthusiasm for granting control to project participants (“handing over the stick”), but on the other hand, they must ensure that at the end of the project “empowerment” is seen to have taken place.

That participatory practice is not a straightforward mechanism leading poor people to assert agency in ways familiar to Western readers is also exemplified by debates about health and hygiene in *Reflect* classes. In earlier times, adult educators had all too clear an image of the cleanliness and propriety standards that were to be imparted to learners. The values propagated then still reverberate now, and we found many women eager to align themselves behind practices they considered modern and prestigious. It is perhaps misplaced to expect *Reflect* participants to formulate challenges to development orthodoxy. Rather, what women seemed to value was being able to claim this authoritative knowledge as their own.

Issues of control and choice also feature when we consider ambitions for *Reflect* to foster collective organisation and the public expression of “voice”. Reports from women that they have learned how to “talk better” are sometimes taken to mean that literacy classes are a means of enhancing women’s standing in the public sphere. Opportunities to learn some English (in Uganda) and “posh Bangla” in Bangladesh were certainly appreciated by learners but their aspirations were often met when a confident public performance lent greater respectability and status. This is at odds with current policy concerns where concepts such as “voice” and “rights” stress the importance of women publicly expressing their very own, authentic experiences. We aim to show that other, less visible strategies can be of equal strategic value to women.

Our findings suggest that like any methodology, participatory or not, in ordinary circumstances *Reflect* is unlikely to spark sustained social movements. Instead, detailed observations of circle procedures reveal how much deliberations are shaped by participants’ ambitions to signal public conformity to messages promoted by NGOs. It would certainly be salutary, in these circumstances, for development agencies to drop pretensions of being neutral. However, this is an unlikely prospect as long as participatory paradigms dictate that the undeniable influence of development agencies is admitted only as an aberration, a distortion to a process that is said to remain firmly under poor people’s control. Only once NGOs position themselves more clearly can the contribution that *Reflect* and other participatory approaches make to a rights-based approach be determined. Increasingly organisations using *Reflect* are recognising this and changing their practice.

The results shown in our study suggest a relatively modest inventory of small and tenuous gains – not the sweeping narrative of personal and social transformations so often claimed. Nevertheless, we think these gains are significant. They matter immensely to women who have few allies and few resources. More evaluations undertaken in this spirit (though not necessarily in this depth) would go some way towards ensuring that we move beyond participation for participation’s sake.

1.1 The purpose (and limitations) of this study

This is a study of participatory development in practice. Looking at participatory projects in Bangladesh and Uganda aimed at the “empowerment” of women, it investigates how the women involved make use of such projects to further their own interests, and how their interests relate to those of the development professionals who fund and manage such projects. The study was undertaken by ActionAid, a British international development organisation, with support from the British Government’s Department for International Development (DFID).

Over the past four years we have sought to find out why NGOs set up participatory literacy projects and why women join them. We have tried to understand what women do there, what they and others around them think about them, and how far the processes and outcomes of the classes mirror the vision of “empowerment” that has been so seductively articulated by development theorists in recent years. Our purpose is to provoke a fundamental debate on the aims and ideologies of participatory development.

The study focuses on *Reflect*, one of the best-known and most innovative approaches to participatory adult education, which aims to use a participatory learning process to stimulate a wider process of change in individuals and communities. Drawing on the ethics and approaches of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), *Reflect* programmes typically deploy a range of visual tools designed to enhance participant involvement and render learning locally relevant (more details below, see also Archer and Cottingham 1996b). The approach first emerged as a response to ‘traditional’ adult education programmes which, according to the innovators of *Reflect*, did not engage learners adequately and failed to produce tangible outcomes. We would like to stress that our research was not designed to provide an evaluation of the particular strengths and weaknesses of *Reflect* as compared to other approaches to adult education, or even of the relative merits of adult literacy programmes as compared to other interventions aimed at empowering women. Indeed, it would be inappropriate to read this report as an evaluation of *Reflect*, for few development projects are subjected to such intense, detailed and sustained scrutiny.¹

While we hope our research offers depth, it does not provide breadth. We made an intensive study of four *Reflect* projects in two countries. We also draw on experience in several other projects that were studied in less detail. These projects obviously cannot be taken as representative of all participatory development projects or of all *Reflect* projects around the world. They may not even be particularly typical of *Reflect* practice in other parts of Uganda and Bangladesh. This is the inescapable limitation of an ethnographic approach that both authors and readers must bear in mind. Nevertheless, other ethnographic studies, including

¹ Those interested in an evaluation of *Reflect* are referred to Riddell (2001).

doctoral research on *Reflect* in El Salvador (Betts 2000), have yielded strikingly similar observations about the contradictions seemingly inherent in participatory development practice.

1.2 Shifting the focus to the literacy programme

It is not our intention to evaluate the benefits of literacy *per se*. In this report we focus on the meanings and uses of the literacy *programme* as an institutional setting within a larger social and cultural system. When we think about other kinds of institution, the distinction is not hard to see. Health policy literature contains many studies of the hierarchical and frequently dysfunctional relationships between doctors and nurses and how these impede the optimal treatment of hospital patients. No one would ever construe these studies as attacks on the intrinsic efficacy of Western biomedicine. Yet we are all too aware that our study, because it fails to offer a glowing endorsement of the claims of particular literacy programmes, may be seen as an attack on the usefulness or importance of literacy in and of itself. This is not our intention.

In fact, we think it is somewhat peculiar that both the defenders and the critics of literacy programmes and policies concentrate nearly all of their energies on debating literacy *per se*. Does the acquisition of reading and writing ability confer certain cognitive advantages, as argued by some, or are these the result of a wider (literate or schooled) social environment? Can we talk about a standardised and universal set of skills that comprise literacy or must we rather base policy on the notion of multiple and equally valuable literacies (public and private, schooled and non-schooled, etc.)? And so on.²

We wonder if ActionAid and its partners have not fallen into the same trap by seizing on literacy as the villain of the piece when *Reflect* practice fails to live up to the very demanding expectations set by *Reflect* theory. Literacy practices and discourses about literacy are certainly part of what goes on in literacy programmes. But they are only a part, and sometimes a rather unimportant one at that. In the same way, mastery of the set curriculum is only a tiny part of the socialisation processes that take place in schools, and the struggles over class, gender and ethnic identity that these processes entail (Willis 1977). Some *Reflect* projects, such as the Madudu programme described in this report, have attempted to down-grade literacy learning within the *Reflect* mix in the apparent hope that this would help facilitators and participants to free themselves from the rigid, unimaginative, prescriptive models of learning associated with literacy programmes and school classrooms, leaving circles free to practise participatory methods without distortion and to actualise the “democratic space” that PRA manuals so compellingly invoke. However, at least in the Madudu case, this solution proved a rather expensive red herring. With or without literacy, mere “methods” proved inadequate to

² These are interesting questions, and, in the hands of the “social uses of literacy” school, they have certainly helped to tease out a richer story about literacy programmes as one particular context, event or set of practices within which literacy acquires meaning. Nevertheless, they still leave us with a story about *literacy* practices.

alter the ideological, economic and political forces that shape life in Madudu and bind all stakeholders (donors, NGO staff, community leaders, facilitators and participants).

We argue that only by widening the scope of enquiry beyond the benefits, meanings, limitations and problems of literacy per se – indeed beyond debates on development methodology generally – is it possible to understand how and why participation in such programmes or use of such methods might “benefit” women. Inward-looking discussions of development methods and tools certainly have their place, but we feel it is time for a closer, more critical focus on the institutional and cultural politics of literacy programmes and development interventions in general. As a small and tentative contribution to such an exploration, we have attempted to trace how “empowerment” and “participation” have actually been played out within the institutional realities of four literacy programmes. We argue that against these realities, the claims of “empowerment” made on behalf of participatory methodologies including *Reflect*, are not only empirically exaggerated, but can often be internally contradictory. And we question whether recent shifts away from a focus on individual empowerment to more politicised concepts such as “rights”, “voice” and “democratic space” resolve, or simply magnify, these problems.

1.3 The historical precursors to empowerment

The power to mould and regulate not just people’s actions and well-being but their beliefs and ideas is, as Bauman (1998), Foucault (1991) and others have shown, what distinguishes the modern state from its less ambitious predecessors.

The civilising mission and the welfare state both have their origins, Bauman argues, in the first waves of dispossession and proletarianisation as capitalism began to take root, and specifically in the Poor Laws of the British Victorian era which tried to control the growing numbers of “vagrants” cut adrift from traditional social moorings. Against a backdrop of growing inequality, the rise of charity work in Victorian England was impelled by middle class anxiety about the breakdown of traditional forms of social control and the future political role of the newly enfranchised working class. Key to the perspective of social historians is that in capitalist societies, charity, or development, is always an attempt to mediate the contested and conflictive relationship between classes (and genders). The objectification of poverty as a social problem demanding expert action (whether the action is framed as state welfare or private charity, self-help or development) can be seen as an attempt by the propertied and privileged to manage and control those beneath them.

Missionaries constantly wrestled with the dilemma of whether their converts really believed or were merely going through the motions, for it was not at all clear to them that heathens possessed the inward conscience needed to make sense of Christian notions of belief and redemption. In contemporary discourse, literacy training has become a popular element of

NGO “empowerment” strategies, and the dilemma has changed little since missionary times. Unfortunately, there are few nuanced analyses of whose interests are at stake in the contemporary construction of the civilising mission being carried forward by NGOs and aid agencies in Bangladesh and Uganda. In fact, the story of participatory development would sound very familiar to Victorian social reformers, whose idea was that “ignorance and prejudice in the treatment of poverty gradually yields to increasing knowledge and sophistication in dealing with its causes and effects” (Stedman-Jones 1971, xvii). Against such self-justifying and complacent narratives, it is necessary to ask whose interests are being served and whose aspirations are being legitimised when NGOs professionalise and package techniques for “empowering” the poor.

Neither “participation” nor “empowerment” make much sense without the right sort of agents to hold power and take part in decision-making. For development organisations, the right sort of agent can only be a clearly bounded individual who can make up his or her “own mind” in a “rational” fashion, who is the hero of his or her own life story and who pursues his or her interests openly and honestly through legitimate channels of public life. Although development workers seldom acknowledge it, this is the same kind of agency constructed and transacted in the institutions of the modern state and the capitalist marketplace.

However, poor and marginalised groups on the periphery of these institutions, with deep roots in pre-capitalist ideologies and cultures, often construct agency and power in far more complex, less individualistic ways. Like missionaries before them, development workers can often be heard lamenting the apathy, passivity, fatalism and traditionalism of their intended beneficiaries, their addiction to superstition, their blind adherence to custom, and their inability to take charge of their own situation and enact a plan for changing it. Rather than struggle to understand non-linear and non-individualised forms of agency and the power relations that underpin them, it is tempting for development workers (like missionaries before them) to seek an easy shortcut for transforming the poor into rational, self-willed, sovereign individuals. As a technique for objectification and inward reflection, literacy (so closely linked to the modern Western experience and expression of what it means to be a rational individual) has often provided that symbolic shortcut.

1.4 Questioning participation

Participatory methods with an “empowerment” ethos, such as the methods that inspired the literacy programmes described in this study, have attempted to effect a fundamental break with the “top-down”, ethnocentric paradigm that defines development as a process of civilising the ignorant. In places, this study may seem dismissive of this effort, or cynical about its motivation. In fact, our research has shown us exactly how entrenched, pervasive and pernicious that supposedly defunct definition still is. It has increased our respect for the

committed people who are struggling to create a new development paradigm, very much against the tide of the ideology and class politics of their own societies, and quite often against the institutionalised interests of the aid world as well. However, the triumphalism of participatory orthodoxy is such that these struggles are seldom openly discussed. That participatory development faces enormous contradictions in practice is not at all surprising, and need not detract from the value or usefulness of participatory approaches, if one has a realistic and honest understanding of the context in which that “practice” unfolds. But instead, we found too many NGO workers and donors using the notions of empowerment, participation and voice to magic away such contradictions. On the one hand, participation is presented almost as a kind of therapy that can catalyse a self-directed, self-willed, authentic process of self-transformation. But curiously, the reported outcomes of this endogenous process (as synthesised, in the case of *Reflect*, in Riddell (2001)) are almost invariably identical to the outcomes foreseen in the old, top-down approach: from the construction of pit latrines and “regular cutting of fingernails” to the adoption of modern farming techniques and the flowering of local associational life. In this way, aid agencies are able to have their bottom-up cake and eat it too – a practice that is seldom good for anyone’s intellectual health. This seems to encourage vastly inflated expectations of what can be accomplished in a literacy programme designed to last nine to twelve months.³ The message being sent to all too many hapless NGO staff could be characterised as follows: not only will poor people achieve self-actualisation and gain the ability to articulate their own demands and aspirations, but this process will lead them to improve their sanitation habits to boot.

If, that is, the NGOs’ interpretation of the programme is accepted. Many of the self-improving disciplines and morally uplifting endeavours that international NGOs took as evidence of their success in catalysing progress and emancipation could equally well be interpreted by local elites as a sign of their success in preserving traditional feminine virtues against a background of chaotically rapid change in gender relations. To take just one example, further discussed in the next chapter, a common action point agreed amongst participants in *Reflect* programmes in the Hindu section of Netrokona and the mixed Hindu and Muslim slums of Dhaka concerned regular bathing. Obviously, this fitted in well with the more generalised notions of cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation that NGOs were keen to promulgate. Like them, it could be seen to signify a new-found attention to demarcating and controlling the boundaries of the self, a new sense of individual responsibility for the integrity of the body and the deliberate taming of nature. But bathing also has enormous significance in the construction of gender and class in “traditional” rural Bangladeshi culture precisely because selves are seen as being so unbounded, and substances pass from one body to the other with such ease. The sheer fact of having to bathe not once but several times in the day is one of the most restrictive of the mundane bodily controls imposed on higher status Hindu women. When one considers that very poor women are largely exempt from

³ Although the ideal length of literacy programmes, as Oxenham et al (2002) point out, remains a subject of considerable debate among donors, in practice many programmes are open-ended, either by design or by default – see also (Turittin 1989).

such observances mainly because they cannot afford to follow them, the significance of “regular bathing” as a *Reflect* action point begins to look rather murkier.

This paradox raises some serious questions about the inherent contradictions of “empowerment” as a route to change. In particular, we argue that the great attraction of participatory development – the notion that it provides a “set of tools” or “methodology” that merely facilitates change without the need to assert power – is ultimately its greatest flaw. Eager to sanitise their own role in local politics and their own place in the struggle over culture and identity, development agencies have latched onto participation as a neutral, apolitical and non-ideological technology, or therapy, which simply allows the poor to “voice” what they have always wanted to say. This mystification takes NGOs even further from a realistic and honest understanding of their own power and how and to whose benefit it is exercised. While providing us all with convenient justifications for our continuing interventions in the name of the poor and oppressed, it actually prevents us from understanding how our resources and influence might alter their lives, for better or for worse.

1.5 Background to Reflect

Between 1993 and 1995, ActionAid began experimenting with ways of marrying the philosophy of the Brazilian left-wing educator, Paulo Freire, with the methodology and tools of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). The key innovation was to dispense with all pre-prepared material – whether primers (textbooks) or the picture cards and “generative words” used by Freireans – basing lessons instead on “graphics” (maps, charts, and diagrams) adapted from PRA. The idea was that members (“participants”) of the literacy class (or “circle”) would produce the graphics on the ground using sticks and pebbles, later progressing to the use of designed symbol cards and, finally, words. The graphics would be based on participants’ knowledge of their own environment and community: village maps, for instance, or rankings of local crops in terms of their nutritional value, cash value and ease of cultivation. As well as habituating participants to the use of marks on paper to represent and structure reality, each graphic would also provide the circle with a “generative” starting point for a Freirean critical dialogue. The facilitator would encourage participants to question the problems and inequities uncovered through a close look at the graphics, and this would encourage participants to transform their reality – or, in less Hegelian language, to agree on practical actions they could take to improve the situation.

Freire’s emancipatory vision has long been a source of moral inspiration but also practical frustration for adult educators. Thus, the idea of combining it with PRA’s relatively easy-to-use “tools” has proved enormously successful. *Reflect*, or “Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques”, is now used by hundreds of organisations in at least 60 countries and has attracted a dedicated international following of adult educators, development workers and community activists.

ActionAid conceived the *Reflect* approach that was piloted in El Salvador, Uganda and Bangladesh. They continue to play a key role in developing the approach and training others in its use. These pilots were evaluated in a 1996 study funded by DFID. The remarkable gains reported in the confidence and autonomy of women participants, as well as the seeming correlation of these gains with increased literacy skills, led to proposals for a more in-depth study to explore long-term results. We chose Uganda and Bangladesh for this follow-up research (for a study on the project in El Salvador see Betts 2000).

1.5.1 Expectations of Reflect

One of *Reflect's* great strengths has been its ability to absorb new thinking and new ideas from a wide variety of sources. The “theory” of *Reflect* has developed considerably since it was first launched to the wider public in 1996. Initially the approach was founded on a Freirean notion of reading and writing as necessary tools or vehicles for abstraction, critical analysis, political organisation and the “decoding” of dominant discourse. But in *Reflect* materials produced since the late 1990s, basic alphanumeric literacy has been downgraded to one of several possible routes to empowerment. There has been a steadily decreasing emphasis on learning to read and write, with concepts such as “creating democratic space”, “analysing power relations” and “communication practices” coming to the fore instead.

Regardless of the narrowness or the breadth, the simplicity or sophistication of the definition of “literacy” they hold, *Reflect* practitioners return again and again to the core notions of “critical analysis”, “planning” and “control over one’s environment”. This points to the deep core of *Reflect's* appeal to development professionals, which we believe has remained unaltered despite the successive elaborations of more complex versions of the *Reflect* approach. It is rooted, most fundamentally, in the Enlightenment belief that society is made and unmade through rational human agency. Underlying *Reflect* is the assumption that every individual, regardless of the circumstances into which she is born, has the same capacity to be the subject of her own history. The world as it is need neither be complacently affirmed nor stridently rejected. Rather, change – or “development” – occurs when individuals are enabled to step back from their day-to-day reality, analyse and critique it, and plan rationally how to change it. In the process, they take control of their predicament. Behind *Reflect's* vision that people must “make their voices heard” and “realise that the power to make changes is in their own hands”, we can recognise Kant’s vision of the enlightened man as one who is no longer dependent on the authority of others, who employs his own powers of reasoning, makes his own judgements of right and wrong and assumes responsibility for his own actions.

This contrasts sharply with the perception of *Reflect* circles by community members, learners and facilitators. They saw them simply as a kind of “school” or “education” for unlettered adults, run by a rich and powerful outside institution, and sought to exploit or control any

prestige and material rewards generated through association with such an activity. On the ground, *Reflect* programmes were situated in a long tradition of education as a civilising and domesticating force for the unruly poor. Indeed, all but one of the programmes that we studied was still firmly organised on the conventional model of the “literacy class”. In other words, participants spent a lot of time practising basic skills such as learning to hold a pencil, write the letters of the alphabet (a complex undertaking for Bangla speakers), sign their names, recognise and combine phonemes and write sums on paper.⁴

At first sight the distance between local perceptions and the emancipatory aims of *Reflect* (see also Foroni et al. 1999) may seem vast. However, in Chapter 2 we argue that in fact the two are much closer together than they seem. What women participants in the *Reflect* projects shared with the NGO staff was an interest in the making of modern selves, in part through the acquisition of literacy, but also through many other activities, symbols and practices that could be rehearsed or performed in the setting of the literacy programme. As the NGO workers framed it, they were enabling women to “take control of their lives” and escape from oppressive dominant norms through an organic process of critical reflection and rational action. As women understood it, they were pursuing enhanced respect and status within the existing social and cultural hierarchies of their community, not least by cultivating the approbation and validation of the powerful and wealthy NGO running the programme.

1.6 The structure of the argument

The status aspirations of poor women do not form part of the blueprint of most development projects. This means it is easy to assume that when a *Reflect* programme yields the predicted results, it is because participants performed to planners’ expectations, i.e. they changed their views and ways as a result of reflection, structured analysis, and debate. Chapter 2 argues that women are often active collaborators in the production of these success stories. For obvious reasons, women participants are keen to please the institutions that are their actual or potential benefactors, however unhappy they might be with aspects of the relationship. It does not cost a woman participant in a literacy class much to attribute all the good that is in her life to the intervention. However, she is motivated to report positively on her experience not just because she wants to impress powerful institutions which she has little means to manipulate otherwise. She might also wish to convince herself and her peers that she really has gone through a big change, that the programme has made her “a better person”.

We would argue that such a partial picture easily misrepresents the broader dynamics of programmes seeking to empower women. A first step towards redeeming our perspective is to explore the ways in which stakeholders in literacy programmes relate to each other in practice. In Chapter 3, we examine some institutional aspects influencing the process of literacy learning.

⁴ In Uganda, for reasons discussed below, practising spoken and written English was also an important activity.

But literacy is not the only or necessarily the most important element of literacy programmes. In Chapter 4, the place of health and hygiene issues in literacy classes is explored. The topic imposes itself since health and hygiene are, and have long been, prominent in virtually all adult literacy programmes in the Third World. Nobody can disagree that good health is desirable, and the amount of time, energy and resources that women participants spend on this are therefore rarely called into question. That said, it is precisely the common-sense legitimacy of this assertion which often prevents us from addressing some of the power issues so clearly entangled with learning about health. The people involved do not view it only as a crucial prerequisite to a healthy life. Taking care of one's own and other people's health also make up a good chunk of what it means to be a "respectable and responsible woman" in Uganda. Certain basic aspects of teaching about health and hygiene, such as building latrines, going to the health centre or boiling drinking water can also mark one out as "modern" – an attribute most of the people interviewed for this research considered very attractive. Understanding the close links that still exist between Western health regimes and the Christian churches illuminates how women (and men) come to view the studying of health as a cleansing and purifying exercise, a rite of passage through which one is converted from an ignorant, uneducated person to a decent and educated person who is close to God.

It is easy to see that this value laden background poses a great challenge to present day literacy programmes which seek to empower women through the valuing of their own resources. In the past, poor illiterate women were perceived to be ignorant. Literacy programmes unabashedly sought to change their thinking and behaviour and found no difficulty in imposing bodily regimes modelled on European middle class ideals of propriety. Today, the emphasis on programmes being learner-driven puts a moral ban on such direct imposition. But how much does this effectively change the way that women are confronted with matters of health and hygiene in literacy classes? Is the literacy facilitator found training women how to sit and kneel correctly the exception to the rule, or simply a logical extension of the curriculum in a context where the understanding of health and hygiene is bound up with moral behaviour? Time and again it is observed that women learners respond particularly eagerly to health and hygiene related activities resulting from the classes. Is this focus on a relatively narrow set of health and hygiene messages attractive because it is seen as a way of asserting control over their lives, and should it thus be understood as empowering? Is it simply a way of gaining status, perhaps at the expense of others (i.e. those who remain "ignorant" and "dirty")? Or is it, against all ideological pledges, a convenient way of confining women to a traditionally caring, feminine role, denying them access to still predominantly male spheres?

We take this question further in Chapter 5, where we explore the wider ambitions of *Reflect* staff to foster collective organisation and to encourage women to "speak" in the public arena, and relate these to women's own aspirations to gain status, respectability and "refinement" through their involvement in the *Reflect* circles. To many women this implies learning how

to become better versed in speaking the dominant language or practising how to comply more convincingly with dominant behaviour norms. Such aims result in circle practices that are difficult to reconcile with the expectations *Reflect* practitioners invest in participatory practice.

In the conclusion, we address the question that some readers will already be asking: “Fine, these are interesting criticisms - but what can be *done*?” Our response is to ask for a clarification: what can be done *about what*, and by *whom*, in order to bring about *what ends*? This is not simply an attempt at a clever piece of academic argument. To our minds it goes to the heart of the dilemmas faced by the whole project of participatory development. If the question is, “What can be done by international NGOs about the fact that x% of Bangladeshi women are illiterate?” then it is possible to have a clear and productive discussion – on much the same lines advocated in early *Reflect* materials – about why illiteracy is a problem, the sources of the problem (and indeed whether it is possible to tackle this problem on its own), the possible roles of various actors in solving it, the costs and benefits of possible interventions (e.g. provision of more adult literacy programmes versus attempts to improve the coverage and quality of primary education), leading into an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of various literacy programmes that have been tried in Bangladesh.

However, the question may be something like, “What can be done about the fact that Bangladeshi women are poor and marginalised and have no voice and lack confidence and cannot read or write?” In this case, any good facilitator would say that the discussion will go round in circles until the question is broken down into smaller bits, and NGOs reach greater clarity on what improvements they want to see in the lives of particular women, and how far their aims differ from or relate to the needs and hopes of these women; as well as what resources and power they have with which to achieve these changes, as opposed to what resources and power women themselves can mobilise. A crucial part of this analysis involves drastically scaling back NGOs’ expectations of personal and social transformation following on from exposure to participatory methods. Indeed, if participatory development has any chance of being useful to actual poor people, we must immediately put an end to the uncritical and often disingenuous celebration of the “agency” of the poor as the solution to poverty – for it is precisely the attempt to create “agents” of the right kind to drive progress forward that has involved missionaries, modernisers and now NGOs in some of the most prescriptive development work of all.

1.7 The field sites

1.7.1 Banda (*Uganda*)

A suburb of Kampala, Banda is an urban squatter area that has grown to its present importance since the early 1970s. Prior to this time, many people feared to settle in the area due to its proximity to the army barracks. Perhaps because the early reign of Idi Amin saw a relatively more disciplined army or, more likely, because land pressure around Kampala

intensified, the population of Banda started growing and is now estimated at 13,000. Baganda make up half of the population, followed by Ateso (7 percent), Acholi (9 percent) and Basoga (7 percent). Banda is a highly transient and young community with one survey showing that nearly 30 percent of the population had only moved to Banda during the previous year, while only 6 percent of respondents had been born in Banda. Although 90 percent of the population is aged below 36 years this youthfulness is mainly due to the proximity of various institutions of higher learning in Kyambogo. The area is divided into eleven zones of which the most distinguishable is certainly B1, the "Acholi quarters", where many displaced people from Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan live in close proximity to the army barracks. Up on a hill and divided from the rest of the parish by a large main road, people in the Acholi quarters often live in more squalid conditions than those on the other side of the road. For their sustenance they depend mainly on a quarry where men, women and children spend long days breaking up stones destined for one of the many construction sites around Kampala. On the other side of the road, the occupations people pursue are much more varied, with petty trade and casual labour being the common options. Business owners and office workers are other, less common, options. In one third of all households a woman is the main earner. Only a very small minority of residents own the land on which they live. Rapid gentrification means that only a very few, mostly long-term, residents feel secure in their tenure. Even during the period of this research, rents in some areas more than doubled. Intense building activities can be observed on many nights, long after the city authorities have gone to sleep.

BCDP is a community organisation run by volunteers and a minority of professionals, mostly recruited among long-standing inhabitants of Banda. Originally founded in 1993 by the Irish NGO GOAL, BCDP faced a rocky transition period in 1996 when GOAL ran short of funds. In spite of severe constraints, BCDP managed to maintain several of its former activities, such as operating a health clinic and providing clean water and adult education. The organisation has also managed to build a sizeable community hall that is now used for meetings and cultural events. As is to be expected, BCDP activists are also important political players on the local scene and when their favoured candidates lost several seats in the Local Council elections of 1998 this posed a serious threat to the running of BCDP. The new post holders insisted that if BCDP was "community-owned", all assets should come under their control. While the members of BCDP have been admirably protective of their organisation (from which they reap very marginal financial benefits, if any), the tensions around who should control BCDP continue to this day.

ActionAid funded BCDP's adult education programme from 1996 until 2001. At its height the programme had 14 classes with, on average, 25 participants enrolled in each. However, actual attendance was often well below these figures. Even at the start of the programme literacy rates in Banda were high, standing at 86 percent of the population. Many learners joined the programme hoping to learn English or to gain access to micro-credit facilities, demands which BCDP partly encouraged and yet struggled to respond to.

1.7.2 Madudu (Uganda)

A rural sub-county of Mubende District in Central Uganda, Madudu lies 160km to the west of Kampala. Looking at a map of Uganda it appears centrally located. However, the reason many people consider it backward and remote today is probably more to do with it having been a remote and contested outpost of the Buganda kingdom in earlier times. This is the most likely reason for the poor transport links and infrastructure provision that persist today. In colonial times, the District Commissioners seem to have put considerable energy into finding explanations as to why Mubende, year on year, failed to fulfil its tax and labour targets. Low and declining birth-rates were blamed in some years, while in others it was noted that the sparse population migrated out for work purposes and failed to return by the end of the tax year. Even early in the twentieth century the administration appears to have encouraged some inward migration from the South West of the protectorate so as to populate the area. In recent years, due to the continuing land pressure in South West Uganda and, more importantly, the conflict in Rwanda and Congo, settlers of Bakiga and Banyarwanda origin have entered the area, which they now share with the Banyoro and Baganda populations resident here. In certain areas of Madudu it was possible, until recently, to lay claim to a piece of land that one had cleared of bush with virtually no payment necessary. Now the pressure on land is increasing, and its commodification progresses quickly. Farming is the mainstay of people living in Madudu. Maize, coffee and tobacco are the main cash crops while food crops such as groundnuts and beans are also becoming increasingly marketable, even if the prices farmers can command are often much lower than those paid closer to the main road between Mubende Town and Kampala.

In 1998, the *Reflect* Co-ordination Unit (RCU) of ActionAid Uganda started a *Reflect* project that was intended as an entry point for a much larger community development project. This was the first *Reflect* project directly initiated by the RCU and as such it constituted a significant departure from the advisory role the unit had hitherto played to projects both within and outside of ActionAid. The staff of the unit had previously been critical of the way other ActionAid projects implemented *Reflect*, so they envisaged the Madudu project also as a chance to prove the worth of the methodology. The early design of the project was thus deliberately ambitious. Taking its cues from international debates about *Reflect*, the project was to be first and foremost about “development”, with literacy teaching taking a back seat. The second important feature was that the project was to be community-run to a much greater extent than other projects. Only shortly into the programme it emerged that funding was not nearly as secure as the implementing staff had assumed. A new management team in Kampala found several weaknesses in the project that had previously gone unrecognised.⁵ Negotiations within the organisation took the better part of a year, before it was clear that the project would not go ahead as planned. While limited funding for

⁵ Some of these weaknesses were directly linked to the project design but the more weighty ones were to do with the way the programme contravened policy commitments of the organisation at large. A fundamental issue was that ActionAid Uganda was committed to spending more of its funds in poorer regions of the country than Mubende District. In fact, the offices to which this project was attached were winding down by the time the project was initiated.

the running of circles was made available, the staff did not have the resources to honour the plans for infrastructure investment and other activities. To RCU staff, association with the project became a source of embarrassment and, perhaps understandably, the competition to continue working on this project was not intense. Meanwhile, the “owners” of the project in Madudu communities were often the last to find out how “their” project was coming along.

1.7.3 Netrokona (Bangladesh)

Netrokona District is situated in Northern Bangladesh, 160 kilometres away from Dhaka and has a population of approximately two million. There are 50 NGOs operating in the District, sometimes competing with each other in the same areas. In spite of this only 10-15 percent of the entire population is estimated to have been affected by NGO activities. SUS is the largest local NGO. Based in Netrokona Town, it works with peri-urban and rural populations in several parts of the District (mainly in Sadar and Atpara thanas). With a diversity of funding sources, SUS covers the breadth of development interventions currently available to Bangladeshi NGOs which, apart from adult education, include savings and credit, health and hygiene promotion, non-formal children’s education, employment counselling, a model farm project and legal assistance. With the vast majority of staff originating from Netrokona, SUS is firmly rooted in the structures of the District, maintaining close institutional and personal links with district and town authorities. Not least due to its charismatic founding leader, SUS also plays an important part in shaping NGO politics and policies at the national level. Many of the women who take part in the SUS *Reflect* programme come from landless or near landless households. Many participants moved on to take part in SUS savings and credit programme once they had passed through the *Reflect* programme.

1.7.4 Mauluvibazar (Bangladesh)

Situated in the hills outside of Sylhet, Mauluvibazar is known for its vast tea estates. Workers in the tea gardens are not from the area but have long been coming from Madras and other parts of India. Historically, they were bonded labour with no means of escaping the poor working and living conditions in the tea gardens. Although contemporary workers are no longer formally bonded they still have no realistic opportunities of moving from the tea gardens into neighbouring communities, where comparable work yields better income. The surrounding communities of Bengali speakers have little incentive to integrate the mainly Hindu workers. Life on the tea plantations remains isolated and regimented, with workers living in housing that belongs to the estate, receiving food rations from the estate and sending their children to estate schools. Until recently part of the wages was paid in alcohol. Alcoholism is a serious problem on many estates. Violence is also common and often linked to the poor working conditions workers suffer. BAWPA is the development arm of the communist party and ran *Reflect* projects with women tea pluckers with one aim being to foster political conscientisation. Since tea plucking on the estates is a lonely affair, many women did appreciate this opportunity to meet up. Unfortunately, one year into the

programme, irregularities in BAWPA's savings and credit operation meant that a large number of women lost their savings and were no longer inclined to take part in BAWPA's projects. While there was strong agreement among participants and former workers of BAWPA that the operations at the local level were not to be blamed, there was a high level of disillusionment with BAWPA specifically, and development organisations generally.

1.8 Research methodology

Qualitative data from ethnographic observations in four field sites provide the empirical foundation for the analysis presented here. The emphasis was on following a cohort of *Reflect* participants as they passed through the programme cycle. In Uganda, Fiedrich and Nalwoga observed more than 300 *Reflect* sessions over a period of three years. Roughly 80 percent of these visits took place in four circles from which key informants were drawn. Both researchers lived near these four circles and regularly took part not only in the circle proceedings but also in every day activities such as farming, brewing, management of household chores, market interactions and medical treatment. Partaking in community events such as weddings, funerals, church services and political meetings further helped the researchers to build close contacts with both participants and non-participants and to understand the contexts they live in.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted not only with learners and facilitators but also with their male partners and with a wide range of people with no direct involvement in the classes.

Visits to other circles in the same and other projects helped ascertain which dynamics were context specific and which had wider resonance.⁶ One-off visits were inevitably formal, sometimes more akin to focus group discussions. By contrast, the regular observations in our 'target circles' soon became routine both to observers and observed. The fact that classroom interactions were a ritual that facilitators and participants were themselves newly inventing was as conducive to the easy integration of the researchers as the educational context, in which participants expected researchers to take notes. Only when specifically asked to contribute did the researchers take active part in the proceedings, since it was noticed that such initiatives otherwise quickly led to the undermining of the facilitator.

While this was not an action research project where explicit change objectives inform and guide research practice, the presence of researchers always and inevitably has an effect on the situation at hand. This is perhaps more true when the researcher is male and white, as in the case of Fiedrich in Madudu (and Banda), but also holds true for other axes of difference. Nalwoga's experience in Banda revealed that even a Ugandan woman researcher is bound by class and educational background. In Bangladesh, Haq is not only a renowned academic but

⁶ At times, the research also draws on research Fiedrich (1996) previously carried out in a third project in Bundibugyo.

was also known to the TV watching public as the former host of a popular show on family relations. In the case of Nessa, being an upper-class, high caste woman placed considerable constraints on her mobility, effectively limiting the extent to which the research in Bangladesh could follow a similar design as in Uganda (as had been originally envisaged).⁷ Rather than making futile attempts to diffuse the obvious differences in status that existed between researchers and participants, the team tried, as much as possible, to integrate in its analysis the differing vantage points from which interpretations were made.

In Uganda, the continuous presence in the field sites presented the researchers with many opportunities to discuss a wide range of issues concerning *Reflect*, development and life in the area more generally. In Bangladesh, the restriction to mobility and also the eventual change-over of staff necessitated a more formal approach, with organised focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews informing our analysis more than direct observations. Since quantitative surveys already were part and parcel of the Monitoring and Evaluation process in the projects in Bangladesh it was felt that this research should not replicate those efforts. However, in Uganda a survey exercise was considered useful to supplement the qualitative data. Women participants from 20 circles (10 in each project) were interviewed along with their male partners (where applicable). Interviews were also conducted with a control group of women who were not participants. The first survey was carried out from January to March 1999, and the second traced the same respondents one year later. 232 out of the original 306 respondents were interviewed in January to March 2000 (i.e. 65%).⁸ Notwithstanding the limitations of this research, it is the most in-depth study of *Reflect* to date.

'Empowerment' is still a widely employed buzzword in contemporary understandings of development. To criticise the concept for its failure to be explicit about its ideological leanings is correct but pointless. For the attraction of empowerment is its fuzzy character, its potential to conceal meanings, thus lending the appearance of deliberate, positive transformation to processes of social change that, in reality, are often rather murky, long-winded and unpredictable. To grasp its significance in specific contexts it is necessary to explore how donors, international NGOs and national elites endow "empowerment" with meaning, both implicitly and explicitly. How are women learners in literacy programmes expected to change? The following chapter pursues this question and places it side by side with women learners' reports of change through literacy programmes.

⁷ The original intention was to choose ten women from each of the two circles in any one field site as key informants. Visits and observations with them were to be complemented by semi-structured interviews with their male partners (if any) and with women who lived in similar conditions but did not take part in *Reflect*. In Uganda, the number of informants was increased usually to comprise all members of a circle. In Bangladesh, the original number of informants were adhered to but due to the limitations outlined above the number of contacts with the researchers was lower than in Uganda.

⁸ While it was relatively uncomplicated to revisit respondents in Madudu, the same was not true for Banda, where the majority of people live in rental accommodation and are highly mobile. Even those who had moved within Banda could rarely be traced. Since many of the men work outside of Banda over extended periods of time, this group was particularly difficult to access.

Chapter 2 **Sisters doing it for themselves? Aid agencies and the ambiguities of women's empowerment**

2.1 **Defining empowerment**

The notion of “empowering” poor and marginalised women has a great deal of common-sense appeal. It may seem obvious that anyone would benefit from increased self-confidence and self-respect, the ability to act effectively in the public sphere, the ability to control one’s income, political awareness and membership of groups and committees, actions to improve the future of one’s children, and the ability to plan for the future, among other “indicators of empowerment” cited by Burchfield (1997) and others. However, in our field sites, such “indicators” had little bearing on the reality of women’s complex strategies for coping and the webs of interdependence and resistance that they wove and unwove every day.

Many other writers have complained about the vagueness and slipperiness of the use of the term “empowerment” in contemporary development discourse (Schapiro 1995, 31). To some, empowerment is a political concept that invokes collective struggle to throw off the yoke of unjust and oppressive social relations and to achieve “power over” resources. To others, it is a psychological concept that refers to the consciousness and perceptions of individuals, or the “power to” express and act on one’s desires. To others, with no lesser claim to the term, the adoption of family planning advice is empowering. And it certainly seemed that we were not alone in our bafflement, for as we began the research we were overwhelmed with requests from practitioners to construct some kind of index or scoring system with which to define and measure empowerment. There have indeed been many attempts at conceptual clarification and even at devising indicators and scales of empowerment, but the more we delved into them, the more we came to feel that these efforts miss the point.

No matter how exaggerated, ambiguous or misconceived the “evidence” on the ground, NGO staff from the villages right back to the head office in London still clung tenaciously to the notion that their programmes were transforming women from silent, isolated, passive figures, caught in the murky shadows of oppressive tradition, into articulate, self-controlled, forward-looking individuals, determined to defend their rights, moving freely in the bright light of knowledge and choice. There is no question that the idea of empowerment is enormously motivating and meaningful for many development workers – and not surprisingly, because it leaves us with the heartening feeling that through our supportive interventions, women themselves have freely chosen to embrace exactly the values that we ourselves hold dear. However, we argue that in fact “empowerment” is better understood as a set of metaphors that have normative value and symbolic power for the would-be “empowerers”, rather than as a factual description or theoretical explanation of changes in the lives of the “empowered”. Indeed, in our view the prodigious ability of empowerment to generate appealing, quantifiable but conveniently vague metaphors of progress depends precisely on its “slipperiness”.

We signal this by talking of empowerment narratives, rather than indicators or evidence. And we argue that despite their seemingly radical attempt to valorise the knowledge, agency and “voices” of women themselves, empowerment approaches do not substantially deviate from the linear pathways towards “modernity” laid out by missionaries, colonial rulers and aid agencies over the past century. A particular feature of empowerment approaches, which we explore in this and the next chapter, is an obsession with the formation of disciplined, rational, self-controlled individuals. Missionaries hoped to accomplish this by helping the heathen to discover and train their consciences and open an inner dialogue with God. NGO workers today often see the process of “participation” itself as a similar gateway to self-realisation. Under the new guise of participation, would-be “empowerers” continue to prescribe the adoption of “modern” attitudes and behaviours as the answer to poverty. However, we suggest in the final section of this chapter that the “empowered” continue to swallow the pills selectively.

2.2 **Gender and poverty: the context of NGO work in Uganda and Bangladesh**

The concept of “empowerment” of the poor as a rationale and objective of mainstream development programmes rose to popularity in the 1990s, at a time when agencies were increasingly realising (or being forced to realise) that simply dotting some tube wells and dispensaries around the place was not making much of an impact on poverty. ActionAid had been a strongly welfare-oriented charity since its founding in 1976, but began to face up to this dilemma in the mid-1990s. As in other NGOs, growing doubts over the efficacy of “service delivery” threatened to create a real crisis of confidence and motivation within the organisation. If the number of schools or miles of road constructed is no longer taken as sufficient evidence of a contribution to reducing poverty, then what to do and where to look instead?

2.2.1 **“Welfare plus capacity building”**

As recorded in the excellent Country Programme Review undertaken by ActionAid Uganda in 2000 (Wallace, T) one response popular among mainstream development NGOs has been a growing investment in programmes intended to enable people to “take control of their own lives”. Typically, such programmes were run side by side with continuing investments in infrastructure and welfare. The resulting approach has sometimes been termed “welfare plus capacity-building”. The most prominent and perhaps most widespread instance of this was the addition of small loan schemes, subsidised by the sponsoring NGO, to the conventional panoply of integrated development initiatives. Theoretically intended to turn the poor into micro-entrepreneurs by easing their access to credit, in practice these schemes often put more emphasis on saving than on borrowing, with a corresponding emphasis on inculcating the virtues of thrift and hard work. Training, awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives of all kinds also flourished. The ActionAid Uganda review mentions, for example, teacher

training, training for Traditional Birth Attendants, water and hygiene education, training local committees in planning, budgeting, proposal-writing and project management, training for HIV/AIDS counsellors, and of course *Reflect*. A similar range of initiatives could have been found in ActionAid Bangladesh at the time.⁹

2.2.2 The concern with gender equity

A growing concern with gender equity was also an important trend in donor agencies and international NGOs during the 1980s and 1990s. The reasons that ActionAid and other development organisations began to devote greater resources to projects specifically aimed at improving women's wellbeing and position in society are complex. At one level this could be read as a breakthrough for feminists who had long argued that the benefits of mainstream development went mainly to men and that a failure to address underlying gender inequalities often meant that development interventions actually worsened women's position. At another level, it could be questioned whether women simply seemed more amenable to having their "capacity built", or if targeting women, who are often stereotyped as altruistic and non-political, offered NGOs a way of maintaining the precious illusion of their own neutrality.

We would also argue that gender empowerment as practised by NGOs in our field sites could be seen as a continuation of a process started by missionaries and eagerly taken up by early nationalist leaders, in which ideals of femininity are used to redefine the articulation of the "private sphere" (of kinship and subsistence production) and the "public sphere" (of the nation-state and the marketplace). Certainly, in both Uganda and Bangladesh, women's empowerment projects were taking place against a background of fierce and sometimes fundamental contestation and change in gender relations. The "woman question" was also a vehicle for other hotly contested issues of ethnicity, nationhood and class. Structures of family, kinship and production have been subject to quite radical upheavals in both societies in recent years as production for the market takes precedence over production for household consumption, and as women take up new and more visible production roles. In both cases these processes represent an intensification of long-term trends that have been under way since cash cropping was introduced during the colonial period.

2.2.3 Women and work in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, "traditionally, men have done field-based agricultural work while women's responsibilities have been confined to the work carried out within the household. Because of the perceived public-domestic distinction, any woman entering the public domain is perceived to be risking violation of her *sotitto* (chastity)" (Nasreen 1995). However, the past 15 years or

⁹ An accompanying trend, discussed later in this report, was the shift towards using local partner organisations to implement and manage the delivery of services. In our study, two of the *Reflect* programmes were directly run by ActionAid's field offices, and three were funded and supervised by ActionAid (which also provided other inputs, such as training and manuals) but managed by local NGOs.

so have seen the accelerated reduction of landholding to non-viable units, the loss of land through indebtedness and forced sales, and growing impoverishment, all of which have helped to force subsistence households to become wage-based households (World Bank 1996). At the same time, workers have been leaving the agricultural sector for non-agricultural occupations such as manufacturing. For many poor people, total family participation in income-producing activities has become imperative for the family's survival (Hossain, et al. 1990). From the mid-1980s, textile manufacturers began to recruit women on a large scale, marking the start of a massive wave of women joining the urban labour force. In the late 1980s the number of economically active women in urban areas was increasing by 50% annually. The mushrooming of income generating projects and public works schemes, sponsored by government and non-government organisations alike, made available new forms of employment for women in rural areas. At the same time, in areas like Netrokona, the same forces of landlessness and indebtedness impelled a large number of men to seek contract work in the rich Gulf states. This trend also left many women in charge of the household for long periods, and presented them with a need and a rationale for breaking with traditions of purdah.

There has been a mirror trend among the middle class, also facing a squeeze on income and the need for two incomes in order to maintain living standards and keep up with growing aspirations to educate children through to graduate level. Educated women have increasingly sought employment in the "respectable" occupation of teaching, and more recently in the growing number of NGOs, donor programmes and government agencies providing services such as community development, micro-finance, health and family planning programs. Quotas for women in local government have created new opportunities for visible participation in the public sphere.

2.2.4 Changing ideologies

The rapid pace of these changes has left unresolved contradictions in gender ideologies. Intensified proletarianisation and landlessness have undermined traditional patriarchal authority. On the one hand, the state has embraced the cause of more and better education, health care and training for women, as productive workers whose previously untapped labour will help to develop the nation (and will specifically help to drive the expansion of export-based manufacturing). On the other hand, the fundamentalist Islamic movement, and the backlash against female independence that helps to fuel it, have also proven politically indispensable to weak Bangladeshi governments struggling to legitimise themselves. "Socialized in traditions that justify male superiority on the basis of their provider role, men are frustrated and humiliated at being unable to fulfil their traditional role and at the threat posed by women's increasing spatial mobility and access to paid employment," writes Nasreen (1995). Tapping into these fears, the state has been quick to present itself as a champion of Islam, not least by reinforcing Muslim family law.

Regulating women's dress, behaviour, appearance and movement through public space is central to the fundamentalist project. As for Bengali nationalists decades ago, female virtue is

the privileged repository of a traditional (Islamic) identity perceived to be under threat or in crisis. In the 1990s, Islamic leaders in Bangladesh condemned women for the destruction of the soil and causing crop failure because they go out to work. "Fundamentalism," as Chhachhi (1989) explains, "provides an ideological justification for bringing women back under the authority and control of men." But the issue of women's labour and sexuality is also the one sphere where it is still possible for men to feel that they exercise some kind of control.

2.2.5 Women and politics in Uganda

Among the Ugandan middle classes as among development workers and academics, the engagement of many women in the guerrilla war waged by the National Resistance Army (NRA) under Yoweri Museveni is often interpreted as an important turning point in terms of women's place in politics and society at large. Boyd (1989) or Wakoko and Lobao (1996) credit the courageous involvement of large numbers of women, often in contravention of their assigned role, for convincing the male leaders of the National Resistance Movement (NRM)¹⁰ to become gender sensitive. Whatever the reasons, women NRA activists did go on to establish a strong, well-organised women's movement with the backing and the ear of government, and the NRM government has, like the Bangladeshi government, identified its project of nation-building and development with the unlocking of women's capacities and productivity. In the early years of the new regime, some significant breakthroughs were made. Not only did it become more acceptable for women to be politicians, but a policy of affirmative action also meant that women's moves into positions of leadership eased significantly at both local and national level. Affirmative action also helped young middle class women to gain easier access to higher education, a plethora of NRM-aligned and donor-funded women's organisations offered them employment, and a wide range of legislative measures were passed to afford better protection of women's rights in the domestic sphere.¹¹

Respondents to our survey said that their opportunities to get involved in public life, politically or otherwise, have also increased.¹² Most women regard these changes as positive and are, at least for

¹⁰ After the bush war, the governing forces were renamed from NRA to NRM. The term used now is 'the movement'.

¹¹ Recent attempts by women activists to pass legislation granting married women a share of their husband's property have shown the limits, however, of these gains. The campaign met with open objection from President Museveni, and women activists threatened for the first time to lobby women against voting for the Movement. This led to a series of covert threats from the Movement government, reminding women (activists) that they had until then enjoyed a privileged position with the powers-that-be and that they were under the obligation to reciprocate with loyalty (Museveni's speech on women's day 2000). It is interesting to note that this first public disagreement between (parts of) the women's movement and the President was over an issue that touches the core of male privilege. If women did gain rights to a large share of the household's property this would not only significantly promote their own opportunities for action, it would also limit men's opportunities to acquire several wives and to exercise control over them. Previous efforts by the women's movement have often sought to promote women's rights without posing such an overt challenge to patriarchy. Much of the campaign work against domestic violence would, for example, have to be classified as an attempt to protect women against an aspect of patriarchy (and one that contradicts deeply held norms of how husbands should behave), not as a vehicle for arguing for its abolition. In fact, even now, the Ugandan women's movement often sees it as necessary to support its arguments by emphasising women's traditional responsibilities as mothers and wives. This certainly helps to make women's issues more broadly acceptable than a stronger focus on women's rights for their *own sake* could ever do but it also, unwittingly, gives credence to patriarchal norms.

¹² Figures on this development are hard to come by since there is no data from earlier decades for comparison, due to the civil strife. The assertions made here are drawn from our own interviews in the two Ugandan field sites.

now, willing to accept that they entail a higher workload. A woman who gets elected onto a Local Council, for example, will often face even stronger pressures to be a good housewife and mother and must be careful how much of her responsibilities she delegates to others if she does not want to become the object of disapproval. (Tamale 1999).

Local councils in Uganda

Local Councils (LCs) are the political administrative system closely associated with Uganda's current national government.

Formerly called Resistance Councils, LCs were first instituted by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) during the bush war so as to institute structures of democratic governance in the territories they held. Today the system extends over the whole country. Level 1 (LC1) would be the council of a village or a zone. Ten representatives are elected (through lining up behind candidates), of which at least four must be women. Local Councils have paralegal jurisdiction and can pass by-laws.

But while women's activism within the NRM (now renamed the "Movement") has certainly contributed to opening up new space for women at the local level, other factors are at least as important for poor women – and above all the shift towards agricultural production for the marketplace, in which women farmers have been heavily involved. At a time when other African countries were introducing market-oriented changes to the agricultural sector at a relatively slow, continuous pace, Uganda was still in civil strife. Soon after the end of the fighting, the government signed agreements with the IMF and the World Bank and agriculture was liberalised in short order. In our project areas, many women were simply better prepared for the demands of this new market era than men. Throughout the long period of civil strife, women had continued cultivating food crops while men, if they weren't fighting, often found it more profitable to spend their time smuggling or secret trading. Surveys in the 1990s showed that about 90% of rural women were engaged in agriculture, compared to only about 50% of rural men. As early as 1992, one study showed that nearly half of all women farmers were already involved in growing non-traditional export crops.

In 1995 the World Bank estimated that about two thirds of food production was still retained for home use, but this share was declining as more food was marketed on a regular basis. Many of the main food crops, such as beans, maize or groundnuts, were becoming more marketable as cash crops, and traders increasingly started to make their way into the villages. This meant women gained more opportunities for trade. For women in urban areas, the possibilities of becoming involved in resale activities also increased.¹³

¹³ It is not our intention here to sing the unqualified praise of liberalisation. Women and men in our research site find it continuously difficult to cope with the variations in crop prices from season to season. They also notice that fertilisers and extension advice are increasingly expensive or more difficult to obtain. But for many women the upsurge in trade has created new possibilities to earn money which were not available before.

2.2.6 Changing family life in Uganda

As in Bangladesh, the rate of change in economic and political life has outpaced change in the sphere of ideology, exposing the strains and internal contradictions in the norms of patriarchy. In Buganda, while assets are considered commonly owned by husband and wife, the husband controls them. “Tradition” would dictate that a wife should turn over her crops to her husband when it is time to sell, and that he should also decide how the proceeds will be spent. Many of the women and men we interviewed were eager to present their own situation according to this norm. In practice, however, men sometimes managed to exert this level of control and sometimes did not. Baganda say that a man is to consult with other adult members of the household on important decisions, and he is meant to consider the interests of those concerned. Some men argued that the control their wife exercised was really a concession from them and thus, ultimately, under their control. Some, in the face of evidence to the contrary, denied that women had effective control over, say, land or the sending to school of children. And yet others emphasised that it was better for a woman to have her own resources since it cuts down on conflict and makes for more harmonious relationships.

And, of course, many women escaped male control over economic resources by the simple fact of not being married, or more likely, no longer being married. While it is still imperative, particularly for poor women, to have been married at least once and to have children, many women who separate from their first partner report having a lot more weight in decisions about and within subsequent partnerships (if any). There have long been women who have lived on their own in Buganda, but the number of female headed households has risen substantially and our respondents pointed to the generally increased acceptance of single women as being an ordinary part of life. Before, many women who got divorced or were widowed had to withstand significant pressure from family and others around them if they did not want to remarry straight away. Today, such pressure is much reduced. Indeed, it may well be that men find it harder to adapt to life without a wife than women find it to manage without a husband. Successful manhood, in many Bantu-speaking East African cultures, depends on forming a homestead and producing children, and “a man without a wife cannot maintain a household successfully; he is forced to either demean himself with ‘women’s work’ or to rely on another household for food” (Heald 1999, 80). But the reality is that, with steep cash payments increasingly demanded in addition to traditional symbolic brideprice exchanges, and with parents increasingly expecting boys to foot the bill themselves,¹⁴ many young men never manage to save up enough to marry. Others marry late or seek out divorced older women who already have their own house and land.

¹⁴ In Buganda, bride price has traditionally been a symbolic gesture of comparatively little material value. A marriage proved its value through the bonds it reinforced or created between families and clans. Today, whether because such bonds are less useful than before or simply because marriage is no longer seen to be very effective in sustaining such bonds, cash payments are expected. Similarly, the parents of boys, who used to pay for and arrange marriages, now see less prestige in doing so, given that clan relationships have decreased in significance.

During the period of our research, many of the anxieties and tensions over the weakening of traditional patriarchal roles were expressed in the debate over AIDS.¹⁵ For many years, Uganda ranged among the countries with the highest rate of HIV infection, with some estimates claiming that as much as one third of the population was directly affected. Today the figures are said to have decreased to less than 10 percent of the population. Many respondents said that AIDS was a factor in making it acceptable for women to live on their own. Less predictable, however, was the intensity of discussion around the widespread assumption, particularly among women, that men are responsible for spreading the disease. Considering that norms of sexual behaviour forbid women to be promiscuous while encouraging men to show sexual prowess with different partners, it is not surprising that most people in our research sites considered men the culprits in transmitting AIDS. It is unclear to what extent these assumptions are borne out in this area, but that does not affect the argument. The fact is that men are seen to be guilty of destroying their own families. This is significant, since one of the roles that both women and men commonly ascribe to men is to protect and sustain the family. At the same time, our respondents also expressed the fact that single women in urban areas are vulnerable to accusations that they are responsible for spreading not only AIDS but all kinds of perceived immorality (Davis 2001; Ogden 1995; 1996).

2.2.7 Development programmes and gender roles in Uganda and Bangladesh

In both Uganda and Bangladesh, intensified commodification and the new productive roles this has created for women have put the existing structure of male power under strain. This has led to an uneven and far from linear process of change in gender roles, which has involved gains and losses for both women and men, and which has been fiercely contested on the terrain of ideology as well as on the terrain of practice. In addition, changes in gender norms and relationships were implicated in other equally contested processes of state formation and economic change. Needless to say, these trends are likely to have had an enormous influence on factors singled out as key indicators of empowerment (such as the degree of financial autonomy enjoyed by women, their mobility outside the home and their say in decision-making). NGO staff members working in the field were certainly aware of the complexities of struggles over gender roles. Within ActionAid, some of these complexities have even been documented in the increasingly sophisticated analyses of the causes of poverty that all country programmes are required to carry out when preparing the “country strategy paper” that accompanies their budget requisitions to head office. But when it came to evaluating the impact of NGO programmes, the historical context suddenly disappeared from view. Indeed, there were important incentives *not* to situate development programmes in a historical or social context, for this would have blurred the whole question of “impact”, making it difficult, if not impossible, for the NGO to assign causality to its interventions. No matter how participatory their methods or how profound their rejection of “top-down”, ethnocentric approaches, development NGOs are still seemingly compelled to show that they are producing “development”. They must find evidence that progress is being made – that

¹⁵ In the last few years, several debates concerning sexuality (about defilement, rape, homosexuality) have received much public attention in Uganda. This probably would not have happened had AIDS not changed attitudes to what one can and can not say in public. But few of these debates have considered the implications for gender relations.

women are going from a bad situation to a good, or at least somewhat better one – and that *their* programme can be credited for it in some way. This is where any effort to understand the specificity of local contexts inevitably gave way to simplistic myth-making.

2.3 What has Reflect done for you? Assessing evidence of empowerment

Demonstrating the effectiveness of “capacity-building” programmes (as compared to say, vaccination schemes) presents development agencies with a special dilemma. There are few concrete outputs to be measured and counted, and even the economic benefits of participation in micro-finance schemes often turn out to be less than straightforward. More fundamentally, once it has been acknowledged that poverty has structural causes that can not and will not be tackled by the construction of ten or ten thousand tube wells, it is not clear how the addition of micro-level interventions such as training programmes to the traditional menu of integrated rural development will make much difference. As Kaplan (1999) points out, the trouble with the familiar maxim about “teaching a man to fish” is that it doesn’t work when the lords of the manor have all the fishing rights. This is where “empowerment” comes in, constructing a direct causal link whereby gains in individual “capacity” and confidence can cumulatively and aggregately result in wider societal change. Despite all the self-questioning to which NGOs subjected themselves in the 1990s, they remained confident in their ability to effect changes at this level.

ActionAid’s 1996 evaluation of the three pilot *Reflect* programmes in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador reported a number of positive changes in the attitudes and behaviour of women and men, which have also been claimed in more recent evaluations of *Reflect* programmes in various countries. A recent synthesis lists the following reported evidence of participant empowerment, some of which pertains explicitly to changes in gender relations (Riddell 2001, 46/47):

- Women more assertive in household decision-making (Bangladesh, India, Sudan, Uganda)
- Improved self-esteem, confidence, sense of achievement among both women and men learners (El Salvador, Bangladesh, India, Malawi, Sudan, South Africa)
- Women more involved in children’s education (Uganda, Sudan, South Africa, Ghana, India)
- Unaccompanied mobility of women outside the home/village (Bangladesh, Ghana)
- Speaking in public meetings or to strangers (Ghana, Malawi, Uganda, Sudan)
- Initiation of community self-help projects such as collective cotton farming, soap production, pig-rearing, well-cleaning, tree-planting (Mozambique, Mali, South Africa, El Salvador, Sudan, Uganda)¹⁶

¹⁶ The mention of increased cotton production as an indicator of empowerment should cause any reader familiar with recent African history to raise an eyebrow. Cotton, writes Mamdani (1996, 159 - 163), was the “archetypal forced crop” in French, Portuguese and British colonies alike (and later, in socialist Tanzania and Mozambique), with production quotas enforced by imprisonment, fines, conscription or whipping. Tree-planting and other measures to stop erosion and improve agricultural productivity were no less hated by villagers, since agricultural extension agents were viewed as agents of the police (unsurprisingly, since their visits usually resulted in fines).

- Requesting services from government (Ghana, South Africa)
- Better knowledge of sanitation, hygiene, health and/or nutrition (Uganda, Nepal, Bangladesh, Malawi, Mozambique)

Another recent and highly influential assessment of a literacy programme – this one in Nepal and funded by USAID – also claimed substantial “empowerment” gains for women. From a before-and-after questionnaire administered to 400 recent graduates and 100 women from control villages without a literacy programme, Burchfield (1997) found that women’s participation in the literacy programme led to increased confidence in stating opinions, participation in discussions about politics and about men’s drinking and beating their wives, participation in credit or loan programmes and active interest in their children’s attendance and progress in school. It also led to increased respect for women’s opinions by family and community members.

Taken individually, these findings closely resembled the outcomes that NGOs have always ascribed to their education and training projects, be they literacy classes or micro-finance schemes: greater self-confidence, more “enlightened” attitudes towards family planning, environmental conservation and gender roles, more frequent participation in institutions of public life, such as local council meetings; and so on.¹⁷

What made the claims for *Reflect* different and compelling, however, was that its inventors had the ingenuity to weave these familiar but disparate “benefits” of literacy into an overarching narrative of “empowerment”, something much greater and more significant than the sum of its parts. “Empowerment” offered much more than an account of how literacy classes might improve women’s knowledge of how to prevent diarrhoea or encourage them to start income-generating projects. It wove these disparate claims into a narrative of *transformation*, starting from critical awareness, leading to “taking control” of one’s own life, and ending – the authors hinted – with initiatives to challenge dominant power relations. Stress was placed on the process through which participants analyse and plan solutions to their own problems – making for a satisfyingly strong causal connection between the changes reported and the activities taking place in the literacy programme:

The [*Reflect*] method aims to promote active dialogue... and empowerment. As participants construct their own materials they take ownership of the issues that come up and are more likely to be moved to take local action, change their behaviour or their attitudes (Archer and Cottingham 1996b, 1).

¹⁷ To give just one example out of dozens that could be cited, an IFAD evaluation of a functional literacy project in Uganda quotes women learners as saying that they had gained self-confidence and learned “how to control pest crops; how to improve sanitation and hygiene at the household level (use of rubbish pits, boiling water, use of latrines); the care and nutrition of children (breast-feeding, a balanced diet, immunization); and modern farming methods”.

In this way, the *Reflect* version of “empowerment” offered a particularly persuasive story about why and how NGO capacity-building projects could bring about change and provide a way out of poverty and injustice. The pre-project period is usually portrayed as disorganised and chaotic. Community responses to poverty are described as irrational (either fatalistic and apathetic, or ad hoc and short-sighted). By contrast, learners in the NGO programme are portrayed as self-aware, disciplined actors, able to reach informed agreement, make a plan and stick to it, even when this means greater hardship in the short term. And their participation in *Reflect* exercises is credited with engendering this process of rational planning:

- In Uganda, literacy participants stated that a village map of all the compounds and their inhabitants revealed an acute land shortage. “Attention was focused on the problems of dividing up the available land between grown up children. Learners were *alarmed* about the dangers of fragmentation and landlessness in the future. This produced a *demand* for family planning”¹⁸ (Archer and Cottingham 1996a, 66).
- As a result of learning units on agriculture, participants claimed that they were “changing traditional practices which undermine food security such as the donating of excess produce at harvest time to friends and relatives (which many circles *agreed* no longer benefited the community but merely increased hunger later in the year)” (Archer and Cottingham 1996a, 67).
- In Bangladesh, participants spoke of how they started bulk-buying when prices were low and one woman commented: “Before we had no organised way of doing this - we knew prices changed but before we were victims of the changes and *we did not really think* about what we could do *until we discussed it openly*” (Archer and Cottingham 1996a, 64).
- The Bangladeshi women also reported that, as a result of discussions in the classes, they started using their loans productively rather than spending the money on daily expenditure or emergencies (Archer and Cottingham 1996a, 64).

Our study was initially commissioned for the specific purpose of testing the durability and depth of the “empowerment” gains reported in the initial *Reflect* evaluation. In a sense, both the 1996 evaluation and the Burchfield study were on the right track in focusing on empowerment rather than on literacy skills. As later chapters will demonstrate, women participants aspired most eagerly to the intangible and indirect results of belonging to the programme, and spoke with great enthusiasm about the self-confidence that resulted from the prestige of being an educated person and living in a (visibly) modern way.

¹⁸ The evaluators do not mention that the area where this *Reflect* pilot project was sited had been subject to intense land struggles for many decades previously. Land deprivation in this area has been blamed on persistent ethnic discrimination during and after the colonial period – see Mamdani, (1996, 197 - 99). The geographical isolation of this area further contributed to its political marginalisation and played an important part in the quasi-autonomy this region assumed while struggling with successive governments, including the NRM. In this context, it would not be out of order to wonder whether the promotion of NRM-backed family planning services as a solution to the problem of land hunger might have carried a certain political significance.

2.4 Factoring in the donor presence

At the simplest empirical level, we found that most of the things offered to us as evidence of women's empowerment ("increased mobility", joining or forming voluntary groups, the launching of self-help initiatives, and so on) had a shaky basis in fact. Whether the evidence came in the form of impressionistic anecdotes, carefully quantified survey results or somewhere in between, it always seemed to ignore the key problem that statements made to NGO workers, or to researchers employed by aid agencies, are part of an ongoing process of negotiation – not simple statements of fact.¹⁹ As Betts also argues in her study of *Reflect* in El Salvador (2000), all such exchanges are part of a bargaining process in which community members selectively demonstrate support for the NGO and negotiate public expressions of allegiance to its values and ideology, in exchange for (hoped-for) access to its resources. At regular intervals, the facilitator of the literacy circle in Kilemba, Mubende would start a session by asking participants, "What has *Reflect* done for you?" This little ritual (which usually involved all participants straining their memory to construct the same list of achievements produced the previous time) speaks volumes about the point that Betts is making. Stories about "progress", enlightenment and changed lives told to representatives of aid agencies are particularly charged, since the need for poor people to "develop" and "educate themselves" has been a constant theme in day-to-day struggles between peasants and the authorities since colonial times (Crehan 1997).

Only with this in mind is it possible to explain why so many participants in *Reflect* circles reported (to us and to other researchers) changes that had not actually taken place. In Uganda, though many villagers in Bundibugyo did construct granaries in line with an action point agreed in the *Reflect* circles²⁰, few or none of them (despite claims to the contrary) actually started storing surplus food instead of following the "negative custom" of giving it

¹⁹ Large-scale quantitative evaluations, if done properly (such as the Burchfield study of USAID literacy programmes in Nepal) do have advantages over the more common method of collating a series of anecdotes, in that they do at least force a number of assumptions to be made explicit and tested. However, still unchallenged is the very basic assumption that the effects of programmes are clear and can be isolated from other factors influencing women's lives. Moreover, once the axis of comparison has been chosen ("before and after" or "sample vs. control group"), quantification requires strict formalising of data along that axis so as to eliminate biases. Scope for re-connecting such data frameworks back to the process of a project or the context of a place is not straightforward since it bears the risk of re-introducing the same biases as have just been laboriously excluded. The data presented only retains its full authenticity and power to convince as long as it is placed within the framework of interpretation. Mentioning of external factors then needs to be carefully managed. Some scepticism about one's own model is indicated, if only to demonstrate open-mindedness. However, too much mention of external factors risks showing up the whole model as questionable. In the process of trading this precarious balance, the debate about women's empowerment becomes artificially "scientificated", and the underlying assumptions are reproduced. On the other hand, at present the practice of participatory evaluation does not seem to offer a way out of this impasse. Participatory evaluation seems no better than conventional quantitative methods at subjecting assumptions (whether those of policy makers or those that are voiced by poor people during evaluation exercises) to critical scrutiny. Unwittingly, the authentic quotes from poor people that have become popular in this literature all too often mirror policy expectations so closely that one wonders whether it is even worth asking for poor people's opinions – see Booth (1998).

²⁰ It is interesting to note that resolutions on the storing of food in granaries are not exactly a new theme in Uganda. A conference of Ugandan district commissioners in 1935 called for granaries to be set up to overcome the problem of localised food shortages, and in 1946 one district, Bunyoro, passed regulations requiring all households to construct their own granaries – see Mamdani (1996, 163).

away at harvest time. Not only would the stored food have gone rotten by the time it was needed, but suspending the custom would have threatened or destroyed the precious social relationships built through exactly such exchanges of hospitality. Likewise, in two sites in Bangladesh (the rice-growing villages and the Dhaka *basti*), the researcher was dutifully informed by women that through *Reflect* they had taken many resolutions for improving the health of their families, such as bathing regularly, planting trees, sending children to the playground to play, and constructing larger houses with big window openings “to let the oxygen come in”. Asked whether they had actually implemented these action points, however, the women cheerfully explained that of course they had not. Ever since the government deliberately filled in the canal that used to flow through the *basti*, bathing had been impossible. As for playgrounds²¹, there simply were none. Likewise, adding more and larger windows to the mud houses typically constructed in the rural area would make their walls collapse.²² And as Suck, a 49-year-old Dhaka slum dweller, put it, “I could not plant trees because I do not have space.” She added, in what seemed like a ritual expression of optimism, repeated by many other learners in the same position: “Very soon I will have a house to plant trees [around].” In fact there was no realistic prospect of Suck getting a house of her own anytime soon. Nevertheless, the women still prided themselves on having produced such fine resolutions, and dismissed any suggestion from the researcher that the impetus might have come from the facilitator, insisting rather that the action points reflected their own opinions and decisions.²³

2.4.1 Collectivism

Betts (2000, 139) gives several similar examples from her research in El Salvador – where socialist, rather than capitalist, versions of modernisation were still strongly promoted by the ruling party and the NGOs connected to it. In one incident, a local NGO convened a meeting of *Reflect* literacy circles to discuss the relative merits of individual versus collective farming. During the meeting, the literacy participants gave wholehearted support to the NGO’s explanations of the need for communal effort, and the meeting concluded with the NGO leaving behind two packets of seeds to assist the people in their resolution to start a

²¹ This rather odd action point was not, as might otherwise be assumed, the result of some half-forgotten American initiative to pep up Dhaka’s pale and sickly children through mass provision of sandpits and monkey-bars. It seems to have resulted from a “social opportunity map” which was copied out by the facilitators from a template in the manual and then carefully studied by the learners. However, rather than recording learners’ impressions of what facilities are available to whom in their own community, as advised in the manual, the map seems to have been taken as a visual aid for instructing poor women on how things ought to be arranged in a modern, well-organised community. Learners also mentioned that the map had taught them “the importance of sending children to school”.

²² There is a fascinating Ph.D. thesis waiting to be written by someone on the seemingly universal obsession among social reformers and missionaries everywhere with bringing “light and air” into the dingy, murky, crowded dwellings of the heathen (or the underclass), and the symbolism of windows (especially glass windows) as emblems of modernity.

²³ And in the Burchfield study of Nepali literacy graduates vs. non-graduates, alarm bells should have been set ringing when an astonishingly high proportion of both groups of survey respondents claimed that during the last year, they had changed their attitude on the appropriate age for girls to marry. How did that happen? Or, did it really happen?

collective farm. But as soon as the NGO workers had left, people quickly arranged to divide up the seeds among individuals, with no further discussion of the merits of communal agriculture.²⁴

However, this is not just the clear-cut exchange of ideological conformity in exchange for material resources that Betts describes. Certainly, both learners and facilitators expressed the hope that by producing the correct action points, they were demonstrating that they were ready to appreciate the superiority of new and scientific ways of living, and that they were the sort of go-ahead individuals on whom the Kampala- and Dhaka-based organisations, with their educated, middle class staff, could rely. Facilitators, in particular, hoped to benefit from a continuing association with the NGO that might eventually see them put in charge of more community “projects”. Learners were aware of an obligation to support facilitators (who usually came from the most influential local families) in their ambitions. And there was a general assumption in the circles that it was a good idea to keep ActionAid happy (particularly when this could be done at very little cost to oneself).

2.4.2 NGOs and the “eternal present” of development

Evaluations of empowerment programmes, however, typically ignore or actively downplay the importance of the presence of the NGO or donor. The study of USAID-funded literacy programmes in Nepal provides a notable example, precisely because the study is in many ways well-constructed – but entirely fails to incorporate any consideration of donor influence into its extensive list of variables to be controlled for.²⁵ The author warns that women might have difficulty “remembering” how they felt or thought before starting the programme, or they might “be reluctant to admit that they ever behaved differently”, a bias that would tend to belittle their achievements (Burchfield 1997, 11). Our research in Bangladesh and Uganda suggests the exact opposite. In our experience, women were very eager to demonstrate how much they have changed through the literacy programmes.

Assuming for a moment that the women participants Burchfield’s team interviewed were not reluctant to report change but actually eager to do so, one can easily see how they would have got the gist of before-after questions pretty quickly. Burchfield herself asserts, “Nepali women are eager to please visitors, and with any survey research, there is a danger that respondents will say what they think the interviewer wants to hear” (Burchfield 1997, 11). It is hard to imagine that any of the women participants thought that “everything is the same

²⁴ In a reverse move, Fiedrich observed villagers in Uganda labelling individually owned pigs as the common property of a “group” on the day evaluators came around to find group activities.

²⁵ On reading through the evaluation, one comes across occasional references to there being a donor presence in the experimental villages. At some point it is mentioned that funds were available for other activities. However, no further elaboration is offered, so the significance of this cannot be judged. At another point, women are asked to specify their ambitions for the future. The key difference between participants and non-participants was that 20 per cent of the experimental group said they were presently involved with a training activity, half of them in knitting and sewing – see Burchfield (1997, 91). The evaluation does not make clear whether similar opportunities existed in the control villages and were simply not taken up or whether they only existed in the experimental villages because of the donor presence.

as before”-style answers would please interviewers. No literacy programme leaves its participants in the dark about its intention to bring about change. A woman participant, apart from perhaps being genuinely grateful, could be excused for viewing the changes she has achieved as the proof of worthiness that she must present so as to receive more assistance.

It is much easier to see how before-after questions could have been more difficult to make sense of for members of the control group. Naturally, even with a clear idea as to the purpose of the questions, their perspective towards the interviewers will differ substantially from that of the participants. Non-participants have no reason to be grateful towards a donor. Instead they might have perfectly legitimate reasons for presenting themselves as needy so as to attract donor attention to themselves. If this were the case, the scale of impact that Burchfield reports would have to be critically reviewed.

Where real changes were taking place in women’s lives, it was common for NGOs to oversimplify the change process in such a way that gave most of the credit to their own interventions. The assumption, as Kaplan (1999) characterises it, is not just that development itself is linear and predictable, and has a beginning and an end, but that development begins and ends where the particular project begins and ends. In fact, an NGO programme could usually be better understood as one small part of women’s complex strategies for coping. But here again, the exaggeration of the empowering contribution of an NGO programme frequently seemed to arise with the strategic encouragement or complicity of participants themselves. For example, it was certainly true that some women in the Netrokona *Reflect* programme seemed to enjoy an unusual level of independence and to be remarkably confident about their ability to shape their own lives. In initial interviews, these women were happy to assent to generalised suggestions by the researcher that their involvement in *Reflect* was the reason. But in follow-up interviews, when the researcher showed a sympathetic curiosity in the details of their individual life stories, the women pointed out that their success was actually due to their own pluck and commercial acumen. It was also due to their own position in the “traditional” life cycle of Bangladeshi women, which places older women with married sons in a relatively powerful position.

2.5 Historicising stories of “empowerment”

Suck’s story

The same Dhaka *busti* dweller, Suck, who earlier ascribed all the good in her life to *Reflect*, later stated: “My husband died 19 years ago. My children were small. I brought up my children by breaking bricks, and food for work [public works programmes]. I led a hard life to bring them up. I take all the decisions alone in my family, because I am the head of the household. My sons, daughters and daughter-in-law give their money to me from *biri* [cigarette] making.”

Several women were lucky enough to be widowed mothers-in-law with working sons and daughters-in-law. These women were quite powerful in their own homes, since custom dictates that sons and their wives turn their earnings over to the mother. Some younger women had husbands working in the Gulf and remitting cash back to them, which they were managing to save and invest in various ways, evading the control of would-be substitute patriarchs in the form of fathers- and brothers-in-law. One had managed to join enough competing micro-credit schemes to become a successful money-lender in her own right. One was divorced but had become a successful *feriwali* (trader) of saris after her husband left her for a maid-servant when her first son was only one year old. Stories like these are increasingly common in Bangladesh. Yet, at least initially, when approached by a middle-class Bangladeshi researcher on ActionAid's behalf, women thought it wiser to portray themselves as having been lifted out of ignorance and hardship by the good offices of the charity, than to advertise their own cunning, ambition and business success.

Ignoring history

Sometimes, NGOs seized on certain events or activities as evidence of positive social change, when in fact such activities were a long-established part of local practice. A *Reflect* programme in Ghana was saluted for inspiring women to demand that the district authorities should provide a teacher for the village school. However, such negotiations are in fact a time-honoured technique for rationing the supply of desperately under-funded government services. This technique was invented by the colonial authorities and is still relied upon in education systems across much of Africa. A literacy programme in Bangladesh, the country of kitchen gardens, was recently credited with having introduced women to the idea of growing vegetables on small plots next to their homes. One suspects that the symbolism of the household garden, so powerfully evoking the domination of nature and the creation of surplus through self-possessed labour, was simply too good for this not to be credited to the NGO programme. Here again we come up against the “eternal present” constructed by NGOs in search of “impact” (Carothers 1999, 19). The eternal present of development leaves no space for recognising the specific history of development interventions and ideologies in any particular place, or for understanding the struggles over power and meaning that have formed that history. Thus, it denies development agencies any ability to situate themselves as necessarily and unavoidably caught up in that history.

2.5.1 Selective evidence of empowerment

Whether NGOs ignore history out of a lack of intellectual curiosity or out of a more calculated indifference, it does result in some strange choices when it comes to selecting evidence of the benefits of NGO programmes. For example, participation in “community projects” such as digging irrigation canals, building bridges, and so on is often cited as an indicator of empowerment. But such activities appear neither quite so novel nor quite so

salutary if considered against the long tradition of forced, unpaid labour by peasants on behalf of local rulers – chiefs, landowners, district commissioners or district councils. The attempt to expand, regulate and systematically enforce this “custom” was one of the most widely hated aspects of colonial subjugation. In Kenya, for example, each adult male was required by law to do six days of unpaid labour for the Native Authority every three months. Many post-colonial states continued the colonial practice of compelling villagers to labour without pay on public works projects. A 1962 resolution passed by Handeni District Council in newly independent Tanzania stated that “any person not participating in development projects should be punished by six strokes”. A few years later, a divisional executive officer was overheard threatening a women’s self-group, “What is necessary to get you to work in development projects? Do we have to bring the *kiboko* [whip]?” (Mamdani 1996, 173 - 5). In places where poor people have been beaten, harangued, fined, and jailed for generations in order to get them to plant trees, build bridges and dig wells, it is unlikely that they would experience the opportunity to “participate” in more of these collective activities as an emancipatory opportunity.²⁶ As this example suggests, the foreclosure of historical complexity so common in empowerment narratives can easily end up being a refusal to acknowledge or analyse the local specificity of the power relations that shape contemporary development encounters.

2.6 Unpacking the myth: empowerment and modernity

Confronted by the researchers with such challenges, NGO staff interviewed in Bangladesh, London and Uganda sometimes conceded that the empowerment narratives perpetuated in NGO reports were somewhat simplistic and stereotypical. Particularly in Uganda, but also in Bangladesh, several staff members signalled that they were privately sceptical about some of the claims made. But others insisted that empowerment narratives are credible since they are told by poor people “themselves” and are “their own”. Even those who voiced profound scepticism still insisted that *Reflect* “does some good”, that women have been changed, that they have become more confident, articulate and forward-looking. In practice we found that even recent writings on *Reflect* continue to cling to the same predictable narratives of virtuous self-transformation that we seek to critique here.²⁷

²⁶ Of course, according to the ideology of participatory development, it would be argued that *Reflect* participants have decided to initiate these projects of their own free will, giving them a fundamentally different character to the public works schemes of old, which were imposed by force and “from above”. It is certainly true that *Reflect* circles did not rely on compulsion or physical force. However, we hope that the discussion so far shows why it is a huge and unrealistic leap of faith to say that they therefore provided a forum for the spontaneous expression of free will and collective self-determination. Such an interpretation would involve a wilfully naïve reading of community politics. In particular it would mean ignoring the very considerable power that NGOs like ActionAid exercise within communities. We feel this has to be rejected. The alternative seems to be that *Reflect* has a rather sinister capacity to make people “internalise” the very things that district commissioners have struggled for decades to get them to do.

²⁷ See, for example, the various articles on *Reflect* in Education Action or the case studies in the Communication and Power resource pack.

Why is the moral and emotional resonance of the notion of empowerment so strong, and what can explain the ubiquity of a concept that seems to have so little explanatory power? It is the assumptions and values that *make* this story so convincing and motivating for us to which we turn next.

The table below lists all the attributes we found associated with “the empowered woman” in a range of recent evaluations and articles. Only a few of the attributes listed were explicitly presented in the reports as indicators of women’s empowerment, but many others threaded through descriptions that are given about women’s actions or the quotes by women participants that were chosen (by the report authors) to represent them. Portrayals of “the disempowered woman” tend to be sketchy and vague in evaluation reports and are often reserved for the control group or the accounts of how women felt before they joined the programme. In table 1. below, we have added (under “the ‘disempowered woman’”) terms which are the direct opposite to those most often used in reports to describe the “empowered woman”.

Table 1: **Making the modern woman**

The “disempowered woman” The rational mind	Empowerment process	The “empowered woman”
Without a plan	→	Organised
Ignorant	→	Knowledgeable
Emotional	→	Analytical
Fatalistic	→	Vision for the future
Caught up in own emotions	→	Able to solve problems
Does what she has always done	→	Innovative
Dreamer	→	Realistic
The autonomous self		
Insecure	→	Self-confident
Self-effacing	→	Self-aware
Relies on others	→	Autonomous
Externally driven	→	Self-determined
Recipient of decisions	→	Decision maker
Lack of shame	→	Sense of dignity
Dependent	→	Independent
Childish	→	Responsible
Can’t stand up for herself	→	Assertive
Doesn’t know what to say	→	Strong negotiating skills
Low self esteem	→	High self esteem
Only looks pretty in public	→	Involved with public life

Table 1: - Continued

The disciplined body		
No control over own body	→	Plans family size
Accepts drinking/drinks herself	→	Objects to alcoholism
Dirty	→	Hygienic/clean
Bad mother/wife	→	Good mother/wife
Victim of diseases	→	Healthy family
Control over time and space (“future orientation”)		
Static	→	Mobile
Lazy	→	Hard-working
Squanders resources/consumes	→	Investor
No particular effort to educate children	→	Sends children to school
Doesn’t know how to talk	→	Articulate
Universalism		
Stuck in traditional peer group	→	Group member
Doesn’t vote	→	Involved with public life
Doesn’t feel entitled to anything	→	Aware of her rights
Transactions mediated by personal ties	→	Transacts successfully using money
Passive	→	Active

As we began to untangle these metaphors, we were increasingly struck by their resemblance to another, older set of metaphors about the rational, autonomous self and the disciplined, orderly body. Originally deployed by British colonial administrators and missionaries to legitimate the need for colonial rule, they were more recently taken up by modernisation discourse (addressed to the problems of self-government, nationhood and economic development in former colonies) and culture-of-poverty theorists (addressed to the problems of the American ghetto). The attributes listed above, and the attempts to devise scales and indices for measuring them, are striking similar to the criteria laid out by modernisation theorists in the enthusiastically scientific-sounding classifications, axioms, and surveys of the 1960s. “Modernity is associated with rationality, empiricism, efficiency and change; tradition connotes fatalism, veneration for custom and the sacred, indiscipline, and stagnation,” summarises Adas (1989, 413). “Modern men [sic],” according to Inkeles (1966, 141-44; 1969, 210/11), are distinguished by their belief in science and bio-medicine; they reject fatalism, and want to be “on time” and “plan their affairs in advance”. They seek to “dominate [their] environment in order to advance [their] own purposes and goals”.

2.6.1 Understandings of individualism

We return to the idea of “planning” and rationality in the next chapter, but for now, we want to point out that central to all of these metaphors is an ideological commitment to the

construction of bounded, self-determining individuals. This is not about simply the power to make decisions, or to participate, but the construction of an individual, a “free agent” whose own separate interests and judgements are expressed in the clash of wills with other autonomous individuals. A Western reader, or for that matter a Western development worker, may find it so difficult to imagine any other experience or possibility of what it is like to be “myself” that she/he forgets how culturally specific is the European and North American understanding of persons as relatively closed, contained and autonomous. It is a Western peculiarity to see the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action organised into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background (Geertz 1983, 53). We have become so accustomed to this way of thinking, says the philosopher Charles Taylor (1999), that we have ceased to understand it as one particular moral and ideological vision. “People behave as individuals,” we think, “because that’s what they naturally do when no longer constrained by the old religions, metaphysics, and customs, though this may be seen as a glorious liberation or a purblind enmiring in egoism, depending on our perspective”.

By contrast, anthropologists have extensively documented the relatively fluid, interdependent and open nature of persons in the understanding of South Asian and Eastern African cultures. Persons, like bodies, are assumed to have, as Lamb (2000) writes, “more or less open boundaries” – and this is especially true of women, whose bodily openness is both a source of [sexual and reproductive] power and of [physical and social] vulnerability. South Asian cultures conceive the world as made up of fluid substances in perpetual flux, constantly separating and mixing with other substances, so that mixings and exchanges of food, bodily substances, words, services and the like can transform the nature of the persons transacting them. For Bengalis, say Inden and Nicholas (1977), persons are formed through kinship relations, which are made through the sharing and partial exchange of bodies by means of acts such as birth, marriage, sharing food, and living together. The body itself is composed of a network of channels and fluids, which flow not only within the body but also among persons and their environments (Zimmermann 1987).

Contrary to many truisms about African life, many Ugandan cultures have long been conducive to individualistic behaviour and thought, but differently so than Western cultures. Heald, writing about the culture of the Gisu of eastern Uganda in the postcolonial period, comments that while Bagisu strongly valued (male) independence and equality, nevertheless “a person’s very being is subject to outside influence whether from ancestral powers or the malignant force of others there appears at a rather basic level to be no room for the heroic virtues, or true individualism. The value of an individual lies in his part in the ongoing flow of specifically Gisu life” (Heald 1999, 76).

Citizenship and rights

Crehan (1997), writing of rural Zambia in the early 1990s, points out that “relationships between individuals are always relationships between brothers, husbands, wives, mother’s brothers, sisters, and so on, all of whom are linked together in irreducibly hierarchical ways. In other words, it is assumed that the most fundamental of the socially recognized relationships that establish the basic network of claims people have on one another are woven out of the strands of kinship; and that the ordering of these strands is necessarily and inescapably hierarchical. According to this view of political life, it is impossible to tear individuals out of this kinship fabric to make of each an autonomous citizen, whose rights, as a citizen, transcend their gender and their kinship location. This was a power landscape in which the basic units were... a set of different, and fundamentally unequal, kinship statuses bound together in a diffuse but inescapable moral net of general mutual obligation. It needs to be emphasized that this account of authority does not simply define a different set of rights; it is a discourse not based on a juridical notion of rights at all.”

2.6.2 Translating “self-confidence”

During our research, we asked a small number of Ugandan development workers which words they used and how they explained expressions like “self-confidence” or “self-esteem” in the local language, in this case Luganda. Not surprisingly, there is no straightforward translation available and development workers must resort to lengthy explanations. “Self-confidence”, they suggested, could be translated as “being your own person” or “s/he can talk”, but neither of these translations carries the same unambiguously positive connotations in Luganda as the word “self-confidence” does in empowerment narratives published in English. In some situations, pronounced in specific ways they can correspond to “self-confidence”, but at other times they can also characterise a person as selfish, reclusive or someone who simply talks too much.

2.6.3 Modernisation discourse in context

As Crehan’s comments suggest, it is equally important to remember that Western notions of the person as irreducibly individual and self-determining, though perhaps ultimately rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions, have a specific and relatively recent origin in the rise of capitalism and the development of the modern state over the past few centuries.²⁸ The political discourse associated with the modern state has at its heart a citizen who is seen as linked to the state and to other citizens through a series of contract-like relationships that define a set of distinct and bounded rights; most fundamentally, the right to “private”

²⁸ Which is not to say that everyone in capitalism’s homeland in 20th century North America was steeped in the ideology of bourgeois individualism – rather fortunately for the small army of social scientists that have made their living by diagnosing the pathologies of the American “underclass”.

property. We turn next to the ways in which the individualistic ideology of modern capitalism has informed approaches to development, first through missionary efforts to spread the Protestant ethic and then through the attempts by colonial and post-colonial states to incorporate the backward masses into a “modern” order of citizenship, wage labour, commodity exchange, and universal education. “Empowerment” and “participatory development”, we argue, are very much a continuation of these efforts rather than constituting a fundamental break with them.

2.64 The rise of individualism

Weber famously argued that the development of capitalism in the West was driven not so much by the development of new forces of production as by the emergence of “a new type of subject – an agent who was set free from constraints imposed by tradition to pursue its own private ends and whose actions were at once motivated by acquisitiveness and regulated by the worldly asceticism” of Protestantism (Gaonkar 1999). The spread of the “Protestant ethic” made capitalism possible by legitimising, even glorifying, the accumulation of wealth and the individual’s responsibility for his/her own salvation. Wealth accumulation through the “proper channels” in fact signified God’s approval of an individual, but only when coupled with appropriate conduct: hard work, strict self-discipline and a constantly inward-looking concern with improving one’s own character. Being poor was by no means a way of escaping this strict (self-) regimentation. Quite the opposite: with work no longer being regarded as a means to an end but rather as a service to God, industriousness slowly emerged as a virtue in itself.

2.65 Individualism and indirect rule

Missionaries, of course, were the first to offer this ideology to the colonised peoples of East Africa and East Bengal. Their belief in the written word as a means of self-transformation is still imprinted strongly on the ideas of contemporary literacy workers. But their enthusiastic efforts to nurture a class of sturdy “yeoman farmers” (or rather, farmers and their wives, since female domesticity was as important as male enterprise in their scheme of things) fit awkwardly into the needs of “indirect rule”, the prevalent ideology of British colonialism until the 1940s. Indirect rule was based on co-opting “native” chiefs as “an integral part of the machinery” of colonial rule; the colonial state sustained (and indeed increased) the power of traditional rulers in return for their willingness to serve as its intermediaries (Mamdani 1996; Perham 1961). As Crehan (1997) points out, its success required “that everybody involved – or at least everybody whose voice was likely to be heard – believed that rural African society did indeed in some essential sense retain its old precolonial structures of authority and forms of social organization”. Though they reluctantly accepted the inevitability of a certain amount of “detrribalisation” among male workers in the cities and on the mines, officials were constantly concerned to quarantine African villages from

“corrupting” outside influences – not least, from overly “individualistic” forms of land tenure, from the too rapid spread of cash cropping, and from too much access to education.

Only much later did the promotion of responsible, self-improving individualism become a concern of the colonial state, and at that point it stopped being seen as a route to God and instead became a route to industrial development. The rise of modernisation discourse within colonial bureaucracies “was very much a response to the perceived loss of control within an older form of colonial authority” (Cooper 1996, 376). As indirect rule began to lose credibility under the stress of increasingly effective mass action by Africans, including the wave of riots and general strikes in the late 1930s, modernisation discourse carved out a new role for colonial officials. This was no longer to be based on an unquestioned right to command or on a paternalistic “understanding” of “the natives”, but rather on expertise in designing rational solutions to the social problems of development.

2.6.6 Transition and progress

Modernisation discourse offered apolitical justifications for why the North was rich and the South was poor – the answer lay in the “transition” from traditional to modern societies that had happened in Europe in the nineteenth century – and a set of steps for achieving that transition. Modernisation went beyond the longstanding idea of “progress” by positing a great divide between the two “worlds” of tradition and modernity. Modernity was a complete cultural, ideological, social and economic bundle, “a series of co-varying changes, from subject to participant political culture, from ascriptive status systems to achievement status systems, from extended to nuclear kinship, from religious to secular ideology” ... and, of course, from oral to written communication. Modernisation theorists identified the lack of an appropriate “ethic”, or set of individualistic values, disciplines and attitudes, as an important reason for the supposed stagnation of the developing world. Development was therefore about “the transformation of traditional society (characterised by dependence on particular, inherited social forms and cultures, as well as on the whims and dictates of nature)” and the creation of modern selves “characterised by control over nature, by individual free choice, and by independence as freedom from given social and natural reality” (Kaplan 1999).

Modernisers hoped that economic development would produce a middle class that, together with a high literacy rate, would serve to promote appropriate modern values. This social and economic package would enable former colonies to achieve the transition to capitalist industry and liberal democracy that had taken place in Europe and North America centuries before. “Without the diffusion of modern values, without a sense of achievement and individual worth,” they argued, neither economic growth nor effective government could be developed or sustained (Alford and Friedland 1985, 48/49). For modernisation theorists, it is modern values that generate and sustain economic growth and drive the development of

non-traditional forms of social exchange (Inkeles and Smith 1974; Quinn and Crocker 1999). Particularly important were the values of universalism, achievement, future orientation, and equality and trust (extending the right to participate in decision-making).

2.6.7 The changing role of colonial officials

Modernisation ideology appealed, Cooper adds, “precisely where there was a deep ambiguity regarding how change was brought about” (Cooper 1996, 377). It allowed officials and academics to skirt round the central question of their own power and what justified it; modernisation was both a universal force of history, and a planned intervention, a series of changes directed by wise white overseers on behalf of a backward people. It could be seen as arising from “natural” forces of cultural change rooted deep within African and South Asian societies, and as a project under the control of particular actors, whose authority was based on their technical knowledge of how to run a society. The idea of modernity as a bundle of closely interwoven cultural, social, political and economic changes made such equivocation easy, allowing colonial regimes both to justify their efforts to engineer planned social change and to deny responsibility for the consequences.

The equivocation went something like this: the colonial powers had introduced new ideas, values and knowledge from their own, superior civilisations. This had inevitably sparked a snowball process of cultural change within traditional societies, which was now leading towards self-government, industrialisation and the spread of wage labour and a cash economy. Now that this transition was underway, the role of colonial officials (and later, of African and South Asian elites) was to guide and manage it. Because their own societies had already negotiated the stages of this universal process, colonial officials were best placed to find rational solutions to the social dislocations that would necessarily arise. No longer were poverty, ill health and hunger seen as aspects of the backwardness of tribal life; instead, they were reconceptualised as “problems” of development that could be solved through better administration and planned interventions. But, as Cooper points out, this placed officials in a situation where “their claim to superintending a universal social process stood in uneasy relation to the lingering fact that they ruled a colony” (1996, 267).

With its interest in erasing conflict, power and exploitation from the frame, modernisation theory relied heavily on the notion of culture as the ultimate motor of social change and often took its bearings from a Weberian interpretation of recent European history as the history of a cultural transformation.

2.6.8 The endowment of national consciousness

In colonial societies, officials faced the very real problem of creating, managing and controlling a pool of wage labour practically overnight, with no Protestant reformation to

smooth the way. Education was seen not only as a practical means of spreading an ethic of hard work, self-improvement and discipline, but also as a metaphor for the modernisation process, which was often portrayed as a process of maturation into adulthood. As nationalist movements developed and self-government loomed, these ideas became linked to another, powerful ideological construct: the notion that it was the educated (male) indigenous elite that must play the central role in transforming colonial subjects into national citizens, igniting the self-awareness of the collectivity and endowing it with a national consciousness. Educated Africans were to be brought into local government and involved in development projects, so that they could act as agents of social change in their own areas (Robinson and Gallagher 1980). This same process would also accomplish an integrative transfer of loyalty from traditional centres of authority (such as tribe or caste) to the new, self-governing nation-state.

2.6.9 From tribesmen to citizens

As Lonsdale and Berman (1992) point out, “The model ... rested on the ethnocentric axiom that creative African politics could mobilise new, wider and more secular allegiances only where people were first knocked off their social balance by political, economic and cultural change introduced from without The only possible unifiers were educated African elites, whose national language, literally and metaphorically, was that of the conquerors. ... To win usable power, the political intelligentsia had to lead an “integrative revolution” in which distinctive tribesmen became common citizens. Nationalism was a campaign of mass education in civic values, lighting the path from narrow, tribal conformity to the personal responsibility incumbent upon members of complex societies.”

2.6.10 Agents of transformation: from the elite to the “community”

However, it is worth remembering why modernisation theory appealed to many people at the time, and not least to nationalist movements. Like the nonconformist missionaries before them, modernisers did not believe there were any innate racial differences between the West and the rest, and expressed great confidence in emerging African and Asian democracies to solve the problems of their own people. “Though the modernizers regarded American and European capital and technical assistance as vital to Third World development, they envisioned Africans and Asians – not Westerners – as the main agents of the transformation of underdeveloped societies” (Adas 1989, 412).

In its celebration of African and Asian agency and its obsession with what is lacking or insufficient in existing forms of agency and culture, the contemporary paradigm of participatory development strongly resembles modernisation theory. However, modernisation theory assumed that a strong centralised state and single national identity is necessary to manage the change process, and that competing forms of loyalty or social organisation must be destroyed. By the early 1970s, donors had become disillusioned with

the demonstrable failure of modernisation to produce either prosperity or democracy. The emphasis on large-scale, state-led social and economic transformation quickly faded from development orthodoxy, and during the free-market 1980s, donors urged the dismantling of the bureaucratic structures (now seen as top-heavy and inefficient) that had been built up through their earlier efforts to strengthen administrative and planning capacity. In the participatory development discourse so prevalent among the NGOs of the 1990s, the locus of (positive) transformative power has shifted from the state and the ruling elite to “the community” or “poor people”. There is a corresponding shift from an unabashedly instrumental view of values (participation, equality and dignity are good because necessary for the smooth functioning of capitalist democracies) to a more romantic view (participation, equality and dignity are ends in themselves). It is assumed that a decentralised form of government is the best way to give the community the impetus to develop itself, and that local ethnicities, languages and identities should be preserved and celebrated. In many ways, this could be seen as a return to the more conservative ideals of indirect rule, with its emphasis on the strengthening of existing local institutions as channels for an organic and natural process of change, and “the encouragement within the widest limits of local traditions, local pride and local initiative, and so of the greatest possible freedom and variety of local development within the territory” (Huxley 1931, 103).

2.6.11 People-centred development and missionary ideals

In their espousal of “people-centred” development, their implicit rejection of state bureaucracies or modern industries as vehicles for change, and their romantic celebration of the ability of individuals to remake the world by changing their moral outlook or mental understanding, contemporary NGOs also effect a rediscovery of missionary ideals. In participatory development discourse, much more so than in missionary discourse, the experience and “common sense” of poor people is celebrated as an unproblematic source of wisdom, resilience and human solidarity (though missionaries, too, posited the innate human capacity of even the “primitive native” to learn and to love). But at the same time, as in missionary discourse, their ongoing impoverishment and subordination is explained by something “missing” or blocked within their makeup that prevents them from realising their autonomy and “freeing” themselves from the external barriers they face.

2.7 From modernisation to “empowerment”

Modernisation theory is now frequently dismissed as a disingenuous attempt by conservative American social scientists to focus attention away from the need for any fundamental changes in the basic structures of capitalist liberal democracy, inherited from colonial rule and carefully protected in negotiated independence processes. But as Longwe points out, with its constant refrain of “They are not educated enough! They are not confident enough! They are not experienced enough!” (2000, 24), empowerment theory accomplishes a similar feat. On

closer investigation of empowerment narratives, the “something” that prevents *individual* women from self-realisation – the “lack” or deficiency that the NGO project is supposed to enable them to overcome – often turns out to be parallel to the modernisation theorists’ diagnosis of the deficits that keep poor nations from developing. The problems that once were located in the weak institutions, backward customs or stagnant economies of developing societies are now found to lie within men and (especially) women themselves. The problem is not within society or culture, or even with men’s resistance to women’s exercising of power. It is in the incompleteness or weakness of their capacities and understanding. And this, of course, is where the development worker, the NGO, the funding agency come in. They offer training programmes, leadership development programmes, non-formal education, literacy classes, all conceived as chances for women to “participate”, to gain understanding and confidence and to learn to “voice” their own needs – to achieve “self-realisation”.

2.7.1 The empowered woman goes to market: gender, nation and the capitalist way

Even if the continuity between current theories of “participation” and old theories of “modernisation” is acknowledged, doesn’t the blatant sexism of the Inkeles quote above (section 2.6) suggest that the commitment to the autonomy and agency of women adds something new and commendable?

Anthropologist and historian Partha Chatterjee has shown how the definition and redefinition of femininity was a crucial ideological project both for the colonisers and for the anti-colonial movement in Bengal.²⁹ The colonisers made the “unfree and oppressed womanhood of India” into “a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country”, and invested enormous energy in documenting, condemning and attempting to reform practices such as *purdah*, *sati* and early marriage. The Indian nationalist movement, on the other hand, made Indian womanhood into the symbolic “home” for an unchanging Indian cultural identity, while at the same time, Indian men had to go out into the “world” to fight for self-determination, progress and democracy in an independent nation-state. Thus, Bengali nationalists undertook to educate women both in classic Hindu literature and also in the virtues of “orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and the ability to run the household according to new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world” (Chatterjee 1993, 118).

In British East Africa, worried by the chaos and fluidity of social change in the urban areas, late colonial officials and post-colonial governments attempted to create stable families (fathers who worked regular jobs, mothers who stayed at home as dependant wives, and children who attended school every day) as a means of creating a stable and orderly urban

²⁹ For a similar analysis of the construction of gender in East African nationalism, see Louise White’s (1990) brilliant analysis of the Kenyan Mau Mau movement.

workforce (Cooper 1996, 266; White 1990). As Comaroff and Comaroff (1992b, 247) observe, missionaries had long seen it as essential to their civilising reforms that women should confine themselves to domestic work within the walls of the house. It was not really until the modernising efforts of the late colonial period that this became a systematic concern of the state, with widespread crackdowns on independent women entrepreneurs in cities, combined with new efforts to educate and train women in the domestic virtues. Chatterjee argues that the nationalists' commitment to women's education and freedom did not mean a rejection of traditional femininity. Rather, nationalism transformed the definition of the proper place of women from the literal physical boundaries of the home into a more flexible, but still culturally determined, notion of women's spiritual virtues, which was expressed in terms of the differences between socially approved male and female behaviour. It was all right, in other words, for men to engage in the unfettered competition for material gain and political advantage in the "outside world", so long as women maintained a "home" within which the old pre-capitalist Hindu values of purity and devotion were preserved. Once the "core" of femininity had been established, it was possible for (middle-class) women to venture outside the house, go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programs, and in time even take up public employment outside the home" (1993, 130 – emphasis in original)

2.7.2 From "home" to "community"

In this connection, it is striking that contemporary empowerment narratives tend to locate women's agency within the "community", conceptualised as a homogeneous, non-competitive domain of shared meanings and consensual norms. "The community" displaces "the home" as the appropriate sphere for the application of women's energies and realisation of their aspirations. Women are seldom, if ever, depicted as motivated by self-serving aims such as greed, envy, the desire to impress or conform, or competition with neighbours. They express their autonomy, it seems, in entirely altruistic ways: by helping their children more with their schoolwork, labouring on community projects, defending their fellow women from excessive abuse by husbands, or spending more time cleaning the home, boiling the drinking water and washing the vegetables. Moreover, changes attributed to NGO programmes are depicted as non-confrontational and consensus-based. At most, losses are incurred by those who are seen to be abusers of community norms (wife-beating husbands, corrupt officials, exploitative traders). Freed to start "small businesses" – which are always of the kind that play some useful function in community life, such as dressmaking or poultry-rearing, and never morally dubious enterprises such as prostitution or beer-brewing – they invest the extra earnings in the welfare of their family and the future of their children.

2.7.3 Hard work and economic autonomy

Despite this assumption that women are altruists and the strong emphasis on the "community" as the appropriate sphere for women's self-realisation, empowerment narratives also turn on

women's acceptance of the basic tenet of capitalism: that as a free agent in the marketplace, I make my own choices and I am responsible for my own livelihood. In empowerment literature this is called "economic autonomy" and it is a highly valued indicator of "taking charge of one's life". Controlling commodities symbolises the act of becoming the sole proprietor of one's own self, and "owning" one's own self is demonstrated by proprietorship in the marketplace, so that entry into the order of commodities itself has a salutary effect on morals and morale. Poor women are never directly charged with being lazy, feckless or spendthrift, but it is implied that their inability to provide for themselves and their children arises at least in part from a lack of prudent planning and entrepreneurial initiative. With the exception of a recent USAID-funded report, no evaluation of empowerment that we found lists being "hard working" or "self-disciplined" as a legitimate indicator of empowerment. And yet, the AID report is merely making explicit the assumptions buried in other, softer versions, when it says that the project empowered women by encouraging "[economic] risk-taking, behavioural change, and hard work ... an ethos of self-improvement ... individual initiative" (Ashe and Parrot 2001).³⁰

A few years ago, research showed that many women who receive loans from micro-credit programmes in South Asia simply pass on the money to their husbands, thus foregoing the opportunity to be entrepreneurial success stories in their own right. These interesting findings sparked a furious debate, for they were seen as a direct and potentially fatal blow to the whole micro-credit enterprise. Few people questioned whether the role of channelling money is really inferior to that of being the owner and managing director. Neither did they question whether it is necessarily less beneficial for women to give money to their husbands for investment in a rickshaw than for them to keep money themselves for investment in a poultry-rearing enterprise (particularly if the rickshaw might produce more income for the household). Only from the perspective of the Protestant ethic, which privileges the control and autonomy of the individual above all else, do these questions "obviously" merit an automatic "yes". Debate focused instead on how much control a woman must exercise and at what stage of the loan process to still be considered "empowered" at the end (see Kabeer 1999, 297). Thus even in this very fruitful and nuanced debate, "empowerment" remains inextricably bound up with "free enterprise".

2.7.4 The importance of not being cheated

Moreover, empowerment narratives always present their heroines' adventures in the marketplace as little micro-parables of the capitalist way, in which each is rewarded according to the skill and effort she invests, and wealth is the deserved result of "honest" work. The most frequent allusion to embracing the capitalist way is an indirect, but consistently recurring one: the theme of "not being cheated". Evaluation reports never feature stories of the newly literate or newly business-

³⁰ Not only do European development organisations want to avoid resonances with racist, missionary or colonial discourse on the lazy native, but they are often at least mildly concerned about the "dehumanising" effects of capitalism (or "globalisation" as it seems to be known these days), and sceptical of the unbridled profit motive. So it is not surprising that their version of modernisation is more Christian Democrat than hardcore Calvinist, and is often accompanied by an emphasis on greater state provision of social and welfare services, together with other features of European managed capitalism.

trained market woman who proudly states how she has increased her profits ever since she managed to fiddle with the measures, or the peasant woman who now dares mix pebbles into her coffee before it is weighed for sale. Instead, the message conveyed in stories of cheating is one where literacy programmes or other empowerment initiatives enable women to claim their “fair share”.

The tea garden workers and the cheating foremen

One of the most popular and appealing anecdotes collected by the research team in Bangladesh concerned tea garden workers whose new-found literacy had enabled them to discover and ultimately to challenge the fact that they were routinely paid for less tea than they had actually picked. For a Marxist, this little story might illustrate how capitalist markets always and systematically exploit those who control no assets or means of production except their own labour, so that class conflict is a constant and necessary feature of the system. The “empowerment” version does not stint on moral condemnation of the corrupt tea garden babu who was defrauding the workers, but also finds a solution to the problem which is actually quite similar to the one that might be formulated in neo-classical economics: it turns out to be a simple “market failure” caused by “imperfect information”. Once the information problem has been solved through literacy and participatory debate, the women are able to stop the fraud, and the market is seen to function fairly and smoothly, rewarding honest, hardworking producers with a just price for their goods.³¹

It is interesting to note that the vulnerability of supposedly ignorant and non-numerate women to “cheating” by wily male traders and middlemen may be more keenly felt by NGO workers than by women themselves. During a field visit to one of the research sites in Bangladesh (a country with a lively commercial tradition dating back several centuries and a thoroughly monetised economy) several women participants enthusiastically claimed that literacy has helped them not to be cheated by travelling salesmen any longer. Prompted for specific occasions on which they would have previously been cheated and how they now managed to put a stop to it, they drew a blank. In later debates with some of the *Reflect* facilitators it emerged that during initial efforts to “mobilise” (recruit) for this programme, NGO workers had gone on repeatedly and at length about how “you will no longer be cheated”. Now the women rightly concluded that evaluators would be pleased to hear that they were no longer being cheated.³²

³¹ See also the example from the pilot *Reflect* evaluation by Archer and Cottingham (1996b). Before *Reflect*, “we knew prices changed but ... we were victims of the changes”; now, with systematic analysis of seasonal market trends, the women were able to start bulk buying to benefit from periodic price dips.

³² None of this is to say that there may not have been the odd occasion on which activities in the *Reflect* circles, whether linked with literacy or otherwise, have helped in reducing incidences of being cheated. The story of tea garden workers challenging the kabubabus’ underestimating of their daily pickings is consistent and convincing. Again, our concern here is with the way in which such stories are told as parables of the capitalist way and an awakening self-confidence. It should be noted that those instances which we followed up in detail often showed that the moral outrage of the female facilitators, who were of similar social standing as the cheating kabubabus (and often related to them), was key in making protests against cheating effective. Beforehand, many women workers simply had no access to a sympathetic ear in this more privileged social class. It is also clear that BWALPA, as an organisation firmly embedded in the union tradition, was particularly keen on foregrounding its own credentials in exposing cases of workers exploitation. See Chapter 5 for the story in more detail.

2.7.5 Money of one's own

Other aspects of money management are considered equally important in assessments of empowerment. Hashemi and Schuler, for example, award an extra point on their empowerment scale to women who make purchases with their own money, and another to those who use their savings to invest in business (1996, 638). Why is such a premium placed on spending one's own money rather than somebody else's? Why is it pleasing to see women worrying about their future to the extent that they try to prepare for it? Such questions are naïve to anyone living in a capitalist society where dependence on someone else is first and foremost considered risky and any individual not making efforts to escape such dependency would be regarded as just as irresponsible as the person who does not prepare for the future. Financial independence along with a realistic and rational vision for the future are taken to be markers of maturity in a person. Somewhat paradoxically, such self-sufficiency is also seen as a better vantage point from which to develop personal relationships with others.

In the Burchfield study of literacy programmes in Nepal, in order to be counted as "more empowered", it was not enough for women simply to state their desire to make money. They had to indicate an activity "that might lead to that result" such as "raising chickens, looking for a job, getting more training, getting a better education, etc." Simply "hoping that money comes my way" was discounted as a passive, childish and therefore disempowered response (Burchfield 1997, 91). Yet, in the context of rural Nepal, this was probably an equally or more rational option than any of Burchfield's suggested alternatives – especially when USAID had come to town.

2.7.6 Disciplined workers

What is new in the NGO project of women's empowerment is not the commitment to women's emancipation from what Indian nationalists described as "oppressive and degenerate social tradition" and what contemporary NGO workers call "negative cultural norms". The novelty is in the extension of this project from middle-class women to women of the lower classes – whom nationalists had assumed to be "culturally incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom" (Chatterjee 1993, 129). And whereas early missionaries and their colonial counterparts hoped to create a class of independent "yeoman farmers", development organisations (like the Ugandan and Bangladeshi state) begin from the premises of modernisation, taking proletarianisation as a necessary and inevitable fact and seeking to induce the cultural and attitudinal changes needed to incorporate both women and men into the modern economy as disciplined workers.

It is not surprising, then, that fundamentalists and would-be defenders of patriarchal tradition sometimes accuse NGOs of "imposing" a Western ideology of gender equity on poor women. Interestingly, this suspicion seldom comes up in relation to middle and upper

class women (one assumes this is because they are assumed to have a capacity to choose for themselves that poor women do not). “Empowerment” allows NGOs to claim that poor women have adopted new values and practices as a result of their own strengthened will and capacity – not the success of the NGO’s proselytizing efforts. At the same time, however, it still allows them to attribute positive change to the effects of the development project (while negative or potentially harmful change is always attributed to factors operating outside of the project).

2.7.7 Women’s empowerment and feminism

In fact, when it comes to women’s empowerment, the fuzziness of the term is especially useful, even indispensable, to development professionals. It allows them to paper over the differences in their various understandings of gender equity. It allows them to present themselves as combating gender injustice (and to construct at least a symbolic link with feminist traditions, in which empowerment has a rather more confrontational significance) without having to back any kind of political project, any agenda for structural change or redistribution of resources, even any critique of dominant cultural values and meanings. Consequently, the feminist concern with equitable outcomes recedes into the background. Instead, as we discuss in more detail in the next chapter, the self-directed process of “participating” is considered to be empowering *in itself*, spontaneously fostering autonomy, self-confidence and independence, so that individual women can change their own lives in the ways they want.

This results in a picture of women’s agency and consciousness that, to a feminist, would seem both overly heroic and at the same time overly paternalistic. Feminists, like Marxists, adopt a critical stance towards everyday experience, as it is seen to be a vehicle for the continuing subordination of women. Women’s own beliefs and perceptions are not necessarily to be trusted, since cultural subordination works through a process of internalising and naturalising dominant ideology. Changes in the self are necessary, but because the self is constituted by and bound up in the structures of culture and society, any change in consciousness can only be achieved as part and parcel of a wider political struggle (and vice versa). By contrast, “empowerment” discourse, as we have seen, has at best a sketchy and static place for ideology and social structure, depicting these as obstacles or limitations that are external to the self and the empowerment process rather than constitutive of it. They are seen as things that women need to be “freed from” in order to achieve self-realisation. The result is a story similar to a religious “conversion narrative” in the way that it wipes out the weight of history and politics with one fell swoop of “empowerment” magic.

Even when it comes to understanding the “empowerment” gains made by individual women, other factors in a woman’s life – a change in personal circumstances, or even just a different development project that she takes part in – can be just as empowering (or disempowering). This is rarely acknowledged in NGO empowerment narratives. At times, agencies will

consider culture or social structure as factors conducive or obstructive to empowerment in a specific context. But rare is the evaluation author or NGO fieldworker who feels that she can go as far as questioning the values informing the development agency's own vision. Most agencies operate on a "common-sense understanding" of empowerment which, in practice, means that the ambitions and ideals of NGOs, the donors who fund them and the middle class professionals who staff them, shape what can be regarded as empowering and what can't. In other words, the empowerment agenda's affinity for the ideology of capitalist individualism privileges one mode of life over several strategies of resistance presently crucial to survival in poor Ugandan and Bangladeshi communities.

2.7.8 Striving for self-sufficiency

Moreover, in the Bangladeshi and Ugandan communities where we did our research, striving for self-sufficiency could backfire badly, since the management and manipulation of dependant relationships is crucial to secure both material and emotional well-being. Even though capitalist modes of production are clearly dominant, most people, whether male or female, were in no position to rely entirely on market relationships for their livelihood. In our study, we found *Reflect* facilitators and ActionAid staff busy trying to stamp out practices such as dowry in Bangladesh or the giving away of surplus food crops at the end of the harvest in Uganda. They condemned these practices irrational, wasteful, detrimental to the position of women, or all three. From a modernisation perspective, it may be true that these customs do not promote the responsibility of the individual for her own life and well-being. Nor do they increase people's propensity to work harder, consume less³³ and invest more, or encourage the equal participation in decision-making of everyone, regardless of inherited position. But even cursory investigation would show that these practices help to weave a complex web of reciprocal exchanges that is vital to the survival of poor households (not to mention, of course, their ability to participate in the life of the community, their dignity and their sense of identity). As countless participatory poverty assessments have shown, the truly poor, in the eyes of the poor themselves, are those who are cut off from such networks of reciprocity and obligation.

2.8 Change Agents? NGO employees and the project of empowerment

In the 1950s and 1960s, modernisation discourse stressed the need for postcolonial elites to change the values and customs of their people so as to facilitate their incorporation into a capitalist society. Interestingly, of course, the employees of NGOs like ActionAid are precisely the "educated elite" that modernisation discourse so eagerly sought. There is some evidence from our interviews and observations that they have internalised aspects of this ideology and

³³ Or, more accurately, consume less of some goods seen as wasteful (such as alcohol and gold jewellery) and consume more of the commodities produced by the modern formal sector, such as soap, newspapers, medicines, plastic sandals for wearing to and from the latrine, etc.

perceive themselves as the “change agents” that modernisation theory thought they should be. Many, perhaps most of the development professionals we interviewed in Uganda and Bangladesh saw it as their patriotic (and sometimes religious) duty to instil modern practices and values among the poor.

The assumption of this “duty” was not entirely selfless, any more than it was when the Victorian middle class took it upon themselves to uplift and reform the slums of London. Jobs with NGOs, particularly international NGOs like ActionAid, are remunerative and prestigious. Even the poorly paid facilitators’ posts were highly sought after in our field sites. The fact that they also involve “service to the community” gives them added moral authority. Like ministers, religious leaders and teachers, NGO workers are responsible for upholding the values of society.³⁴ During the local government elections of 1998, several *Reflect* facilitators in Bangladesh used their position to launch a campaign for public office, whilst at least one senior member of ActionAid staff in Mubende was widely rumoured to be planning to stand for Parliament.

2.8.1 Class issues?

That said, there are significant differences in the way Ugandan and Bangladeshi staff and facilitators in our field sites structure their encounter with project participants. By their own account, most of the NGO workers that we interviewed in Bangladesh came from families that were and had been part of the landed elite or the rising professional middle class for a few generations. Neither they themselves nor the people they encountered in the villages would have considered their position in society as unstable. This was decidedly different in Uganda, where many employees of ActionAid and partner NGOs are first or second generation middle-class, with an acute sense that the privileges they currently enjoy could be gone tomorrow. While in Bangladesh, NGO employees can be said to be the “good conscience” of the established middle and upper classes, in Uganda development workers more or less constitute the newly emerging middle classes, still retaining strong direct bonds with poor people.

This has several consequences. At a professional level, few Ugandan graduates are in a position to choose a profession on the grounds of personal, idealistic ambitions. The primary objective must be to fulfil the wide range of obligations to poorer relatives while also securing one’s own status and career. A position with an international NGO not only marks one out as a modern professional, it also bestows on relatively young women and men the means to act as powerful patrons to poorer peers and relatives. Each of these dual roles comes with its own perks and disadvantages, but the options for escaping either one of them are limited and unattractive.

³⁴ Although it should also be noted that both in Bangladesh and, to a lesser extent in Uganda, staff who joined ActionAid from agencies outside of the INGO sectors, i.e. government, universities, local organisations, sometimes were seen and felt as if they were “selling out” by joining an INGO.

The reason for dwelling on these dual identities here is that they entail two approaches to poverty which are, in theoretical terms at least, very different. With their monthly pay cheque, Ugandan professionals not only provide for their immediate families, but also respond to a wide range of demands from other family members, friends, churches, etc. Accommodating such demands is not a mere matter of charity. Few people get through their education with the help of their parents' funds alone. By the time a graduate gets a job, dozens of people – and not only family members – are likely to have helped along the way, and they themselves or their children or grandchildren can reasonably expect reciprocity. A complex web of lending and giving ensues along with a set of personal obligations and dependencies. The giver of money will often be deferred to and, with time, money wields influence.

2.8.2 Patronage, politics and participation

When the same professional comes into a village as a development agent, however, he or she is meant to deal with resources very differently. Participatory projects require a “hands-off approach”, where the professional merely facilitates community members in their activities. Even for those who agree with the principles behind this approach, it can be very hard to maintain in practice. The reasons for rejecting the deference offered from project participants – either in gratitude for money or patronage already received or in anticipation of favours yet to come – are not only virtually impossible to convey to the people who are wanting to express their respect. It is also plainly irrational in terms of getting a job done. Not slipping into the role of a benevolent patron would take considerable time and effort, while accepting this role offers all the advantages of acting in a known capacity and thus achieving greater control over the situation.

Moreover, the kinship obligations of NGO staff create pressures that go beyond the purely personal level. As one long-time development insider has written of Nepal, “When the political parties are bound together by densely woven loyalties based on personal allegiances, clan networks and ethnic divisions, neutrality becomes elusive. ... All NGOs ... not just advocacy groups but also NGOs that provide services ... are under intense pressure in this charged environment to develop party allegiances” (Carothers 1999, 222).

“Capacity building approaches” usually involve far smaller transfers of material resources than, say, infrastructure development. This placed Ugandan staff in a difficult position on occasions when local authorities insisted that ActionAid build a school, a road or a clinic in their community or provide emergency loans to farmers for the purchase of seeds. Since ActionAid obviously possesses the resources to do this kind of work if it wishes, and is well known for having provided similar services to other communities in the past, refusal has tended to be seen as the withholding or withdrawal of support from the particular chief or local council concerned – obviously an act with political significance. In the early stages of this research, it was noted that staff of ActionAid Uganda did not feel free to voice such

reservations, no doubt due to their awareness that a professed affinity towards “giving hand-outs” or “delivering services” could easily have made them seem “unprofessional” and “behind the times”. It appears that the significant gap between employees’ own life practices and the ideals and guidelines of ActionAid meant that individuals felt they had to change hats and move back and forth between different spheres. Not surprisingly, this complicated everyday procedures and produced much insecurity with staff constantly checking whether they are “in line”.

2.8.3 Adapting the discourse

By contrast, most employees of Bangladeshi NGOs we spoke to had foregone more lucrative opportunities in other sectors of the economy in order to work in development.³⁵ They had far less difficulty in adapting “official” ActionAid discourse to their own more distanced social role as emissaries of the elite amongst the hard-core poor. Hossain and Moore (1999; 2002) illustrate how Bangladeshi elites past and present have had little reason to feel threatened by poverty or the poor and thus favour solutions to poverty which encourage poor people to “help themselves”. Responsibility for the poor is viewed as individual, traditionally voluntary, personalised, and focused on selective, narrow welfare communities. The prevailing interpretation of “empowerment” among Bangladeshi NGOs was a highly prescriptive one, which simply assumed the possibility and the necessity of social engineering through education and, by the same token, repeatedly blamed poverty on the ignorance and apathy of the poor. We have seen that this is hardly a “distortion” of the empowerment model, just an exceptionally direct and blunt reading of it.³⁶

A chicken’s tale

Bangladeshi staff and facilitators were more insulated than their Ugandan counterparts from countervailing demands from the “beneficiaries”, and seldom seemed to find themselves in a position where their vision of how poor women should change their lives started to impinge too awkwardly on their own ideals and choices. Gender oppression, dowry and domestic violence for example, were typically treated as “problems of the poor” with a degree of detachment that would have been impossible for Ugandan staff to maintain. During a focus group discussion with women learners in Netrokona, the foreign researcher tried to gain a sense of the degree to which the women had been able to improve their stake in decision-making concerning family affairs. As readers should by now expect, the women insisted that thanks to *Reflect* they were now equal to their

³⁵ Even though the reputation of the NGO sector has in recent years suffered from allegations of profiteering at the expense of the poor, these in themselves indicate how much Bangladeshi elites regard NGOs as the rightful initiators of development and how important it is for individual employees to portray themselves as morally upright.

³⁶ One manager of SUS in Netrokona was bewildered why the *Reflect* trainers from ActionAid never taught the facilitators how to ensure that debates in the *Reflect* circles would effectively result in the adoption of specific action points. This manager was fully aware of the anxieties of *Reflect* practitioners not to appear prescriptive but disagreed with this philosophy, stating that clear prescriptions are imperative when working with poor people.

husbands in all aspects of decision-making. At this point, one of the male *Reflect* co-ordinators spoke up and presented the women with the “tale” of a woman cooking for the family and dividing up a chicken. There were two pieces, one larger and nicer than the other. Which one would they have given to their husbands and which one would they have kept for themselves? The women chuckled in a “the game is up” kind of way - the notion of keeping the larger piece to themselves was plainly too inconceivable for words. The *Reflect* co-ordinator sat back and, with a casual nod, handed the situation back to the foreign researcher.

Rendering assistance to a foreign researcher who was at an impasse was the first but not only motive for the staff member’s actions. The story he was telling, it later turned out, was one he had picked up during gender training and seems to be a pretty standard one employed by trainers to rebuff trainees who stubbornly insist that male privilege is no longer an issue. The story he was once patronised with (most likely by a more highly educated woman trainer), now not only served to put the village women “in their place”, it also seemed to be delivered with the intention of demonstrating his expertise in “gender issues” to the representative of an important funder.

2.8.4 Distance from poverty

Reflect facilitators in Bangladesh also enjoyed a clear distance from the “problems of the poor” that Ugandan facilitators did not. Asked about their motives for teaching, these daughters and nieces of local landowners were keen to point out that they were not looking for a job. To them, this was a quasi-voluntary activity done for compassionate or philanthropic motives (and to tide them over the period between leaving school and getting married or moving on to higher education). Facilitators in the much less stratified villages of Uganda were set apart by their educational qualifications, but tended to come from the same socio-economic background as most of the participants. While some made efforts to distinguish themselves from their literacy participants, they automatically included themselves when talking of wanting to bring about change in the community. In contrast, facilitators in Bangladesh clearly did not regard the learners’ communities as their own (or even similar to them).

2.8.5 Age and authority

In Uganda, the younger facilitators often found it far more difficult to assert authority in front of an older audience, mainly because the participants couldn’t see any reason why they should suddenly defer to someone who – outside of the classroom – would be regarded as their junior. Not surprisingly, Ugandan facilitators were keen to be recognised as professionals, and this may also help to explain their impatience with those aspects of participatory methodology that seemed to them most undermining of their dignity and

authority (such as sitting on the ground, or drawing in the dirt with sticks). The lack of social distance sometimes made it difficult for Ugandan facilitators to discuss issues “too close to home”. Individuals had widely differing strategies to deal with such situations. Some simply passed over topics they thought too delicate, others sought to ensure that they were not seen to be “pushing” topics (sometimes by relying more strongly on PRA graphics than was usually the case), while yet others tried to assert control with authoritarian style.

By contrast, facilitators in Bangladesh had few qualms about expecting women to discuss intimate details of their family lives, such as how frequently their husbands beat them, how much they had paid for their daughter’s dowry or when they had last bathed. The class and status distinctions were so strong in Bangladesh that it was possible for very young women to teach groups of considerably older, but lower-status women with only minor resentments surfacing. Circles that we observed in Bangladesh were in many ways closer to the ideal presented in *Reflect* literature. Lively discussion occupied much of the class time, strong opinions were debated, problems were aired and wrongdoers (from lazy and corrupt officials to men who beat their wives too much) were denounced.

2.8.6 How much distance is ideal?

Reflect literature supposes that the lesser the social distance between participants and facilitators, the greater the possibilities for an authentically egalitarian and participatory process. “Finding a local person has been... emphasised in order to ensure that the *Reflect* process is essentially internal to the community [rather than depending] on interaction between an external agency and the local community. It is... a break with much of the work influenced by Freire, which is often premised on interaction between “intellectuals” and “the masses”... (and) with most schooling, which... tends to depend on teachers coming from outside” (Global Survey of *Reflect*, 2001). However, our findings in these two countries suggest that in fact the possibilities for a participatory “dialogue” may depend on there being *enough* social distance between participants on the one hand and facilitators and NGO fieldworkers on the other (regardless of whether the latter come from the same village, hamlet or district as the former). This, we would argue, is because far from being devoid of power dynamics, the participatory process demands a peculiarly “disinterested” and invisible form of authority. The facilitator must cajole the participants into disagreeing with her and with one another. She must selectively trespass on hierarchies of gender, generation and caste and selectively allow participants to do the same – all the while secure in the implicit knowledge that she will remain in charge and that her control of the process will not be challenged.

2.9 Women’s perspectives on empowerment

We hope that we have shown why it is naïve and self-serving when NGOs claim that empowerment narratives represent the realisation of “women’s voices”, finally freed from the

silence imposed by oppression and lack of confidence. But it would be equally wrong to assume that in Uganda and Bangladesh, empowerment narratives are always a passive expression of conformity to an “imposed” ideology. It would be wrong, as we argued above, to accuse agencies of forcing the Protestant ethic down poor women’s throats. That would imply that women actually adopt the values implicit in the practice of empowerment and do so against their own best interests. Rather, uneducated women with few other sources of social standing gain prestige from the ability to recite to one’s neighbours and relatives worthy recommendations on the modern and correct way of doing things, and indeed, from the act of producing something as official-sounding as an “action point”. Both demonstrate their connection to the influential and authoritative NGO. In other words, the ideology of the NGO is sometimes appropriated as a resource in itself for women learners, who blend it with more localised discourses on respectability and morality.

2.9.1 Women behaving respectably

Ogden (1996) shows how much effort women in a Kampala slum invested in battling the persistent stigmatisation of single urban women as immoral, (sexually) dangerous and/or barren and not worthy of respect. She describes a situation of considerable contestation and change in relationships between women and men. On the one hand, stable marriages were increasingly the exception rather than the norm, but on the other hand, AIDS gave new impetus to longstanding fears of the sexual danger embodied by independent women. Against this backdrop, she argues, it became more important for women to be seen to uphold and embody the virtues of the “proper” and respectable wife and mother. For the Ugandan women in our study (who, like Ogden’s interviewees, frequently relied on “multiple partner strategies” for economic survival), their participation in the *Reflect* programme provided one way to demonstrate their respectability.

Frederece learns to behave properly

In Uganda, women like Frederece would happily report to ActionAid staff how since joining the *Reflect* circle they are more confident, able to take autonomous financial decisions, able to negotiate marketplace exchanges without fear of being cheated, and healthier because of the understanding of hygiene and nutrition gained in the circle. Frederece’s story seemed, at first glance, to offer convincing proof of the empowering impact of the *Reflect* programme. When the researcher first came to stay in the village, and visited her in her home, she was anxious and reticent. She felt shy about leaving the courtyard of her own house, did not interact much with her fellow villagers, was dreading having to deal with coffee and maize traders, and felt overwhelmed by the day-to-day problems of running her household. Eighteen months later, she was brimming with confidence, sure that her maize and coffee harvest would bring enough profit to keep her eldest son in secondary school, and articulate in her pride in her achievements. And she gladly professed how much *Reflect* has helped her, albeit in somewhat vague terms (“I now know how to behave properly”).

But the “empowerment narrative” constructed in the dialogue between Frederece and ActionAid officers leaves out the most significant factor in explaining how and why she has changed: the death of her husband shortly after he had accused her of witchcraft and adultery. Widowhood under such a dark cloud had exposed her to profound economic distress and the distrust and suspicion of her fellow villagers. But at the same time, once Frederece had found ways to steer past these difficulties, she also found herself in many ways better off. Joining the *Reflect* circle was one of several steps that Frederece took to rebuild her life. She saw it as a means to restore her social standing in the village and possibly to alleviate her economic woes, should it prove to be the case that material rewards might flow from ActionAid to those registered on the list of participants. While the latter expectation had been disappointed, Frederece did have some success in using the *Reflect* circle as a base for reconstructing a network of friends. Perhaps the self-evidently worthy character of the *Reflect* class (and besides a prayer meeting, what could be more morally unimpeachable than a literacy class?) also helped rub off some of the moral stain that her husband’s suspicious death had left (as Frederece implied when she said that *Reflect* had taught her “how to behave”).

This gradual acceptance back into the fabric of village life was an enormous relief for Frederece, and is more than enough to account for her “transformation” into a confident, articulate, organised woman. Additionally, as she eventually admitted to the researcher, once she had steered her way past the immediate crisis of the witchcraft allegations, Frederece found that money went further, and life was easier without her habitually drunken and abusive husband. This gave her an extra spring in her step. *Reflect* had indeed played a part in Frederece’s story, but it was a part that Frederece had carefully defined, and not at all the starring role that the “empowerment narrative” would have claimed for it.

In Bangladesh, lower-class women were equally keenly aware that their society stigmatises them as dirty, shrill, lazy, deceitful and ignorant. They, too, struggled to construct a positive identity for themselves as proper wives and mothers and upstanding members of the community. Said Suraya Begum, “I advise my neighbours to keep clean and to drink boiled water, to send their children to school. They come to our house and appreciate me for cleanliness.” Cleanliness, of course, has particular symbolic importance in both Hindu and Muslim Bengali cultural tradition. Keeping the body and the home free of pollution by impure substances is central to the daily construction of caste and, as anthropologist Sarah Lamb has argued, of patriarchy. Regular bathing, prescribed for high-status women as a way not only to purify the body but also to prevent the contamination of women’s households, is one of a set of symbolic practices, like restrictive dress, spatial seclusion, special diets, used to “close” and contain the powerful but dangerous “openness” of the female body. Such practices, Lamb (2000) writes, function to “contain a woman’s most important and intimate

interactions within her household, and channel her sexual and reproductive powers toward her husband and toward extending his patrilineage". Suraya Begum's ability to weave the "traditional" and the "modern" meanings of cleanliness together into a single image of the respectable wife and mother is an example of women's inventiveness in combining "development" discourses and their symbols of "modernity", with older, local categories of feminine domestic virtue. Such acts of appropriation can hardly be seen as passive conformity. On the other hand, neither do they fit comfortably with the classic empowerment narrative. Yet the typical NGO evaluator would simply assume that Suraya Begum's statement represents evidence of the "impact" of new, modern ways of organising daily life.

2.9.2 He who pays the dressmaker...

Many Ugandan women value being independently successful and are proud of their ability to provide for themselves without any help from men – fine indicators, one might think, of their "empowerment" in the best tradition of the Protestant ethic. But at the same time, they maintain a different set of values, according to which a woman must be interested in having clothes and other things bought for her. This is not just for the sake of having new clothes, but to prove to herself and everybody else that she is appreciated and respected by her husband. In other words, there is a definite premium on new clothes that are bought for and in appreciation of a woman. Several women told the researchers of their strategies to get their husbands around to buying them clothes. Alongside with cooking good food, being polite and having sex, this also included trying to become pregnant and, in one case, passing money to the man so as for him to publicly pretend that he was the one buying the dress.

On two occasions during the year, Christmas and Easter, it becomes paramount for everyone to make a smart public appearance. Formerly, it would have been up to the men to cover the expenses and procure all the items needed for this undertaking. Nowadays the expansion of the market economy means that some women (with or without partner) have enough funds to pay for themselves. In the run-up to Christmas 1998 we spoke to some women about their arrangements. One group of women knew that nobody would buy clothes for them, either because they were not in a permanent (enough) relationship or because previous experience had taught them not to harbour any expectations. With varying success, all of these women had made efforts to save money towards buying new outfits. Those who had the prospect of wearing a particularly nice dress on the important day were understandably proud of their achievement, underlining the hard work they had done and the fact that they manage to fend for themselves. By contrast, they described their husbands as "lazy", "drunkards" and "good for nothing". Only one woman defended her boyfriend, saying that him not paying for her was the agreement they had and that there was no reason for him to spend money on her when she is not willing to do the same for him. Yet, even she conceded that it was ultimately much more desirable to have a man buying clothes for her: "It is nice. Everybody knows he has bought it for you."

Among the second, smaller group of women, who did expect to get a new outfit from their partner, some were shy to speak about their arrangements. It would be presumptuous for a woman to flaunt her expectations beforehand since the actual outfit he buys her is not only meant to reflect the size of his wallet but also the extent of his appreciation. But the women's remarks of modesty, pointing out that their partners had just bought rather a lot of clothes for the last festivity or that the harvest had not brought in much money, could barely conceal the air of hope and anticipation. One didn't have to ask these women whether they would be happier if they bought their own clothes (as some of them also do), seeing how visibly pleased they were to be the envy of other women around.

The woman who wants a dress from her husband needs to make an investment the profitability of which she can calculate about as reliably as if she undertook to rent a market stall. There was often little difference in the way women spoke about the managing of relationships and the way they described entrepreneurial activities. But investment in relationships is not picked up by any indicator of empowerment. This is partly because the woman concerned is seen to do the "wrong" things (increasing dependency rather than reducing it), and partly because her behaviour is deemed to be morally unsuitable (involving wasteful expenditure, devious behaviour, "dishonest" work and immodestly making a show of herself by wanting lavish clothes in the first place).

In the empowerment discourse, the above situation could only ever serve as an illustration of the structural constraints women face in patriarchy. The possibility that a woman might act in such a way out of choice (though, of course, within the given constraints) is not granted to her, while the possibility that she might prefer a strategic accommodation with local custom to becoming an entrepreneur is taboo. As we have seen, it is no accident that writings on women's empowerment uncritically portray the market as the benevolent saviour of women from patriarchy. Here, we are made to believe, women can make useful investments, do honest work and be independent. The risks and constraints that market involvement entails are rarely subject to much scrutiny. Even in situations where NGO staff are keen to step beyond stereotypical portrayals of empowered women, this can prove a difficult task. Women and men are understandably keen to present themselves as decent, honest and work-minded characters. Sensing that they are "inappropriate", stories of how they themselves sometimes deceive or act deviously are omitted in favour of a decent public front.

Joyce's stand

On one occasion an elderly participant, Joyce, was late for the *Reflect* circle in Kilemba. She joined the ritual recitation of "what *Reflect* has done for me" midway through. Everybody had watched her arrive from the moment she left the bar next door, staggering slightly. Joyce comes across as a shy woman, someone who is not usually given to long discourses, but she could be blunt. Now she flatly refused the polite if slightly sarcastic remark by the facilitator that "you must have been digging in a far off field." "No, I had a glass, I needed it."

Once Joyce is briefed on the proceedings, she wants to make her own contribution and starts telling how her daughter who lives in a nearby town had poisoned herself after a fight with her husband and that she had been hospitalised for some time. Joyce expressed her pride in not having visited her daughter upon receiving news of her suicide attempt. She explained that her daughter had only herself to blame for the trouble she was in given that she drank alcohol and may well have been adulterous. Joyce presented the fact of *not* visiting her daughter as a sign of positive change within herself (i.e. being strict in morally judging other people's behaviour and acting on it), and one that had come about through *Reflect*.

It could be that Joyce just wanted to get this - no doubt harrowing - experience off her mind and managed to elegantly weave her story into the theme the class was just dealing with. But the reactions from the others clearly showed support for Joyce's stance of moral superiority. Some questioned the intentionality of the daughter's actions and Joyce adamantly rejected any suggestion that "she might not have known what she was drinking." The few women the researcher spoke to in the days after the session all agreed that Joyce had acted correctly.

Joyce's example of how she was changed (read empowered) is unsettling and could serve as an example of how the promotion of individualistic ideology implicit in the empowerment discourse inadvertently and yet inevitably supports potentially harmful sentiments of moral superiority. However, this assumes that *Reflect* really did change Joyce in the way she proposes. Our findings suggest that "impacts" of empowerment are not as straightforward in practice as the terminology suggests. Instead, Joyce and others carefully select and choose what has had an "impact" on them and what hasn't.

In this instance, Joyce had good reason to demonstrate a determined stand. Suicide is a delicate affair and she was in a vulnerable position where others could have accused her of bearing part of the blame. She was rumoured to have spiritual powers and was long known to disapprove of the lifestyle of her daughter. It then appears that Joyce's statement here had little to do with what the *Reflect* circle had done for her. Instead she aligned herself with the Protestant ethic ideology so as to make it clear to everyone that she did not and would not be made to feel any guilt for her daughter's action, and would not be fazed by any of the accusations that may have been floating around about her. In doing this she was relying on the validity of the Protestant ethic ideology in the given context, and the validating messages of *Reflect* and other interventions like it.

The truly intriguing aspect of this scenario is how an ideology that promotes individualism, rationalism and self-determination, is here being put to effective use in a context where Joyce is actually seeking to protect the status she has in a set of dependent relationships. But we

found that this strategic “muddling” of ideologies is a much more likely outcome of empowerment activities than the kind of rational, linear vector of enlightenment and progress on which the emotional and moral appeal of empowerment narratives rest.

2.10 The smoke screen of empowerment

The concept of empowerment currently deals in stereotypes because its actual praxis lies beneath a smoke screen. There is an obvious contradiction in the uniformity of outcomes reported and development processes which are meant to have become “open-ended”, “participatory” and “adapted to local needs”. Outcomes reported regularly present real women in as much as they measure up to the “ideal woman”. NGO workers are often quick to point fingers at donors and policy makers for imposing targets and demanding delivery and thus denying practitioners the opportunity to engage in “real” empowerment. However, from the experience of this research it appears that practitioners were just as often prone to make ambitious claims for the effectiveness of their programmes which, on many occasions, went way beyond any expectations donors would have dared suggesting as targets.

The “change agent” is left in a difficult position. On the one hand she must challenge the woman participant profoundly enough to set off a substantive and sustained move towards changing values, attitudes, behaviours and practices in a certain direction. On the other hand the development worker is not meant to actually be perceived as the change agent in the end. Most adult educators and feminists would still rather deny that their position of power almost automatically renders their knowledge more influential. This tension contributes to some of the dogmas that have become common place in programmes seeking to “empower” women – perhaps especially, as we discuss in the next chapter, the faith in participatory methods as neutral techniques that can in themselves induce the right [“rational”] process of change without the development agency having to exercise undue influence. We suspect that empowerment discourse flourishes for the same reasons that modernisation discourse did in the era of decolonisation: because it allows room for manoeuvre within an unresolved ambiguity about who is driving the change process and towards what ends.

All too often the long list of desirables that we commonly associate with “being empowered” and that we use extensively to describe what we see, masks cultural difference rather than laying it open. When we start out to evaluate empowerment we have too clear an idea of what we are looking for and then promptly find it. It is ironic that the missionaries and colonial administrators of the early twentieth century probably had a clearer view of the cultural and historical specificity of “modern” Western forms of social agency than contemporary NGOs. Like contemporary Bangladeshi elites, they did not attempt to disguise their belief that subjugated peoples were lazy, unenterprising, fatalistic, ignorant and enmeshed in superstition. By contrast, the concept of empowerment through participation glosses over a wide array of tensions inherent to the project of development. This is both its

usefulness and its danger. We believe that further perpetuating the fiction that there are “neutral” mechanisms or techniques which manage to produce singularly positive change is unhelpful to everyone, from development organisations and the often very committed individuals who work for them, to poor people and to the cause of development itself.

Reflect practitioners resent the notion that “literacy makes modern”. In its place they assert that “participation makes empowered”. But how much difference does this conceptual shift make to the practice of literacy programmes? The following chapter provides analysis of the historical, political and institutional contexts in which the literacy programmes we researched took place. A myriad of factors, motivations and circumstances is seen to influence proceedings and outcomes, challenging overly simplistic distinctions between what constitutes “best practice” of Reflect and what should be judged a “distortion”.

Chapter 3 **Drawing lessons: literacy programmes, participatory techniques and the illusion of dialogue**

“The list of characteristics that accrue from literacy include individualism, objectivity, the holding of individual opinions, a capacity for logical analysis, and context-independent abstract thinking.... Literacy releases the individual from a sense of personal inferiority, from the relationship of dependency and subservience, and allocates a new status and potential.” (Bhola 1985, 23)

“The evaluations also revealed that the Reflect circles had a positive influence on people’s resource management at an individual or household level. Women in Bangladesh repeatedly spoke of the value of calendars and matrices to strengthen their analytical skills, enabling them to plan better, develop more effective coping strategies (e.g. bulk buying and storing goods) and have more control over decisions regarding loan use(...). In Uganda there were what appeared to be the beginnings of significant attitudinal changes seen in relation to child spacing, polygamy and traditional cultural practices which can undermine food security.” (Archer and Cottingham 1996b, ii)

The history of *Reflect* in the late 1990s was, like the history of PRA itself, characterised by two trends. The first was an incredibly rapid spread. By the end of the decade, ActionAid UK reported that 350 organisations in 60 countries were using the approach. An ActionAid survey of these organisations in 2000 attracted responses from 137 groups in 43 countries. The second trend, however, was a growing disquiet and debate amongst the most committed proponents of the approach over the “distortion” or weakening of its participatory elements “in practice”. In this chapter we explore some of these “distorting” factors and the solutions that practitioners tried to apply.

3.1 Literacy and its motivating ideologies

While there is a considerable amount of literature on how to overcome the lack of motivation often ascribed to adult learners, we know surprisingly little about the motives of adult learners for joining and staying in the classes. It is even rarer to find agencies devoting much scrutiny to their own motivations for setting them up in the first place. In an attempt to address this gap, this chapter examines some of the interests, aspirations and assumptions of NGO staff, facilitators and learners involved in ActionAid’s *Reflect* programmes in Uganda and Bangladesh. It focuses particularly on how field staff in Uganda struggle to realise the ambitious expectations generated from ActionAid headquarters as well as the equally tenacious and often conflicting expectations of participants and facilitators.³⁷

³⁷ It should be noted that ActionAid headquarters did not hold any formal management role over the projects in question. However, the staff in Uganda were, perhaps more than others, in direct contact with developments in the London offices and were thus exposed to the intense debates occurring there about what constituted “cutting edge *Reflect* practice” and what was branded as a “distortion”.

The virtues and benefits of literacy figured prominently in the rationales for involvement in *Reflect* given by the donors, NGO staff, local leaders, facilitators and participants that we interviewed. It would be easy to assume that the literacy programme unites them all in the single purpose of overcoming ignorance or (in the Freirean idiom) the “culture of silence”. This myth of literacy’s transformative powers, as Street (1984; 1995; 1993), Gee (1996), and others have shown, is a pervasive one. It certainly helped to shape the ambitions and meanings that were invested in the *Reflect* classes by different actors. Indeed, many women sought – to the horror of ActionAid UK – to exaggerate the similarity between the *Reflect* programme and formal schooling, seeking to appropriate for themselves a little of the prestige of being “lettered”.

But other powerful ideologies and incentives also shaped perceptions and practices. The “literacy myth” was by no means the only influence on the messages promoted in the classes, the interactions between facilitators and learners, and the social significance (or “impact”) of belonging to the programme. In fact, literacy acquisition played a relatively minor part in the happenings in literacy classes and their outcomes, while the interests of the different actors had a significant impact on how the programmes evolved. In other words, there is a lot more going on in literacy programmes than literacy acquisition itself. To understand this, it is necessary to outline a little of the colonial and postcolonial historical context that has so closely meshed language and literacy with ideologies of nationhood and development in both Uganda and Bangladesh.

3.2 Literacy and nationhood in Uganda and Bangladesh

Researcher: “So what is it that makes you laugh so hard about born-again Christians?”

Florence (an elderly woman learner from Kilemba, Uganda): “Have you not seen them? They only go like this (claps hands above her head) and sing ‘hallelujah’ and ‘praise the lord’ all the time. They don’t even have a book from which to read. In the Catholic Church we have a book which God has written, his words are there for everyone to read.”

If women came to *Reflect* classes because they felt a strong need to be able to read bus signs and medicine bottles, their aspirations would have been disappointed. In the *Reflect* circles we observed, like in most literacy programmes, participants did not achieve sustained progress towards an actual ability to read and write. Our sample was far too small to be able to generalise about the literacy outcomes of *Reflect* in Uganda and Bangladesh, and it should be noted that internal evaluations of *Reflect* have claimed far better results. It is quite possible that we simply happened to choose particularly unsuccessful circles for observation.³⁸ However, it is more likely that the pessimism of our findings results from the sustained and

³⁸ An internal evaluation of the *Reflect* projects in Bangladesh estimated 40% of participants achieve sustainable literacy, and an external evaluation in Uganda which tested recent graduates suggested that nearly all participants had acquired basic literacy. Both studies were methodologically problematic, however.

intensive scrutiny that we were able to devote to the question of literacy use. Most evaluations of literacy programme rely on self-reported ability and propensity to read and write, sometimes supplemented by tests administered during or shortly after the class. Though we did not formally test literacy skills, our day-to-day observations yielded very few empirical instances of participants actually using reading and writing skills, and no evidence that *Reflect* participants were more likely than non-participants to do so. This is in line with the few studies that have attempted a systematic assessment of retention rates. Tests administered six months to one year after the class tend to show that few graduates of any basic literacy programme retain their skills.

Despite the emphasis laid by the aid agencies on the role of literacy in shepherding women into the modern economy, it was apparent in settings like Mubende and Netrokona that the “target groups” (impoverished women on the fringes of the cash economy) had little practical use for literacy, even if they *could* master it by coming to such classes. Yet, despite knowing perfectly well that the economic and other returns were likely to be minimal, women came to the classes week after week. Indeed, in Bangladesh, after “graduating” from the *Reflect* programme many women promptly signed up for the government literacy programme (and vice-versa) and began the whole process all over again. In Uganda, some participants attended the same literacy circle on and off for three years or more, seemingly content to chant syllables week after week and month after month (see also Turittin 1989).

The common reaction to such findings is a call to artificially create the conditions which would *make* people “need” literacy skills. But rather than join the dozens of authors who offer suggestions for “post-literacy” interventions, we found it more interesting to ask why women were attending the literacy classes in the first place, if they did not already “need” to read and write.

3.2.1 The role of religion

Florence was born only shortly after the first missionaries settled in her area. Her statement not only reveals her understanding of Christianity as a modern religion marked out by a book, it also hints at what might be its appeal to many Ugandans. The Bible is “there for everyone to read”, it contains God’s word (and Florence is not alone in taking that literally). Becoming literate is therefore equivalent to having a direct access route to God. Christianity, by virtue of arriving from outside, offered an alternative to indigenous spiritual practices which were deeply rooted within local hierarchies of gender, kinship and generation with little space for individual spiritual advancement along a given route. In fact, in many African cultures spiritual knowledge was never meant to be easily accessible. It is bound to initiation, stages in the life cycle and gender. Most importantly, it is well beyond the control of an individual. Florence, whether she likes it or not, is bound up with this belief system and yet every Sunday she carries a much treasured copy of the Bible five kilometres so as to hold it

in her lap during mass. However, the fact that Florence cannot decode what God has written for “everyone” to read only heightens the “magic” exuding from the pages. Her Bible was part of a donation from an American missionary group and she cannot understand why anyone would want to do without such a prestigious source of knowledge.³⁹

But is this an example of someone attempting to accommodate a modern technology within a traditional, magical knowledge system - or of two magical traditions colliding? Protestant Christianity entails a literal belief in the dynamic power of the written Word to penetrate and transform – a belief that was particularly important to missionaries, who relied on it to make the conversion process possible. Ever since the days of the Reformation, Arno and Graff (1987, 2) remind us, “A belief in the efficacy of literacy and the printed word itself has been an article of faith.” Early missionaries in the British colonies, both Protestant and Catholic, emphasised the importance of basic literacy skills for Bible study (Ssekamwa 1997) as the pathway through which each individual, no matter how benighted her surroundings or how backward her ideas, could obtain direct and unmediated knowledge of God.⁴⁰ As a nineteenth century missionary in southern Africa explained to his congregation of Tswana tribespeople, “When God’s word began to work in their hearts... their tears would wash away all the red paint from their bodies” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992a, 250).

3.2.2 Missionaries and “civilisation”

This had implications beyond the sphere of religious practice, however. The idea that literacy itself could serve as the avenue towards enlightenment was part of a progressive ideology, pitched against the prevalent view that a large part of humanity was “naturally inferior”, and therefore permanently stuck at a “lower stage” of civilisation. Missionaries, particularly those from the non-conformist tradition of radical Protestantism, promoted the competing idea that everyone has the capacity to live a civilised (read Western, Christian) life if provided with some of its essential tools, among them an injection of literacy skills. The notion that all people had the capacity to receive the written word also implied that all people had the capacity to reason. Along with the ability to read would develop the reflective mentality, the logical powers and the capacity for abstraction, the lack of which had so far confined “the natives” to an inferior state of knowledge.

An important part of this process was to be the work of the missionaries of writing down African languages in “simple grammatical form”, thus “bringing the language under some

³⁹ Skaria (1996) describes a similar “fetishization” of books and written documents in the hill tracts of Western India in the nineteenth century, stemming (he argues) from “the subaltern perception of writing as a desirable, dangerous instrument of elite domination, one that has to be both challenged and incorporated.”

⁴⁰ In fact, in the Buganda of the early twentieth century, the ability to read was a pre-condition to being baptised, which, in turn was more or less the only way of gaining access to political resources - see Jones (1926, 192); Pirouet (1978); Ssekamwa (1997).

organisation”. African languages were understood by reference to European “folk” dialects such as Breton and Welsh, and assumed to be inherently primitive and unsophisticated, like African mentalities. It was also assumed that Africans themselves lacked the powers of abstraction and analysis that would be needed to understand the underlying structures of their languages, “and so this structure was to be excavated and re-presented to [them] by their white mentors” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992a, 253).

3.2.3 Colonial education in Africa

Rifles, railways and writing, the British used to boast, were the 3 R's of colonial conquest. Yet until the post-war era, colonial officials took far less interest than missionaries in education and literacy and were in the main happy to leave the schooling of both children and adults to the churches and mission stations. In part, this reflected the fact that they lacked the budget to do otherwise. The prevailing imperial ideology of the day stretched to a vague notion of a “civilising mission”, but not yet to the systematic provision of social services or the planned development of the economy. In part, it also reflected the caution they felt they needed to exercise with regard to education. Sharing the missionaries’ belief in the transformative powers of education, they also feared its “detrribalising” effects in much the same way that they feared the corrupting effects of the cash economy and of city life. Both were to prove persistent obsessions for colonial administrators, since the system of indirect rule depended on the deliberate reinforcement of tribal constraints⁴¹. The 1925 Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa expressed it this way:

“Education should strengthen the feeling of responsibility to the tribal community, and, at the same time, should strengthen will power; should make the conscience sensitive both to moral and intellectual truth; and should impart some power of discriminating between good and evil, between reality and superstition. Since contact with civilisation - and even education itself - must necessarily tend to weaken tribal authority and the sanctions of existing beliefs, and in view of the all-prevailing belief in the supernatural which affect the whole life of the African it is essential that what is good in the old beliefs and sanctions should be strengthened and what is defective should be replaced”

(Jones 1924, check page).

The ongoing protests from Ugandan elite members against “second rate education” may only have reinforced the colonial perception that too much or the wrong type of education only encourages discontent and rebellion. Vernacular literacy was seen as a largely “benevolent” skill. The same was not true for command of the English language, which the Protectorate government was much more reluctant to encourage. In a letter to Bishop Forbes (May 5th, 1920) the Secretary to the Acting Governor explains why: “The Government is desirous that

⁴¹ For more on this, see Chapter 2.

selected natives should be trained in English so as to become really capable clerks and interpreters. What is not desired is that a large number of natives should get a smattering of English which would not be sufficient to make them capable clerks, but which would lead them to think that they were above technical and manual work” (see also Mazrui and Mazrui 1998).

3.2.4 The end of indirect rule

The 1940s saw a shift in imperialist ideology. Under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940, officials were allowed for the first time to spend UK funds to improve the standard of living in the colonies in a fairly simplistic gesture to keep the Empire together during the war.

However, during the 1940s, a wave of strikes, riots and disturbances across the British Empire, together with the rapid growth of organised nationalist movements and trade unions, forced Britain to reconceive the imperial project. The authority of tribal chiefs was “on the wane”, officials reported, while nationalist leaders showed growing success in mobilising urban workers and youth. Africans were increasingly inclined to dispute the legitimacy of British rule, and the successful struggles for self-government in India, Burma and Ceylon had not gone unnoticed in Africa.

In response, Britain’s first Labour government proposed the effective abandonment of the two world approach of indirect rule in favour of an ambitious project of incorporating colonised peoples into a single modern world of wage labour, economic rationality, mass education and universal citizenship. No longer would the stated purpose of the Empire be to reduce unemployment in Britain by creating new trading partners. Instead its function and legitimacy would lie in improving the economic and social conditions of the colonised peoples themselves, towards the day when self-rule would be granted.

This heralded a transition in imperial ideology, from a vague concept of “trusteeship” and a civilising mission to a much more specific commitment to “developing” the colonies through planned interventions in health, education, rural development and basic infrastructure – with the aim of eventually creating self-sufficient and self-governing nations (Cooper 1996, 71/72).

3.2.5 Education as metaphor for social change

Although acceptance of this modernising discourse was only partial and stereotypes of the “backward” African remained prevalent, from the second half of the 1940s colonial officials did begin to invest systematically in education, along with health, housing and other social services. In part, this reflected the emerging belief, also important in the rise of the post-war welfare state in Europe, that such interventions would improve the productivity of workers (a set of assumptions that later coalesced in human capital theory). In part, it reflected the

belief that education was the best way to inculcate the modern and rational outlook that colonised peoples needed (it was believed) to become responsible citizens of self-governing nations. Education, Cooper (1996, 213) argues, became central not just as a policy intervention, but also as a metaphor for a natural, evolutionary but nevertheless guided process of social change, “closely linked to the metaphor of maturation into adulthood” and seen as a collective, even national, process as well as an individual one.

3.2.6 Literacy for self-government

The introduction of government literacy programmes in the late 1940s was explicitly aimed at preparing Africans for self-government, and particularly at equipping them to take part in “democratic” institutions of local government, before one day going on to establish national legislatures. As W. Arthur Lewis, an influential development economist, wrote in a memo for the Colonial Economic and Development Council in 1948:

“The colonies are poor because the colonial people have not learnt how to master their environment. Their techniques and tools are primitive; their hygiene deplorable; and their attitudes too frequently a fatalistic acceptance of their condition as inevitable. The key to rapid and effective colonial development is mass adult education; education not just in literacy, or even primarily in literacy, but in life – in agriculture, in hygiene, in domestic living, in cultural values, in democratic organisation, in self-help, and so on.”⁴²

Anticipating Lewis’s advice, Uganda’s first mass literacy campaign in 1947 was geared towards promoting responsible citizenship. It included plenty of advice on agriculture (keeping granaries, planting a balance of food and cash crops, trenches against soil erosion) and home management (importance of having separate buildings for animals and cooking, latrine building, clean water). Local chiefs were allowed to take compulsory measures through the local courts for those who did not act on what they were taught (Ssekamwa 1997). Nevertheless, the prospect of imminent self-government now made it imperative that education should not simply teach people to believe what they read. Instead they were to learn how to read critically, so as to arm them against the kind of “demagoguery”, rumour and propaganda that colonialists, at the end of their own era of self-confidence, saw as an inevitable ingredient of the coming era of African nationalism.⁴³ The threat posed by the detribalised urban masses was now to be dealt with by encouraging, rather than denying, wider and better access to education, since the “illiterate and semi-literate population in the

⁴² W.A. Lewis, “Principles of Development Planning,” Memorandum for Colonial Economic and Development Council, 11 April 1948, FCB 67/1, item 1. Quoted in Cooper 1996: 214.

⁴³ British colonial officials in the late 1940s and early 1950s were obsessed with the danger that the masses would be exploited by “professional politicians” and “unrepresentative oligarchs”, who were particularly adept at manipulating African traditions of oratory. As Cooper points out, “virtually every African politician who acquired a following was labelled a ‘demagogue’” (1996:215).

towns and urban areas” was seen as easy fodder for “extremists and hotheads”, while the government’s best allies were the “responsible and educated elements” (Cooper 1996, 254/55).

3.2.7 The promotion of print

It was also around this time that the colonial government began to promote the spread of print culture. Up until the early 1950s an ordinary, rural Ugandan would probably only have come into contact with written words in church-related contexts (including schools) or, less often, in dealings with state agents. In these contexts, writing would have been used in a prescriptive fashion, one where “truths” were proclaimed so as to be followed. Now it was deemed important to promote a more pluralistic approach. The “marketplace of ideas” needed for a healthy democracy was to be encouraged. Newspapers in local languages were founded and received state subsidies. Government primers also started to make their way into the countryside (a trend that was sadly reversed during the years of civil strife). Religious reading materials lost some of their almost exclusive hold over rural areas. In their account of the cultural transition that would supposedly bring prosperity and good governance in its wake, modernisation theorists placed special emphasis on the spread of mass communication. While accepting the assumptions of the time about the cognitive advances that literacy was supposed to bring to individuals, their keenest interest was in the political benefits of mass literacy. Modernisation theorists, observing the role that educated leaders, newspapers and pamphlets had already played in the rise of nationalist movements, were concerned with how post-colonial states could harness literacy to promote a unitary national identity and to deepen the authority of the state. Lerner, for example, argued that exposure to the world beyond the family and community, gained through exposure to newspapers and written information, would make hitherto parochial and conservative groups more responsive to new ideas and new ways of doing things (as quoted in Adas 1989, 414; Lerner 1958).

3.2.8 Encouraging civic spirit

In addition, civic spirit was meant to be encouraged through the formation of clubs and societies. It was hoped that voluntary associations (such as the Mothers’ Union, the Salvation Army, Catholic Action, and the YMCA) would break down tribal and ethnic loyalties and at the same time teach modern forms of leadership and foster the principles of “democratic organisation” based on achievement and merit rather than ethnic ascription. Probably it was also felt that such “healthy” forms of collective action under the responsible leadership of the educated would counterbalance the emergence of less controllable mass movements, such as the Mau Mau movement in Kenya or the wildfire spread of spirit possession cults across the African countryside.

3.2.9 Colonial education in East Bengal

In East Bengal, the prior existence of a literate, urbanised class of Hindu traders – who had already become the go-betweens between the aristocratic Muslim landlords and the peasants – made early colonial education policy in many ways a less vexed question. It seemed natural enough to train the existing imperial intermediaries to become the English-speaking civil servants and intermediaries of British colonial rule. Yet this policy helped to fuel an intense linguistic nationalism which soon became a vehicle for class and communal conflict. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the expansion of jute cultivation and other forms of commercial agriculture contributed to the formation of a new class of prosperous surplus farmers (*jotedars*) from amongst the local Muslim population. They spoke vernacular Bengali rather than the Urdu of the immigrant Muslim aristocracy (*ashraf*). Squeezed by the British land settlement policy and deprived of state patronage, the *ashraf* sought the backing of the *jotedars* and Muslim peasants. To do so, they called upon religious sentiment, rallying the commoners against the economic and cultural domination of the city-based Hindu middle classes (*bhadralok*).

3.2.10 Partition

The rivalry between Muslim *ashraf* and Hindu *bhadralok* first surfaced in the political arena, when the British partitioned the province of Bengal in 1905, ostensibly for administrative reasons. The nascent Muslim middle class, under the leadership of the Muslim Nawab of Dhaka, supported the partition in the hope of securing the patronage of the British rulers. The Hindu *bhadralok*, who had extensive economic interests on both sides of partitioned Bengal, were bitterly opposed to the split, and denounced it as a sinister design to weaken Bengal (which was at the vanguard of the Indian self-rule movement). It was in this period that the idealisation of Bengali language, culture and history acquired its greatest political and emotional potency for the Hindu middle class, who began to see themselves as the defenders of “Golden Bengal” against both the British imperialists and the ignorant Muslim gaudes.

3.2.11 The rise of Bengali

It was not long before the upwardly mobile *jotedars* began to construct their own version of a distinctive Bengali identity, also heavily invested in the celebration and promotion of the Bengali language. Initially aspiring to imitate the mores and culture of the aristocracy, the *jotedar* soon began to assert their own separate economic and political interests. As part of this process, they began to pursue the secular education that had previously been the preserve of the Hindu middle classes, and to compete with the Hindu middle classes for access to the colonial state. Along the way, they began to identify their cause with that of a vernacular Bengali Muslim tradition, distinct from the universalistic Islamic “grand tradition” of the Urdu-speaking *ashraf*.

In the united Pakistan, the spectre of Hindu exploitation could no longer be used to unite Muslims under one banner. Instead, the Bengalis of East Pakistan asserted their cultural and linguistic identity against the exploitation of their co-religionists who spoke a different language. The Language Movement of 1948-52 demanded the designation of Bengali as the state language of Pakistan, undermined the authority of the *ashraf* and reinforced the role of the vernacular elite. After partition, the provincial government of East Pakistan appointed the East Bengal Language Committee with Mawlana Akram Khan as its Chair (Umar 1970, 275). “Those were heady days, with Bengali Muslims feeling liberated from the imposed Calcutta standard in which they could never become fluent” (Chowdhury 1960, 75; as quoted in Wilce 1995). Under the banner “Simple Bengal”, the Language Committee propounded the following policy goals:

“i) that the Sanskritization of the language be avoided as far as possible by the use of simple phraseology and easy construction. . . , ii) that the expressions and sentiments of Muslim writers should strictly conform to the Islamic ideology [sic]; and iii) that the words, idioms and phrases in common use in East Bengal especially those in the Puthi and the popular literatures be introduced in the language more freely.”

3.2.12 The commitment to Universal Primary Education

Until Bangladesh split from Pakistan in 1971, the post-colonial state’s efforts to promote an authentic Muslim vernacular culture and language were focused on children rather than older adults. Every government in the then Pakistan expressed its commitment to universalise primary education as soon as possible, although none of them achieved much success. Likewise, one of the first acts of the new post-colonial regime in East Africa was to embark on a massive expansion of the education system. Aided by the relative prosperity of the 1960s, modern school buildings began to appear across the countryside, and a new curriculum was introduced to help bind the young nation together. Formal education, for decades the badge of superiority for the “civilised” African or Hindu elite, the asset that guaranteed them jobs in the civil service, and the medium of access to the power of the colonial state, was to be thrown open to everyone. The history of mass education for children and adults in Uganda was soon interrupted by years of civil war, but this did little to dispel (and indeed probably reinforced) popular faith in education as the best route to a secure, well-paid job. Of course, it is significant that when the Museveni government began to face increasing political pressure from would-be opposition parties, one of its most successful moves was to announce the revival of a nationwide programme of free and universal primary education (UPE).

During the 1950s and 1960s, adult education in Pakistan remained the preserve of local philanthropists rather than government departments, much as it had been in colonial days.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ In the early sixties, one national voluntary association organised a few literacy centres for adult women in different parts of Bangladesh. Another organised effort to impart adult education was found in the seventies in the Comilla district under the direct guidance of Bangladesh Academy of Rural Development (BARD). However, neither effort was sustained for long.

However, in the newly independent Bangladesh, adult education soon became a government preoccupation alongside UPE. In 1976 the Zia government introduced a nation-wide adult literacy campaign alongside a UPE campaign. A basic primer for adult education was developed and disseminated alongside a standardised “Islamic” curriculum for children. Large numbers of volunteers were recruited to “free the country from illiteracy”, and making at least one adult literate was a prerequisite for the school leaving exam. An enormous amount of money was allocated for the printing of primers, training of facilitators and supervising of literacy centres around the country. All government officers were required to visit at least two centres a year in the course of their duties. The political significance of the Zia literacy campaign is attested by the fact that after Zia fell, one of the first acts of the new government was to terminate the program and close all the literacy centres.

3.2.13 The Total Literacy Movement

In Bangladesh, adult education programmes came to the fore again in 1988 with UNICEF funding to some selected NGOs. At the initial stage of the project, each organisation had its own curriculum and primers, but the government of the day soon intervened to once again sponsor the development of a unified adult literacy curriculum. Soon afterwards, the government announced its intention to rid the country of illiteracy, and introduced a new mode of state-sponsored adult education called the Total Literacy Movement (TLM) throughout the country. At the same time, to enable the government to claim all the credit for eradicating the evil of illiteracy, NGOs were barred from running adult literacy projects (though allowed to conduct “empowerment” programmes). The TLM is still ongoing, and one district at a time undergoes the programme. Volunteers and government officials of the district get involved in the programme and within a year all adults aged 15-45 are supposed to have been through literacy classes in a TLM centre. Any individual within that range who is unwilling to attend literacy class is punished. As of 2000, 16 districts had been declared literate through this programme.

3.2.14 The political uses of the TLM

NGO criticisms of the TLM’s lack of sustained results have tended to fall on deaf ears, as it is questionable whether making people literate is the most important aim of the programme in the first place.

As with mass literacy campaigns in many other countries, the political uses of the TLM programme are partly at the level of ideology (creating symbols of progress and national unity for which the government can take credit)⁴⁵, partly at the level of propaganda (or

⁴⁵ In Bangladesh, literacy programmes may have a special resonance for secular NGOs because they build on the myth that the national liberation struggle united rich and poor through a common cultural and linguistic national identity, and because this myth has become “heatedly contested” in recent years as fundamentalists have argued that religion, not culture and language, defines the nation.

“political education”), and partly at the level of patronage (as a way of distributing jobs and contracts to party supporters in the district). In Uganda and Bangladesh, it is expected that both NGO and government literacy programmes will serve as a vehicle for disseminating government development messages – for example on family planning. In Bangladesh, both government and NGOs have invested heavily in efforts to reduce human fertility and change people’s attitudes to family size. Therefore, any educational programme intentionally includes messages on the desirability of keeping one’s family small. *Reflect* circles have been no different in this respect and NGO staff and facilitators would be perplexed by any suggestion that they should be.

3.3 Literacy – a solution to poverty?

Beyond the specific political uses of literacy programmes, it seems that the project of making people literate has helped elites and state authorities in both Uganda and Bangladesh to sustain the view that poverty is caused by a range of deficiencies in the understanding and moral attitudes of the poor – “fatalism and laziness, high fertility, a lack of ‘consciousness’ or ‘awareness’ of the true causes of poverty..., the inability of the poor to plan or manage their incomes and so on”, as Hossain and Moore (Hossain and Moore 1999) characterise the views of Bangladeshi elites. The belief is that poverty is therefore best remedied through education. “The cry for education was continually heard from those on the Boma [government] side of the divide,” writes Crehan (1997) of 1990s Zambia. “The dominant image of the relation between the state and those in the rural areas was that of teacher and pupil. The state was seen as an educator leading ‘villagers’ out of the ignorant dark of backward thinking into the shining day of development.”

3.3.1 The literacy myth and the NGO quest for modernisation

Long before “participation” or “empowerment” arrived on the scene, literacy was seen as the social technology that enables this shift from a “traditional” or “primitive” mentality to a modern mindset. Ong (1982) went so far as to claim that literacy “restructures thought”. The kernel of these claims is the idea that mastery of the written word brings with it superior cognitive power and the capacity for abstraction, encouraging a rational, detached outlook on the world. This allows the emergence of a self-reflective, critical individual who can begin to cut himself loose from superstition, communal prejudice and parochial loyalties.

Theorists went to great lengths to justify the superiority of literacy, speaking of the “Great Divide” between literacy and orality. Drawing elaborate distinctions between full alphabetic literacy and “restricted literacies” (i.e. all other scripts), they claimed that only written language using the fully alphabetic script guarantees the optimum rationalising effect (see Collins 1995).

As Gee (1996, 32) summarises, the literacy myth claims that:

“literacy leads to, or is correlated with, logical and analytical modes of thought; general and abstract use of language; critical and rational thought; a sceptical and questioning attitude; a distinction between myth and history; the recognition of the importance of time and space; complex and modern governments; political democracy and greater social equity; economic development; wealth and productivity; political stability; urbanisation; lower birth rates; people who are achievement oriented, productive, cosmopolitan, politically aware, more globally and less locally oriented, who have more liberal and human social attitudes, are less likely to commit a crime; and more likely to take the rights and duties of citizenship seriously.”

More recent research reverses the causality, arguing that it is not literacy that determines culture, but cultures that determine literacies. Proponents of “new literacy studies” focus on the analysis of actual literacy practices so as to explore how they are informed by the institutional and cultural contexts within which they are placed. Literacy practices vary widely among cultures and individuals, and a closer look at what people do with literacy (rather than what literacy does to them) quickly renders implausible the notion that literacy is a technical skill or a cognitive capacity. Researchers working with this approach have also debunked the idea of literacy as an automatic or direct agent of progress, pointing out how the privileging of one literacy practice has marginalised and displaced other non-standard scripts and knowledge.

3.3.2 Literacy to empowerment

Reflect first evolved in this climate of scepticism. Literacy’s ability to deliver on the promises made in its name was under question due to the widely observed failure of literacy programmes. Academics increasingly questioned the desirability of seeking to prescribe modernity by this means. As it evolved, *Reflect* proposed a seemingly radical shift by substituting “empowerment” in place of “literacy” as the real driving force of change. Rather than simply replacing traditional with modern knowledge, the main thrust of empowerment, according to this approach, is to increase people’s confidence in their own knowledge so as to enhance their acting on it. The idea that literacy in itself could change people is rejected and reversed. *Reflect* aims to assist people in controlling and shaping the use of literacy. “Learners” turn into “participants”. They are assumed to be resourceful, capable and knowledgeable rather than ignorant, incapable and in need of a technical quick fix. Literacy need not replace previous knowledge, rather it will provide the tools needed to strengthen, systematise and validate it.

What *Reflect* adds to the notion of literacy as vehicle for abstract reasoning and inward self-knowledge is a countervailing romantic concern with the moral content of knowledge,

expressed in the quest to preserve and validate “traditional” wisdom. In a way, this brings us full circle back to the pre-war colonial model of appropriate education – seen not as a means of replacing old doctrines with new ones, but of enabling “the African” to develop systematic moral judgement and conscience, actively discriminating between what is sound and what is pernicious in all belief systems. “To develop an effective participatory approach the starting point must be to recognise people’s existing knowledge and skills. *Reflect* is rooted firmly in a belief that people have this extensive local knowledge [but] this knowledge, whether inherited, passed down through tradition or acquired through experience is rarely reflected upon systematically, discussed openly or positively developed (Archer and Cottingham 1996b, 18).

3.3.4 Drawing on PRA

At the heart of the participatory approach that *Reflect* borrowed from PRA was the collective construction of a diagram, map or grid to systematically represent some “problem” or issue important to participants. The pictorial icons used in making the diagram were a first step towards representing reality with abstract symbols and an introduction to the cognitive feats that can be accomplished with them. The diagram, in other words, would be the learners’ first “text” and the icons could later be replaced with words. By replacing the conventional literacy primer with materials generated by learners, which reflected not only their own immediate surroundings but also their own ways of categorising and representing reality, *Reflect* aimed to escape the authority trap that bedevilled other attempts to inject Freirean dialogue into literacy classes. With the aid of a teacher trained to ask questions and encourage debate (to “facilitate”) rather than to impose her own expertise, participants would, quite literally, draw their own lessons from the pictures and maps they had produced.

3.3.5 Bottom-up meets top-down

We have seen that *Reflect* programmes in Uganda and Bangladesh faced a paradox common to many participatory projects regardless of their sector or theme. Despite all of the training, attention and moral zeal invested in the promotion of a “bottom up” methodology, they somehow miraculously produce much the same improvements in hygiene, family planning, attendance at community meetings and general pulling-up-of-socks as used to be preached from the “top down”. While *Reflect* circles were often livelier than traditional literacy classes, they sometimes seemed almost as prescriptive in their approach and as formulaic in their outcomes. The “sample units” offered in the Mother Manual (Archer and Cottingham 1996a)⁴⁶, with minor adaptations to local context (such as the substitution of rice for maize in the Bangladeshi version) were being followed quite religiously. In Bangladesh, sessions did frequently revolve around the discussion of elaborate maps and diagrams – often developed by participants but sometimes painstakingly and beautifully drawn by facilitators at home the

⁴⁶ Mother Manual: The idea was that this manual would not be directly followed but would enable people to produce local manuals adapted to the local context.

night before, then used as a kind of home-made teaching aid to introduce standard messages on hand-washing and good nutrition. As an internal evaluation of the Bangladesh programme put it, graphics were mainly used for “the mechanical translation of identified issues and ‘action points’ into stereotypical activities”. In Uganda, at best the graphics were considered an opportunity for “drawing lessons” in a rather more traditional sense – as we discovered when visiting one circle whose facilitator, eager to impress us with his skills in the most arcane aspects of *Reflect* methodology, organised his students to come one by one to the blackboard and demonstrate how neatly they had learnt to draw standardised pictorial symbols for a house, a person, an ear of corn and other symbols frequently used in *Reflect* “sample units” and training courses.

3.3.6 Theory to practice

Commitment to the participatory ethos was strong enough in ActionAid that senior members of staff involved in *Reflect* soon noticed the tensions between what was supposed to happen (the open-ended, spontaneous and flexible exploration of participants’ own concerns), and what did happen (the top-down promotion of aid agencies’ predetermined messages). Between “drawing lessons” in the Freirean sense, and “drawing lessons” in the Ugandan sense, lay a huge gulf that needed bridging. Such gaps between theory (or aspiration) and practice were not unique to *Reflect* programmes in Bangladesh and Uganda but were noted by concerned internal evaluators in a variety of settings (such as Ghana, El Salvador, Mozambique, and Nepal).⁴⁷ From the late 1990s, the mechanistic and standardised application of *Reflect* in the field became a regular topic of discussion and soul-searching at gatherings of *Reflect* practitioners in ActionAid Uganda, in Bangladesh through the *Reflect* trainers’ forum, and in a series of publications and international workshops run by ActionAid UK.

We turn now to three examples of “distortion” that *Reflect* proponents themselves identified in these interlocking forums, and look at how the kinds of solutions that were proposed related to the institutional and political realities of literacy programmes on the ground. This does not intend to be a comprehensive view of all of the diverse ways that *Reflect* has evolved.

3.4 Three causes of “distortion”

3.4.1 “Distortions arise from hierarchy in the implementing organisation”

This diagnosis honed in on a supposed contradiction between the participatory ethos of *Reflect* and the fact that ActionAid (like most organisations employing several thousand people around the world) is a bureaucracy that does not operate on democratic lines. More

⁴⁷ Of course, more complacent evaluators, less concerned with what counts as genuine participation, might not notice such gaps at all. The fact that the problem was noted and critiqued in an evaluation is probably a sign of a high, rather than low, degree of skill, understanding and commitment to participatory methods.

specific criticism was also directed towards ActionAid's heavy operational presence in poor communities, which in turn was related to its reliance on child sponsorship to generate the funds for its work. Both of these together were said to perpetuate a traditional welfarist approach to development that also ran contrary to the spirit of *Reflect* and encouraged local people to view the programme as a way of accessing some of ActionAid's wealth. In a sense, this was the most promising line of enquiry because it allowed practitioners to recognise and critique the institutional interests of their organisations, re-opening an analytical space that is consistently denied by empowerment discourse. However, along with this critique came a determined effort to defend the purity of the "method" itself, to abstract it from the distorting confines of any particular institution or organisation (rather like Marxists with their insistence that communism could not be equated with any "actually existing" socialist regime). At the same time, there was a tendency to exaggerate the power of development agencies whilst romanticising the democratic aspirations and potential of "community" structures, as if the presence of the NGO was the sole source of anti-egalitarian, anti-participatory pressures. This meant that discussion quickly became unhelpfully abstract, often veering off into idealised accounts of "people's movements" that would be capable of implementing *Reflect* in a truly participatory and radical spirit.

Unable to transform ActionAid Uganda into a people's movement, staff involved with the *Reflect* programme in Mubende district still struggled to take on board the emerging criticisms of ActionAid's top-down tendencies and the ways in which its ability to bestow material resources on poor communities inhibited genuine participation. They decided to set up a new project in the same district that would be entirely overseen by community committees, putting local people rather than agency staff in the driving seat. On paper, the participatory credentials of this project structure were impeccable. On the face of it, ActionAid's involvement was minimal and the structure was democratic, gender sensitive, and built on already existing structures. All of these are factors commonly believed to enhance the "ownership" of a project by local people. But as the following case study shows, the attempt to establish "community structures" based on principles of fairness, justice and equality floundered when it ran up against the reality of diverse local interests.

3.4.2 Case Study: The Madudu experiment - an example of institutional failure?

The scene is a small meeting hall attached to the sub-county headquarters in rural Madudu. About 50 *Reflect* facilitators and "committee members" have gathered for a three-day training which is meant to define the role of the committee members within this *Reflect* project. Attendance is good, men and women have shown up in equal numbers and there is an atmosphere of heightened expectancy. It is the first (and so far only) project to be directly implemented by staff working in ActionAid Uganda's *Reflect* Co-ordination Unit (RCU) and it explicitly sets out to prove that *Reflect* works best if run by communities with as little involvement by the NGO bureaucracy as possible. Staff have spent a lot of time thinking

about how to best structure this programme so as to ensure efficiency and accountability. The vision is that *Reflect* participants, with time, will form a “movement”, a community based organisation run by themselves. Staff contend that, crucial as they may be, facilitators can be a hindrance in this endeavour. Experience from other projects suggests that they can become overly dominating, making the circles the vehicle for their own agendas (which is considered undesirable). Also, it is felt that reliance on only one person in every circle limits the scope for effectively gaining the support of all key players in an area for any eventual activities resulting from the circle discussions. Thus goes the official version of why it is a good thing to have broad-based committees involved in the management of this project.

Three months before this meeting, when the circles were just about to start operating, the then *Reflect* co-ordinator had organised a “consultation” meeting with local councillors (LCs) under a tree close to this same community hall. He had explained to them and sought their acceptance of the proposition that this would be “their” programme, not ActionAid’s, and that it was not just a matter of making people literate but of developing the area. Committees were central to this objective and the co-ordinator introduced the idea of committee members acting as volunteers by asking, “Do you think that people who work for their own communities should get paid?” Long faces prevailed as people reluctantly agreed to not getting paid⁴⁸, but the mood lifted when the need for committees was underlined by the mention of “seed money” which would require overseeing. The *Reflect* co-ordinator produced a blank flip chart and, in a gesture of documenting the on-going discussion, drew the organisational structure of the project. When debate ran low, he would remind people of the similarities in form and purpose to the already existing structure of Local Councils (to which all those present belonged), thus aligning this project firmly with one of the most heralded innovations of the current Movement government while, to state the obvious, also exposing his own political sympathies. In this fashion, the elected village leaders came to decide on exactly the management structure which RCU staff had previously worked out to be the most fitting one:

1. Village *Reflect* Committee (VRC)
2. Parish *Reflect* Committee (PRC)
3. Gombolola (i.e. sub-county) *Reflect* Committee (GRC)
4. Contact person
5. Local Councillors

In the three months between these two meetings, the first *Reflect* circles started operating in the area and LCIs were busy assigning people to the posts that had been created. Literacy facilitators were allowed to be on the village committees, where ideally they would act as

⁴⁸ All of the agency staff we spoke to were anxiously aware of the irony and contradiction evident in this appeal for voluntarism which is routine in development agencies. They are all too aware that the boundaries for such an appeal are arbitrary and cannot comfortably justify their own status as (reasonably well) paid professionals.

secretary. They were not permitted to take the role of chair. A first conflict had already arisen, with many facilitators irked at the fact that they were to be controlled by a group of people who had had no training in *Reflect*, whereas they themselves had received two weeks' initial training and increased their competence through actual teaching. As a result of this, the RCU proposed to change the title of the contact persons from "abalondoozi" to "abatabaganya", implying more of an advisory role and less of a control function. At the same time it was decided to have a three-day training to iron out the differences and get the committees off to a good start.

In their introductory remarks to this second training session, ActionAid staff again emphasised that they would not be making decisions – this would fall to the participants. Then the training started off with the appointed members splitting into groups according to which committee they belong to (VRC, PRC, or GRC). On large flip charts they were to list all the responsibilities and roles their committee should take on. Afterwards, each group presented its ideas. The presentations were striking in their similarity: all committees wished to take on the same roles and focus exclusively on control functions. Much time was then spent discussing who would report to whom, how often and how many pages a report should have. There was some tension since every committee was intent on being reported to, while not being keen on reporting themselves. Occasional giggles exposed the rivalry as a bit of a game but in the end people were adamant about the crucial nature of their own, preferably co-ordinating, functions, while similar claims from others were smilingly but vigorously contested. RCU staff and some members of the audience at times chipped in with diffusive remarks about "every function having its place", a contention that was politely accepted by the audience but of no visible consequence. Gradually, the discussion was transformed into a dialogue between the audience and one RCU staff member who took the opportunity to underline the importance of good written reports, pointing out that they encourage a spirit of accountability and facilitate orderly planning and decision making. Questions from the audience prompted the staff member to elaborate in lecture form that a good report should contain both good points and bad points (i.e. be balanced) and should always aim to find solutions to problems, thus subtly countering the prevailing perception among the audience that reports are a tool for "spilling the beans".

Reflect facilitators were in a difficult position during this debate. At times they spoke in their role as committee members but mostly they constituted themselves as a distinct group, lecturing the others present about *Reflect*, making heavy use of the acronym and slipping the name of Paulo Freire and terms like "conscientisation" or "empowerment" into their talk. They had invested a lot of time and energy in being trained, walking around the village to encourage people to come to the circles, and building shelters. In some cases, it was later rumoured, aspiring facilitators had even paid LCs bribes so as to be recommended to ActionAid as facilitators.⁴⁹ Now, their own demonstration of competence in all matters

⁴⁹ Though the facilitators were called "volunteers" a monthly amount equivalent to US\$7 - 8 was paid to them. Many facilitators regarded this as "little money" but few would have been willing to carry on without it.

concerning *Reflect* was clearly aimed at showing up the incompetence of the committee members in front of RCU staff. But this claim to superiority eroded swiftly when, in the afternoon, the committee members listened intently to the brave attempt of an RCU staff member to translate “Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques” into Luganda, thus starting to initiate committee members and bring them into the group of “those in the know” about *Reflect*.

The “who” and the “what”

From the outsider perspective, perhaps the most striking observation about these early meetings is how much they were about “who does” rather than “what is done”. Nobody involved, least of all those chosen, thought it problematic that dozens of people had been appointed to posts that had in no way been defined beforehand. The only content-oriented responsibility all committees now claimed for themselves was “to ensure that learners learn”, signalling thus that they were not to be confused with advocates for the literacy participants, instead preferring the role of inspector. Questions about the need for voluminous reporting arrangements and elaborate bureaucratic structures never gained prominence. Furthermore, considering the objectives that ActionAid staff had previously set for these committees and the way they managed to influence decisions on other matters, it is surprising to see that they did not intervene more strongly here. Why didn’t they? Why were people from Madudu keen to take on posts without even knowing what was involved? Why did nobody but the foreign researcher perceive this as potentially problematic? Without suggesting that the issue of committees was the only important factor in determining the progress of this project, it can serve here as a good example of how and why the reality and the rhetoric of literacy programmes often clash.

The role of the committees

In practice, only a few of the committees ever constituted themselves after having been appointed, let alone took an active role in supporting the literacy circles. The only reports that were ever written were by the GRC chairman who had to submit a brief report every month to the ActionAid office before being allowed to access the “community-owned” bank account to pay allowances to the facilitators. Yet none of the committee members interviewed for this research perceived themselves as failing in their responsibilities, stating that they were supervising things “from far”. Increasingly, they started to complain of ActionAid letting them down, making a mockery of the committees and their members by not putting more money in. Still, when ActionAid staff came on visits to the area some committee members remained eager to attend to the visitors and put on a semblance of being in control. Nobody ever officially relinquished a committee post.

To understand what was happening, it is important to recognise the place that committee members and others give to public offices of this sort. One has to know that there was no shortage of committees in the area. To start with, there were the Local Councils, extending from the village to the parish level, on to the sub-county, county and district levels. At some levels there were, at least in theory, sub-committees for women, youth and disabled people. The various churches had their own committees and so did the local schools, to name only the most prominent ones. People in the area were ambiguous about these institutions. Most of the time it was acknowledged that they didn't do much, and the pomposity of having such officious structures was subject to constant mockery. Women would ostentatiously call each other on the street by their respective titles, only to then break out in laughter. On several occasions, members of the various committees (and there was a tendency for a few people to monopolise posts) nonchalantly confided that they themselves saw little point in some of these committees and didn't really know what they were meant to do there.

The other side of the coin became visible when a new committee was formed, or elections for an existing one were to be held. This was no laughing matter at all. People invested a lot of time and energy (in some cases also material resources) to get themselves or others onto committees. They would also lay claim to the authority associated with a committee post. In one case, to the dismay of the participants and the facilitator, a female *Reflect* committee member started farming on land that had been donated to the *Reflect* circle by a local landowner, claiming that it was under her control. Nobody disputed that this was indeed so, even though, to the outsider, her complete failure to act in her role as a VRC member would appear to make her case a weak one. But both the participants and the facilitators needed no reminding that this VRC member had authority regardless of performance. They invited her into the circle for a seemingly general debate about the problem of some people in the village encroaching on other people's land. They achieved little.

For all the casual mockery exhibited around leadership posts, they were a desirable achievement and could, at times, lend prestige and authority as well as material benefits to the post-holders regardless of what they actually did. If this is so, we can no longer maintain our initial stance that the functions bestowed on the different *Reflect* committees were vague. To the contrary, they were quite explicit to everyone involved except the foreign researcher.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the fact that many committee members were motivated by status aspirations and reserved more active involvement for a time when ActionAid would make more substantial funds available (which never happened) did not enter the official discourse within ActionAid until much later. Even after it became apparent that the structures were not operational as intended, this model of "community based" management of a *Reflect* programme was still peddled as a successful innovation in training courses held by RCU staff and in meetings with official visitors.

The literacy market

As this case study shows, ideals of democracy, equality and participation can be at odds with the diverse interests of local people getting involved with such projects. In practice, organisations offering literacy programmes now present themselves as service providers who check whether there is a demand for literacy in the area where they would like to operate. Predictably, there usually is a market for a free good, particularly when it is the only one on offer.⁵⁰ The question as to whether somebody would like to join an adult education programme could often be more aptly translated as, “Would you like to be associated with a rich, powerful international organisation or not?” The answer is obviously a foregone conclusion and it is clear that, whether willingly or unwillingly, programme organisers retain significant leverage over the course of a programme.

The power dynamics of the programme

This case study of the Madudu *Reflect* project has pinpointed some of the different interests, motivations and constraints that shape the running of literacy programmes and which defy the commonly assumed unity of purpose among the actors involved. Literacy programmes which limit their scope to “making people literate” (as only a very few do) could theoretically try to override these individual, institutional and cultural factors with a clear-cut, top-down hierarchy. However, as soon as empowerment becomes one of the objectives, such attempts lose all credibility. A much more serious understanding of the power dynamics underpinning literacy programmes becomes imperative. Here we have focused on only a very limited range of factors which played a part in the Madudu project. It could be argued that our choice of a project which has faced severe funding constraints and management problems risks presenting an extreme picture. There may be some truth in this, but it is our contention that many of the trends illustrated here were simply more clearly visible due to the extremes that the project went through and that many other projects face similar issues and constraints.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Many organisers of literacy programmes (“providers”) now complement their talk of “partnership with communities” with the use of marketing speak in an attempt to diminish their own role to that of a “supplier” while elevating poor people to the status of “consumers” who have “demand” and make “choices”. Considering the environments in which literacy programmes are usually situated, such euphemisms amount to a deeply cynical misrepresentation of reality.

⁵¹ Staff who initiated this programme operated on the assumption that substantial funds would be made available for a range of infrastructure initiatives. While these activities were said to be part of the *Reflect* programme, the specific pumps, bridges and wells were decided upon long before the first *Reflect* circle started debating its issues. It is, of course, likely that the working of the committees would have looked very different if funding for this infrastructure had indeed proceeded as staff expected, and that they would have appeared in a more positive light. However, it is telling that something that was vigorously characterised as a bottom-up movement should have become so heavily dependent on donor funds so quickly. For some considerable time, the project staggered on with hopes of receiving more substantial funding. After a prolonged period, however, senior management of ActionAid decided not to embark on any infrastructure investments. The reasons for this decision are beyond the scope of this report. Suffice it to say that lack of appreciation for *Reflect* among senior management was *not* noticed as a factor influencing the decision by the researcher.

3.4.3 “Distortions are caused by inappropriate attitudes of implementing staff”

Too often, it was said, people chosen as *Reflect* supervisors and facilitators were already trained as teachers or had previously taught in more traditional, non-participatory literacy programmes. They did not have the correct attitudes of humility and deference to the experience and wisdom of participants. They were too keen to set themselves up as experts and to recreate the authority of the literacy primer that *Reflect* sought to do away with. This strand of thinking will be immediately familiar to anyone who has followed similar debates in PRA circles. It contains the kernel of an acknowledgement that the people who work for NGOs, like NGOs themselves, are not blank slates but are situated in a particular class and cultural location, and have to operate within the constraints of particular institutions. In the rush to find “technical” solutions to this “problem”, however, “more training” (or different training or better training) in the participatory ideals and methods of *Reflect* was almost always offered as the answer.

A closer look at the Madudu case, however, suggests that the problem was not so much a lack of understanding, loyalty or responsiveness to the ideals of *Reflect*. It was more the huge practical difficulty of delivering ActionAid’s dual expectations that the programme must be participatory and “empower” people, but must also empower them in the right way, producing measurable results against the indicators of modernisation discussed in the previous chapter (not just literacy, but also “life skills”, entrepreneurship, political participation and so forth).

By the time the project started, staff were under pressure to make it a success story. It had to conform to best practice of *Reflect* and produce results both in terms of literacy and empowerment. Had the expected funding for other activities been forthcoming and channelled through the committees they would, at the very least, have appeared more active than they turned out to be. It is not at all uncommon that development agencies “buy” the will to engage from their target population. Yet we rarely correlate the level of participation with the level of perks granted to key players from within the project area.⁵² The Madudu project is interesting because at the beginning staff could have reasonably expected to have this option and, to an extent, did communicate this to people living in the project area. Later on, due to various factors beyond the scope of this report, this possibility of orchestrating participation through money was withdrawn.

People in Madudu were no less eager to push staff into the role of patrons. Staff at times rejected this role, reminding them that it was “their” project. At other times they played on it, as when they subtly encouraged people not to give up hope of more substantial funds coming. In this later situation, staff would often face quite aggressive questioning from

⁵² This is not to imply that the granting of perks is necessarily a bad thing, only to say that development agencies are often not straightforward in analysing the reasons for specific financial investments in projects.

stakeholders in the project area but rarely had to fear being pinned down to any commitments. A response such as, “It is better to first do something yourself before asking for help,” or “Could anyone abandon an orphan?” or even just a mysterious little smile would usually suffice to restore hope while not explicitly stepping outside the official line. Thus the project was kept in semi-suspense for a long time. Staff never felt entitled to exercise more than the most polite pressure on senior management who were dragging their feet on the decision about further funding. By the time a decision was reached (discontinuation after a further year, rather than the hoped for scale-up), staff had long-since drastically reduced their visits to the area, and only one or two circles (out of ten originally) were still running.

NGOs and politics

One possible motivation which can only be speculated upon relates to personal and/or political agendas that staff may have been pursuing in setting up a management system that was shaped by, and relied heavily on the system of Local Councils (the political administrative system closely associated with the current national government). There is no clear evidence from our research that such agendas were present and influential - for obvious reasons, this area of interest is virtually impossible to research. ActionAid, and most other international (and many national) aid agencies have strict policies limiting staff’s involvement in organised politics.⁵³ At the same time, agency staff are increasingly encouraged by their employers to take an active stand on sometimes overtly political advocacy and campaigning issues and, by virtue of their qualifications and status, they inevitably form part of the small pool of people pre-destined for the political arena. In a context of severe resource constraints, as is the case in Uganda, aid funds are probably the most flexible source of money available to influence politics at all levels. Activities such as literacy programmes offer plenty of scope for the extension of political patronage (for example, through committees) without this necessarily being detectable to the outsider. Decisions about where programmes are located, who gets involved and who benefits are routinely justified on grounds of policy-relevant information (poverty assessments, literacy rates, etc.), and yet always and inevitably leave significant leverage for personal interpretation and influencing.

⁵² This is not to imply that the granting of perks is necessarily a bad thing, only to say that development agencies are often not straightforward in analysing the reasons for specific financial investments in projects.

⁵³ To illustrate some of the practical implications of such a policy it suffices to recount an incident (in a different project) where, during campaigning for parliamentary elections (which lasted several months, with Uganda being a country that has no shortage of voting exercises) one of the authors was sitting in an ActionAid vehicle (with the organisation’s sticker on the door) passing through a village where a campaign meeting was being held. One of the other staff travelling in the car spotted a contact we had previously been looking for and asked the driver to stop. Both the driver and the other staff member present nervously reminded him that it wasn’t a good idea for the ActionAid car to be seen at this occasion. As we sped out of the village, the driver lamented how he would never have taken this route had he known that there was a campaign meeting going on. It must be added that it is common practice for politicians campaigning in areas where ActionAid is working to lay claims to “having brought ActionAid to our area”. It is not an unlikely scenario that on stopping the car, the speaker would have interrupted his speech to publicly welcome “my dear friends from ActionAid”. Thus it is clear that even staff members who have no political ambitions at all are forced to exercise extreme caution, often interfering with their duties, so as to avoid arousing their employer’s suspicions.

None of this is to say that the staff involved here did not genuinely want people in the project area to benefit. As it became clear that participation in the Madudu circles was low and dwindling and that participants and facilitators were increasingly dissatisfied due to not getting the kind of support from ActionAid they were expecting, staff grew equally upset and were looking to make amends within the limited means available to them. Two constraining and intertwined factors limiting the scope of their initiative must be given attention here: the hierarchy in which they operated, and the development ideology with which they felt compelled to comply.

Steering the course

As our illustration above shows, RCU staff went to great lengths to formally adhere to this structure. At least during the first 18 months of the project, a myriad of consultations took place and all major decisions were thus taken by representatives of the “community”. However, a closer look reveals that while RCU staff were busy defining themselves out of the “official” picture, they were also carefully steering meetings towards making the decisions they themselves had previously identified as the most appropriate ones. This rarely required any arm-twisting. Given the authority wielded by staff by virtue of being paid workers, everybody would listen up if any of them “also had an idea”. Interestingly, in the vast majority of cases, the decisions thus engineered were much more in line with participatory development ideology than the decisions committees were leaning towards before such staff intervention. Thus, while staff had to oversee the actual running of the project, they also invested significant resources in running a “virtual” project, one that was “for the record”, where the disparate views and opinions of Madudu people were moulded to fit with participatory development ideology. Trainings, meetings and consultations were the arenas where elements of this official version needed to be incorporated with reality. Unwittingly, in so doing, they perpetuated the myth of there being a homogenous and benign community will, fully compatible with Western standards of fairness, justice and equality.

To avoid misunderstanding, staff were not being devious in following this strategy. In focus group discussions and personal interactions it emerged that they felt a strong personal commitment to participation and they never saw their own directiveness as being in contradiction to that ideal. Instead they were more likely to perceive their own actions as the necessary precursor to “true” participation, thus classifying any factors standing in the way of this elusive ideal as blockages in need of removal. This attitude is compatible with their own aspirations for a modern, democratic society. As an organisation, ActionAid Uganda embodies these modern ideals as much as other INGOs do and there are continuous efforts to flatten organisational hierarchies and encourage a participatory culture in which staff at all levels are free to voice their opinions and assume appropriate responsibilities. At the same time, however, staff are also immersed in a culture of power where authority is legitimised by seniority (defined through age, gender, educational status, position in the organisation and connections).

The danger of commitment

This type of authority is not dissimilar to that in operation when people in Madudu aspire to leadership posts, only that here what is at stake are highly competitive jobs and careers. Thus, even with “directors” being re-launched as more supportive “facilitators”, many operational staff still did not feel comfortable to freely voice their own ideas or concerns. One staff member put it thus: “There would be stigma to personal commitment, it is not recognised, you do things the way that the organisation does it, you opt for the majority, otherwise you stand out.” Standing out is not a desirable way of getting noticed in this context; instead it stands for being “big-headed” and “over-ambitious”. The person standing out is easily perceived as a threat by his or her superior, might well be regarded as ungrateful to the very people who provided employment, and runs the risk of “staying low”. Whereas on the official platform, staff are encouraged to show initiative, innovate and take on responsibility, they must carefully manoeuvre any attempts to shine here for these are precisely the actions which could also make them collide with the unspoken and yet pervasive authority culture where values such as loyalty, submissiveness and obedience take precedence.

It is now more clearly visible how it came about that nobody regarded it as odd that the committees formed for the Madudu *Reflect* project had no role to speak of (even after the meetings described above). By introducing the committee structure to people in Madudu, staff were effectively transferring the two scripts that direct their own working lives. The official one that necessitates formally democratic procedure and is peppered with fashionable development idioms, and a more clandestine sub-script which subverts the official rhetoric and ensures that decisions are taken with regard to established hierarchies.

3.4.4 “Distortions are caused by inappropriate expectations surrounding literacy”

Researcher: “How did you first come to know about the learning circles?”

Young woman: “People came from the office (of SUS, Netrokona) and told me about participatory methods. We were ignorant, in the dark, we needed to learn. They said they would give us all that. Now I can teach my children and I no longer get cheated.”

Remarks like the above are commonly used in evaluation reports to authenticate how women “themselves” are satisfied with the personal transformation experienced through literacy programmes. Particularly in Bangladesh this is by no means self-evident. Facilitators, both in Netrokona and in Mauluvibazar, report having visited the houses of potential participants up to six times prior to starting the classes so as to overcome resistance from women and their husbands. They proudly recount how they went about convincing women that going to the literacy classes was worthwhile. One facilitator recounts how she asked women about their hobbies and how they would usually talk of applying make-up or playing games. She then explained to them that becoming literate would help them stop such “wasteful” activity,

allowing them to hold on to their meagre resources more effectively. Facilitators' accounts of "mobilising" learners also involve stories of women who can supervise the education of their children and are awarded with prestige and money in later life, and those who can't and consequently gain no such benefits. Another recurrent theme in the stories facilitators told potential learners and their husbands is of travelling salesmen cheating hapless women out of their savings.

Creating "demand"

Such means of creating "demand" for literacy must be seen in perspective to how literacy learners are usually recruited in Bangladesh. In very many, possibly the majority of literacy projects, women are required to pass through adult education programmes before becoming eligible for loans or other desirables, such as skills training. In SUS and in BWALPA, such pressures were rarely exercised. However, the research came across one case where women participants in Netrokona reported that, with the introduction of the literacy programme, facilitators suggested to them that SUS might align its micro-credit programme (in which they already took part) so that only those able to sign their names would be able to access credit (whereas fingerprints had customarily been accepted).

Perpetuating the literacy myth

The example quoted above illustrates one plausible way in which participants take part in reproducing and perpetuating the literacy myth. When answering the questions of important visitors to the project, they recuperate the propositions facilitators made to them during recruitment and reformulate them into actual achievements, indicating that what was meant to happen did happen. Evaluators, ignorant of how women's answers evolve, leave with the confidence that women's lives have indeed been transformed for the better through literacy, or in this case, *Reflect*.

For not only are women respondents under the obligation to please visitors, they themselves are overwhelmingly firm followers of the literacy myth. The power that they and others attribute to schooling is a recurrent theme of this research. Without pre-empting the debates of the following chapters, we refer to the example of women's husbands' fears about the literacy programme having the power to undermine their control of their wives. Particularly in Bangladesh, resistance from husbands was often difficult to overcome during the mobilisation drives. Typically, it was feared that wives would be converted to Christianity, would start dressing immodestly, would talk back to them, and would stop respecting traditions. Facilitators diplomatically sought to allay such fears, and these examples are illustrative of such efforts in the way they underline the benefits of education not only to the woman herself but to the family at large.

A few women participants reported that they themselves initially shared such fears, while facilitators and NGO staff put them down to ignorance and took them seriously only in as far as they constituted an operational problem. It is, however, remarkable how closely these fears compare to the transformations women reportedly do achieve in literacy projects. Women are, after all, encouraged to control not only their own but also their husbands' expenditure; to go out in public more than they did hitherto; to confront their husbands on traditions such as having many children, early marriage or dowry payments. Still, participants, facilitators and NGO staff were united in not seeing any problematic tension here. Instead, women participants joined facilitators and NGO staff in interpreting their own embrace of the modern values propagated in the literacy programme as the natural result of having been "literated" (a commonly used term in Bangladesh); of having emerged from darkness to light, from ignorant belief to enlightened knowledge. Both their own and their husbands' fears are said to automatically dissolve in the process.

In this context, women participants effortlessly conflate the effect of education, literacy and participatory methods. All of them are seen as being geared towards the same aims. Attempts by the researchers to elicit more detailed accounts of how women learners actually make the numerous transitions they claim to make were equally frustrating for all parties involved. In Bangladesh, women learners would state that they had changed through "discussion", or "because I am now literate", but did not share the researchers' impression that the often profound changes that were claimed could probably only be the result of a more protracted process of consideration. On the strength of the combined data from Bangladesh and Uganda we can assert that "rational" analysis and debate only exceptionally provided the impetus for a woman learner to initiate changes in her life. Instead, the practice of both *Reflect* sessions and of individual learners relied heavily on an implicitly shared vision of what it means to be educated.

The powerful presence of this vision, which also exists in Uganda in a different form, must lead us to critically review the concept of literacy as myth. Whether literacy, or in this case *Reflect*, has power to change people is no longer the issue in a situation where that is, quite simply, a certainty beyond questioning. The value of such orthodoxies for the orchestration of change should also not be underestimated. From the perspective of a woman learner, the fact that there is a well-defined societal image of "the educated woman" can be very attractive. Without widespread prevalence of such an image and the offer of an education which is to bring her closer to it, she would have one opportunity less to realise at least some of her ambitions. The fact that there is a universally accepted idea of what it is to be educated also means that a woman learner can, to an extent, legitimate the changes she initiates. Her husband and others around her are more likely to accept the changes education "imprints" on her than those she might wilfully come up with by herself.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Obviously, such acceptance hinges on the husband's acceptance of literacy classes as "real" education. The analysis of later chapters shows that women are proactive in ensuring that their non-formal education is as formal as possible, but that husbands reserve their full approval.

Admittedly, the path that is thus opened to participants is narrow and prescriptive, requiring the acquisition of a distinct set of behaviours and attitudes and the shedding of others. But while going to literacy classes might represent an outward pledge to modernity (as it is imagined), it does not normally signify as clean-cut a break with tradition as the literacy myth suggests. It is often only through taking part in a literacy class that polarisation about what is “modern” and what is “traditional” takes on significant meaning. Withstanding the strong pull to become “modern”, learners carefully match what they pick up in the institutionalised education setting with their own ambitions, the boundaries of which are set by the circumstances they live in. The results normally reveal an accommodation of modern values in traditional practices or vice versa, and always defy any notion of simplistic cause-effect relationships.

Thus, even if an NGO and all of its employees had genuinely wanted to embrace a new kind of literacy learning process – one free from political manipulation or predetermined ideological messages, one that would simply “empower” poor people to understand and voice their situation – it would be naïve to think that a simple injection of “training” and new ideas would suffice to cancel out decades of struggle between poor people and their rulers in which literacy, and education more generally, has become a privileged vehicle for “civilising” the poor. Taking this on board, leading thinkers on *Reflect* have increasingly hoped that a purer form of participation could be achieved if only literacy could be excised from literacy programmes (or at least re-situated within a larger framework of communication and power so that literacy is re-framed).

3.5 Literacy and Reflect – an ambiguous relationship

In the effort to close the gaps between theory and practice, theories on *Reflect* became ever more abstract and ambitious – so much so that one senior manager in ActionAid Bangladesh started to derive great amusement from innocently requesting visiting *Reflect* trainers to give him a simple one-sentence definition of *Reflect*. In 1996 it was described as “a new approach to adult literacy” which fused Freire and PRA. By 1998, *Reflect* was described in terms that made no mention of adult literacy: “a structured participatory learning process which facilitates people’s critical analysis of their environment... the creation of democratic spaces and construction and interpretation of locally generated texts... a multi-dimensional analysis of local and global reality, challenging dominant development paradigms and redefining power relationships...”.

Oddly, however, in their increasingly strenuous efforts to strengthen the empowering and participatory process of *Reflect* whilst purging non-participatory, hierarchical content, the leading thinkers of *Reflect* have brought it closer and closer to the most traditional conceptions of literacy as a vehicle for rational thought – the ideology that Gee calls the “literacy myth” (1996).

We have already pointed out how NGO evaluations of “empowerment” turn on the transformation of confused, dependent, childlike women into rational, self-determined individuals. What is striking is how much emphasis is placed on the distinct, personal identity an “empowered [or literate] woman” should have, the emphasis on self-determination and the capacity of individuals to take [rational] decisions and act for themselves. Techniques for enhancing “capacities” of self-awareness, critical detachment, and rational self-control then become a means to create individual identity.

3.5.1 The rule of rationality

Colonial regimes, post-colonial states and NGOs alike have shared the assumption that progress is all about the “institutionalisation of rationality”. In this view, modern societies are characterised by the use of “objective information and rational procedures” in order to achieve utilitarian goals. Educators and development workers not only implicitly accept this picture of modern states and societies as rationally ordered, but commonly take it to mean that people (the “poor”, the “ignorant”) can and must be taught to accept objective knowledge and “rational procedures” as the norm and apply them to their own affairs.

A common feature of contemporary “empowerment” projects is the invention of scientific-sounding methods or techniques which are supposed to induce women to dissect their experiences into a series of problems to be solved and plans to be enacted. Here is one version with a strong American tinge of the self-help manual:

“WEP”⁵⁵ use of appreciative inquiry also helps explain the women’s high level of commitment and activism. In essence, appreciative inquiry invites the women to focus not on the problems they have, but on the opportunities they have to improve their lives and their community as well as on their previous successes in overcoming obstacles. These opportunities are translated into an action plan with a commitment to take an immediate first step. (One example could be collecting stones for a school building project as soon as the decision to improve the school is made.)” (Ashe and Parrot 2001, 17).

Reflect publications describe an essentially similar process, as the following description of Bangladesh participants suggests:

“Women in Bangladesh repeatedly spoke of the value of calendars and matrices to strengthen their analytical skills, enabling them to plan better, develop more effective coping strategies (e.g. bulk buying and storing goods) and have more control over decisions regarding loan use (...).”

⁵⁵ WEP here stands for a Women’s Empowerment Programme by the organisation Pact, operating in Nepal.

However, much of *Reflect's* special appeal comes from its appropriation of the Freirean version of the literacy myth (even while claiming to reject that myth). *Reflect* revives the notion – so appealing to many Western development workers – that written signs are not just a means of communicating potentially liberating information, but that the very act of codifying reality through abstract written symbols is itself a liberating act. Like the literacy myth, *Reflect* proposes “rational procedures” as a means of orchestrating a process of systematic analysis, leading to the emergence or discovery of individual identity and opinions where previously there had been only unquestioning subservience to received wisdom, and invoking individual agency where previously there had been inertia and passivity.

But how far does this actually differ from old ideas of literacy as the technology of abstraction and objectification, the medium of a superior rationality? Even in the most sophisticated *Reflect* literature, reliance on non-written forms of communication, calculation, and memorisation is construed as yet another “lack” or absence. It is symbolised (as Freire was also wont to do) in images of silence, weakness (vulnerability to being cheated), immobility (inability to read street signs or bus timetables), passivity and isolation (being cut off from information). In more recent *Reflect* publications where much attention is paid to the need to go beyond narrow concepts of literacy, and phrases like “structured learning process” are used in place of “literacy”, there is an even stronger dependence on the notion of the abstract representation or “structuring” of reality as a means of subjecting lived experience to rational analysis and objectification.⁵⁶ Illiteracy is transmuted into a sign and symbol of a lack of critical self-knowledge, leaving women hostage to the whims and prejudices of others and unable to “sign their own names”, assert their will or exercise their “voice”. The literacy programme then offers the means to overcome these deficiencies. Literacy is, in other words, a kind of technology of the self, ideal for fostering the individual subjects who can then be “empowered” to bring about the transformation of their own circumstances.

The process of change described follows a rational, non-conflictual and linear pattern: problem - discussion/analysis - consensus - action - satisfaction. For example:

“For women whose lives were largely restricted to their homestead, the maps and matrices offered insight into a wider world. The evaluators were surprised that even something as simple as a household map was regarded in some cases as being of real practical value. Sharing information on where everyone lived and how to get there was of genuine use to some women who had previously not been to some parts of their own village. It prompted many to visit other learners in their homes and to gain more confidence to visit relatives.” (Archer and Cottingham 1996b, 69)

⁵⁶ The emphasis is usually on written texts (maps, matrices, etc.) but the leading thinkers on *Reflect* have shown increasing interest in non-written forms of “text” and media of communication and have made this the dominant discourse in debates about *Reflect*.

Framed in this way, change is ascribed firmly to the participatory learning process, in much the same way that literacy would previously have been credited. Prior ignorance of the wider world is identified as the factor that restricted women's mobility. They then gain orientation, mobility and confidence with the help of a seemingly simple tool through which they share knowledge (rather than have it imposed on them). In such straightforward fashion, *Reflect* participants sort through their attitudes and behaviours and embrace the developmental targets other methods have failed to convince them of for decades.

Hence, as women are exposed to techniques of objective analysis and learn to objectify themselves as separate, bounded individuals, as they acquire the disciplines of self-control and the insights of logical thought, so too they will naturally gain the courage to reject (what appear to development workers to be) wasteful, humiliating or oppressive customs. The crucial assumptions are:

- a) that women have hitherto been passive, silent and unable to defend their own interests because they lack some crucial ingredients of selfhood: strength of will (confidence), knowledge, the ability to reflect systematically on their problems;
- b) that this same "lack" also explains their unthinking persistence in "negative" customs; and
- c) that once this "lack" is overcome, women will be able to change their lives according to a rational plan of self-betterment.

However, what was "rational" was invariably identified with the practices advocated by the NGO itself. In this way, *Reflect* practitioners were able to reconcile a "bottom-up", participatory approach to development with a continuing ability to guide the change process in the "right" direction.

To what extent *Reflect*, or any set of "rational procedures", actually has the potential to initiate such changes is open to debate, but it is worth noting that the resulting understanding of how social change takes place – and what role the development agency has played in it – is quite a comfortable one for the development agency. In spite of the radical changes *Reflect* purportedly brings, evaluations rarely mention the conflicts and tensions which are usually part and parcel of social change. Where they do, such as when Bangladeshi women participants defend their learning activities against fundamentalist mullahs, graduates are invariably shown as worthy and virtuous, fighting for a just cause. There are no examples of graduates who use their new skills to cheat, lie, deceive or apply vice in any shape or form. The power lent to poor people through empowerment is never seen to corrupt. The way graduates make use of their enhanced skills and capacities is apparently by creating new opportunities, never by trying to snatch existing ones from others.

3.5.2 Power: a matter of technicality?

In Chapter 2 we saw that modernisation theorists were ambivalent about the need for a stimulus from without to make people and societies change in particular ways. They were quite confident that governments could plan and engineer social change – in part through inputs like literacy programmes, agricultural extension and mass education – but also wanted to claim that the ultimate impetus for change came from the universal and meta-historical forces of “progress”. All they were doing, in other words, was designing rational solutions for managing and guiding the inevitable process of “transition” from a traditional to a modern society. Empowerment narratives, on the other hand, shy away from narratives of large-scale structural change. Instead they depict social change as the spontaneous outcome of newly empowered individuals asserting control over the direction of their lives. Yet contemporary NGOs seem to echo late colonial administrators when they claim that they are merely applying certain technical skills and rational methods to enable people to manage change. The change process is catalysed and guided (“facilitated”, in development jargon) by the NGO’s technical skill in “participatory” methods, rather than driven by the agency’s political or moral positions. Through these techniques of “participation”, people are enabled to express and pursue *their own* aspirations in a rational and constructive manner; there can be no question of the NGO “imposing” its own vision of the good, for that would not be genuinely empowering. By focusing narrowly on techniques for utilising knowledge as the key to change, ActionAid, like many other proponents of “empowerment”, was able to ignore the intrinsic connection between knowledge and power. “Local knowledge” is presented as an unproblematic resource pool, which, when structured and systematised through the application of certain “rational techniques”, can be translated into benevolent action.

Health and hygiene practices are one area where “existing local knowledge” in the field sites has long been shaped by missionary, colonial, nationalist and commercial interests influencing which practices are considered either prestigious or morally suspect. Against this loaded background, Reflect and other participatory approaches emerge with the promise of a method that allows people to consider their situation from a perspective of constructive and pragmatic rationalism. The following chapter investigates the scope for this endeavour, illustrating how, in practice, circle discussions about health and hygiene do not escape the historical legacy that goes with the topics. Developmental approaches and methods here appear more likely to represent and express social realities than to radically reform them.

Chapter 4

Healthy bodies and clean minds: creating the civilised self

4.1 **Walking briskly to leave the fools behind**

Asked about her thoughts on educated people, Frederece, a *Reflect* participant in Madudu, has just done something very untypical. Without any encouragement she has off-loaded an array of derogatory characterisations: they cheat, lie and “fool” the uneducated, are arrogant, greedy and let uneducated people do all the work. So scathing was her attack that the next question in line almost seemed inappropriate:

Question: “Do you then think that you will become more like an educated person once you have finished going to the *Reflect* circle?”

Frederece (beaming): “Yes, I have already started to change.”

Question (baffled): “How have you changed?”

Frederece: “I have also started ‘fooling’ people. When I go to church I put in more effort, I wear nice clothes and shoes. I hold my head up high (straightens up and makes a stern face) and walk quickly (angles her arms in marching fashion). And when I go and visit people and I see that they don’t have drying racks (to dry cooking utensils) or separate kitchens I say to them, ‘If you were going to the *Reflect* circle you would know the importance of having such things’.”

With her strong approval of the hygiene measures propagated in the *Reflect* circles, Frederece is in good company. Both in Bangladesh and Uganda, in the rural and urban research sites, health and hygiene were by far the most popular topics with participants, and the ones they felt had benefited them most. The husbands and non-participants we spoke to mostly referred to women participants’ enhanced cleanliness and reinforced sense of domestic duty, when reporting on the impacts they had observed. Facilitators were equally eager to spend time on such topics and many took it upon themselves to actively monitor the progress participants were making in implementing the changes that were discussed in the circles. Such efforts are typical of active adult education programmes and undoubtedly contribute to the positive correlation that agency staff and academics commonly make between women’s education and better health status for poor women and their families.

In fact, health and hygiene is possibly the topic where our contention that literacy programmes are riddled with the conflicting interests and positions of their stakeholders seems least plausible. Illness can so obviously be a detriment to a happy life that efforts to overcome it rarely need to struggle for approval. And yet it is often precisely this common-sense plausibility of health interventions which blinds the outside observer to the dynamics involved in changing health and hygiene practices.

Frederece’s actions are a case in point. Her compound is adorned by a new drying rack and she would be the first to say that it was the *Reflect* circle that inspired her to build it. If asked, she would look back on the way she used to handle her utensils, shaking her head at her own

“backwardness”, expressing her content with the now attained “enlightenment”. In short, Frederce would do any evaluation report proud.

However, the conversation quoted above also reveals that literacy programmes are not the unambiguous, purely pragmatic trajectory from illness to health they are commonly made out to be. It is interesting to note that Frederce regards herself as “fooling”. Wearing nice clothes and walking briskly is not yet second nature to her and she doesn’t feel fully entitled to the image she is trying to create of herself as a (more) educated person. In this context, Frederce’s attempts at self-betterment are at odds with the developmental discourse on health and hygiene and its narrow definition of self-betterment as the adoption of health and hygiene practices which programme-makers regard as being conducive to good health. Frederce’s own ambitions clearly go beyond this. It would take some considerable twisting to reinterpret the situation where she confronts other people about their “short-comings” as a purely informative act of “sharing experience” or “disseminating knowledge” so that everyone can benefit from what was learned in the class. Instead, Frederce applies subtle judgements concerning the level of prestige attached to certain health and hygiene practices so as to mark herself out as more sophisticated than before and to engage in one-upmanship. She can do that by walking briskly, dressing nicely and having a drying rack. She couldn’t achieve the same effect by telling everybody that the best thing for toothache is to down a couple of glasses of local gin.

4.1.1 Hierarchy of practice

There is a constantly evolving hierarchy of knowledge concerning health and hygiene practices. Different practices attract varying levels of esteem according to how expensive they are, how scientific or modern they are perceived to be, where they are available, who uses or approves of them. Literacy programmes either don’t acknowledge this plethora of factors or seek to bring it under control by encouraging people to make “rational” choices based solely on a judgement about which practice is most efficient in bringing about better health. The vigour with which literacy programmes address health and hygiene issues suggests that there is a strong presumption that while poor people would not make such “rational” choices of their own accord, they could and indeed should. “Irrational” behaviour is much more likely to be attributed to “ignorance” (hence the need for education) than to how people relate to the hierarchy of knowledge mentioned above.

In this section, we illustrate how all players in literacy programmes are operating with and within knowledge regimes on health and hygiene practices. We look at how this influences progress and outcomes, putting a different slant on the results often reported in other studies. We find that there is no basis to claims that literacy learning or participatory class debates are the factors leading to the adoption of “modern” health and hygiene practices. This raises the question of how the changes that many women report come about, if indeed they do come

about. In line with our argument, we proceed by presenting outcomes in terms of health and hygiene practices as they were reported to us and observed by us. Comparisons with the way other studies have presented similar results broaden our analysis and help illustrate what the general preoccupation with health and hygiene entails. On that basis, we undertake a closer analysis of how results came about, looking at the process of learning in the classes and how women deal with their knowledge outside. It must be emphasised that we are not primarily concerned with how effectively the programmes managed to implement their own health and hygiene objectives. This study intends to question the nature of such objectives and how women (and men) do or don't make changes to their lifestyle as a result of going to the circles.

4.2 Documenting change

Women participants reported a wide range of changes they have made since joining the *Reflect* circles. In both Uganda and Bangladesh they spoke of having built drying racks, latrines and separate kitchens, some with the help of their partners and others on their own. Other often-mentioned changes include increased washing of hands, boiling of drinking water, more conscientious sweeping of the compound and greater care in handling and guarding foodstuffs. Particularly in Banda, women emphasise the greater awareness they now have of the need for a balanced diet and their attempts to ensure it in as far as means allow. Many women also say that they would now more readily make use of biomedical facilities, not only because of heightened awareness but also because they are less intimidated by the numbers on the doors and signposts on the wall. In Bangladesh, greater commitment to family planning must be added to the long list of achievements women lay claim to.

Some of the statistics generated through the survey exercises support such claims. In Madudu, 47 percent of all participants refer to at least one health or hygiene related issue when asked about the most important changes brought about by *Reflect*, making this the most often reported benefit.⁵⁷ Several other questions relating more specifically to both health and hygiene practices and perceptions were asked and deserve more detailed analysis.

Table 2: **Building modern homesteads: ownership of latrines, kitchens and drying racks**

	latrine?		separate kitchen?		drying rack?	
	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
Women participants Madudu	61 95%	3 5%	59 97%	2 3%	49 83%	10 17%
Women control group Madudu	34 81%	8 19%	36 86%	6 14%	31 74%	11 26%

⁵⁷ One year earlier, in 1999, the figure was marginally higher, at 53 per cent. In Banda, respondents were much more likely to point to their literacy achievements when answering these questions. Their high regard for health and hygiene measures comes out much more strongly in the qualitative evidence than in the survey results.

According to this table, participants are significantly more likely to own a drying rack, latrine or a separate kitchen than members of the control group. The figures for both groups are high but not implausible. In the case of latrines, it must be cautioned that there are other factors, such as pressure from the LCs or radio broadcasts which may well have influenced the high rates. It can also be stated with confidence that the idea of having a separate kitchen was already popular independently of *Reflect*. Still, neither of these factors would explain why more *Reflect* participants than others acquired these items. More participants than control group members have added one or more of the above items to their household during the year between our two interview exercises. All of this suggests that *Reflect* did have the effect of encouraging participants to add health and hygiene infrastructure to their households.

Where is the common sense in a drying rack?

Drying racks are table-like structures made with reed or wooden poles. The idea is that cooking and eating utensils dry on them prior to re-use so that no contaminated water mixes with foodstuffs. Households without drying racks tend to store the still wet pots and pans in a corner of the house. Many of the participants in Madudu built drying racks and now use them regularly. Unfortunately, there is some doubt as to how far the racks contribute towards reducing diseases originating from contaminated water. The rhythm of daily activities is such that utensils tend to be washed only shortly before the preparation of the next meal, and are not left on the drying rack long enough to actually dry. In the morning after breakfast, many houses are locked up while everyone goes to the fields. It would be unsafe to leave utensils out. Instead they are brought out and washed as cooking for lunch starts. The same procedure is repeated after lunch and dinner. Some of the women we asked about the situation regarded the drying rack as simply the place to put things once they are washed. Others were aware that the actual drying of utensils has its importance but didn't regard it as a priority. Two women saw the drying rack primarily as somewhere to display to passers-by the new cups and plates they had acquired or received from their partner. One of the two was happy that she had shamed her husband into buying new cups as a result of the public display she had made of their meagre collection of kitchen goods.

Other health and hygiene practices are much more difficult to measure than physical structures, even if the figures presented in the table above say little about the use and usefulness of drying racks, kitchens and latrines. Some practices, such as birth control or boiling of drinking water, are difficult to investigate through questionnaires. Respondents can be easily intimidated (particularly in the case of birth control) and there are no means of verifying answers. Our questionnaire tested for perceptions on family size but did not enquire about actual practice. There is some evidence from our qualitative research that a few women felt better informed about family planning methods after going to the circles and that they all regarded it a subject of interest⁵⁸. That said,

⁵⁸ On closer questioning, few women maintained original claims of only having learned about family planning through the programme but many convincingly stated that they had learned new facts about aspects of family planning. Not all circles dealt with the topic, and female facilitators seemed more comfortable (not surprisingly, in front of a majority-female audience) than men.

interviews with health staff in our project areas provided no evidence that use of family planning methods has increased as a result of *Reflect*. We are sceptical of programmes making such claims given the strong incentives women and men have against using them.

On the issue of boiling drinking water, qualitative observations proved that very few participants put this action point into practice. It is a demanding and relatively costly exercise requiring scarce wood for fuel and pots to boil the water, time to supervise it and storage facilities that effectively avoid recontamination. It is debatable whether the extra efforts incurred in the process of boiling water do not undermine the potential health benefits of consuming boiled water.

Health-seeking patterns are a more tangible, if complex, issue. All respondents were asked to provide details of the last incidence of illness in their household and how it was dealt with. The most striking finding is the high number of respondents, both participants and control group members, who report having used biomedical facilities during the last bout of illness. Seventy four percent of participants in rural Madudu and 60 percent in urban Banda claim to have visited either private clinics or government health facilities. Figures for the control group are similar (76 percent and 65 percent respectively). The lower frequencies in urban areas are explained by a greater number of people buying drugs from pharmacies and vendors. In fact, many of those who have gone to government facilities and, in particular, private clinics will not have received a diagnosis from medical personal, effectively using them as drug suppliers only.

The high rates of usage reported here are probably influenced by respondents thinking of the last case of “serious” illness in the household. To many adults, this would mean an illness that makes it impossible to work for prolonged periods of time. A light fever, perhaps connected with malaria, would not normally be brought to the attention of health personnel. With young children and babies, the situation is markedly different and even relatively poor parents will make strenuous efforts to access facilities quickly. The high figures correspond to our qualitative observations that, with the exception of some conditions presumed untreatable with biomedicine, there is a strong preference for biomedical care.⁵⁹ The cost of getting such treatment is obviously a factor few can disregard and our data cannot adequately reflect the multitude of treatment forms people seek out and combine in practice. Both material and other constraints (see below) often dictate the treatment to such an extent that it would be difficult to conceive of adult education having much of an impact on the “choices” people make. Our data suggest that treatment-seeking patterns in Banda and Madudu remain uninfluenced by the *Reflect* projects.

⁵⁹ Our study found that men were the ones whose illness goes unchecked. Most of the treatment histories collected refer to children (56 percent). Only 11 percent of all incidences related to adult men (compared to 31 percent for women). Men reported their own and their wives incidences of illness equally, but women were five times more likely to mention their own illnesses than that of their male partner. The few incidences of men's illness documented here were more likely to be treated through self-medication than those collected of women. Information gathered from medical facilities confirm that men rarely come in to be treated themselves and the men we interviewed in more detail (i.e. separately from the survey) usually had no high regard for health services, with many considering alcohol the most convenient way of getting over pain and discomfort. This raises the question of why most health and hygiene messages are targeted at women.

Even if this is the case, it is plausible that some of the health and hygiene measures mentioned earlier have had a positive effect on the health of participants and members of their household, reducing the times they need to seek treatment. It is likely that any such impact would be felt only in the long term, but investigations into how far back the last incidence of illness lies can provide some preliminary information. The results reveal little difference between categories of respondents. Nearly three quarters of all households reported an incidence of illness during the last week, underlining that illness is the norm rather than the exception in everyday life.⁶⁰ Sadly, it seems that the frequency of illness is not reduced by taking part in *Reflect*, previous schooling or indeed by ownership of latrines, drying racks or separate kitchens.

4.2.1 The link between education and illness

A common response to such findings is the call for more and more appropriate education (for both children and adults). Such well-intended advice reinforces the idea that rampant illness is a result of poor people not performing to their abilities. Our analysis so far suggests that poor people in general, and *Reflect* participants in particular, are stretching their capacities to the limit (and often beyond, when it comes to paying for treatment) so as to cope with and avoid illness. But from the limited data available, it does not seem as if such measures wield strongly positive impacts on their health. The most likely explanation for this disappointing result is that seemingly “common sense” measures, such as boiling water, using biomedical facilities, joining family planning schemes, or having drying racks are not as universally sensible as is often assumed.

4.2.2 Common sense solutions?

It is ironic that in order to be regarded as “empowered”, women must make decisions which reflect “common sense” knowledge of what is good for them. Many evaluation studies focusing on women’s empowerment through educational activities conceptualise empowerment as a means to an end. More often than not, the ends are very clearly defined and the proof of being empowered is in women subscribing to a narrow set of ideals and practices. Apart from somewhat contradicting the notion of women gaining “autonomy” to take decisions for themselves, this tendency in the literature expresses a misplaced confidence in family planning and other measures, making these out to be universally applicable solutions to women’s problems everywhere (see for example Moulton 1997).

This hegemony of “common sense” tends to mean that “scientific” (or “modern”, or “Western”) health and hygiene practices are perceived as the only genuinely valid ones even

⁶⁰ In Madudu, women participants and their husbands are slightly more likely than the control group to have reported an incidence of illness during the last week. This is probably due to their living in slightly larger households than members of the control group. The figures hardly vary between the first and second survey exercise.

Table 3: Agreement to statements concerning health and hygiene

1. Using the dispensary/hospital is better than using traditional medicine		I agree		I don't agree		I have no opinion on this			
<i>Madudu</i>	woman participant	(61)	94%	(4)	6%				
	woman control group	(37)	93%	(3)	8%				
	husband	(47)	96%	(2)	4%				
<i>Banda</i>	woman participant	(39)	98%	(1)	3%				
	woman control group	(22)	92%	(1)	4%	(1)	4%		
	husband	(11)	92%	(1)	8%				
2. Against Malaria, injections are better than pills		I agree		I don't agree		I have no opinion on this			
<i>Madudu</i>	woman participant	(40)	62%	(23)	35%				
	woman control group	(28)	67%	(14)	33%				
	husband	(28)	57%	(19)	39%	(2)	4%		
<i>Banda</i>	woman participant	(31)	78%	(8)	20%				
	woman control group	(19)	79%	(5)	21%				
	husband	(10)	83%	(2)	17%				
3. Educated people tend to be cleaner than uneducated ones		I agree		I don't agree		I have no opinion on this			
<i>Madudu</i>	woman participant	(47)	72%	(18)	28%				
	woman control group	(31)	74%	(10)	24%	(1)	2%		
	husband	(43)	88%	(6)	12%				
<i>Banda</i>	woman participant	(27)	68%	(13)	33%				
	woman control group	(18)	75%	(4)	17%	(2)	8%		
	husband	(9)	75%	(3)	25%				
4. Traditional medicine can also help sometimes		I agree		I don't agree		I don't know		I have no opinion on this	
<i>Madudu</i>	woman participant	(47)	72%	(17)	26%	(1)	2%		
	woman control group	(30)	71%	(10)	24%	(1)	2%	(1)	2%
	husband	(32)	65%	(15)	31%	(2)	4%		
<i>Banda</i>	woman participant	(17)	43%	(19)	48%	(3)	8%	(1)	3%
	woman control group	(14)	58%	(6)	25%	(4)	17%		
	husband	(3)	25%	(7)	58%	(2)	17%		
5. To have many children is a great fortune		I agree		I don't agree		I don't know		I have no opinion on this	
<i>Madudu</i>	woman participant	(18)	28%	(45)	70%			(1)	2%
	woman control group	(18)	43%	(24)	57%				
	husband	(20)	41%	(28)	57%			(1)	2%
<i>Banda</i>	woman participant	(10)	25%	(27)	68%	(2)	5%	(1)	3%
	woman control group	(7)	29%	(15)	63%	(2)	8%		
	husband	(3)	25%	(8)	67%	(1)	8%		

where circumstances render them impractical. A poor woman who autonomously decides that it makes sense for her to have ten children or that the biomedical services on offer are simply not worth bothering with wouldn't stand the remotest chance of being counted as an empowered woman. The tensions between actual practice and what is considered "proper" practice are glaringly obvious in many places, particularly poor ones. However, they are rarely exposed as such. Proponents of women's education still prefer (or feel obliged) to portray educational activities as a purely benign change mechanism, replacing "bad" with "good" behaviour. In practice, this situates current efforts to increase donor commitment to women's education precariously close to colonial ideologies of education acting as a "civilising" force.

It is common for evaluation studies to state that education programmes for adults often manage to change prevailing health and hygiene perceptions and attitudes but rarely succeed in changing actual behaviour.⁶¹ Our own survey results reveal limited evidence to this effect, while illustrating how much people already ascribe to "modern" values, at least when taking part in surveys conducted by outsiders. The table below shows the level of agreement or disagreement which respondents expressed when confronted with the deliberately opinionated statements in the left column. Noticeable differences between the experimental and control group exist on two counts.

4.2.3 Injections for modernity

In Banda, the women participants show a slightly higher propensity to reject traditional medicine and to embrace biomedical facilities than the control group (see statements 1 and 4). This can be partly attributed to the large amount of time that women spent learning about health and hygiene issues in the Banda programme. The fact that BCDP runs a community health centre may also have influenced women's reactions to these statements. However, the more pronounced differences are found in comparing rural and urban responses, with urbanites being generally more likely to reject traditional medicine.⁶²

Several traditional healers operate in Banda. At the time of our research, they were not complaining of lack of customers. Interestingly, some of their treatment practices were consciously oriented towards satisfying customer demand for "modern" treatments. One traditional healer, for example, sought to enlist the researcher's assistance in identifying the best means of making pills. She had noted that clients no longer wanted to be given large bottles of herbal solutions but was unsure whether her present innovation of making pills based on clay would prove popular in the long run.

⁶¹ Sometimes, such assertions are deceptively reassuring, interpreting programme "achievements" in terms of changing people's perceptions as a first and crucial step towards eventual behaviour changes which are understood to be more difficult to attain. Considering the limitations women face in actually making changes, this suggestion of progressive, linear change is problematic.

⁶² The term used for "traditional medicine" in our questionnaire was "eddagala ganda", which most people take to mean herbal remedies, strictly distinguishing it from witchcraft practices which few people would be willing to publicly embrace.

Contrary to the connotations of the term “traditional”, all the healers we visited placed emphasis on theirs being an evolving, scientific, and professional practice (see also Wallman 1996). They underlined such claims by using utensils borrowed from biomedical practice or by putting signs (“doctor’s consultation room”) on their door. They spoke of the experiments they have conducted and mentioned their criteria for referring patients on to other facilities. The practitioners of so-called traditional medicine are in fact positioning themselves in alliance with “modern” medicine, rather than in opposition to it. With such flexibility, healers remain a credible alternative to a population which otherwise has a stated preference for biomedical services.

Our research in no way examined the worth of any type of treatment. But we included a statement suggesting that “Against malaria, injections are better than pills”. We did this because several health professionals and researchers had suggested to us that patients, and in particular educated ones, often believe injections to be far more effective than pills, when in fact from a medical perspective, the active ingredients of pills and injections are the same and use of the later is usually only indicated where other factors (such as stomach problems or being unconscious) prevent a patient from swallowing pills.⁶³ In practice, our data suggests that the number of people endorsing injection use is remarkably high throughout, with *Reflect* participation seemingly not being a decisive factor. Instead, it appears that place of residence is a much more reliable factor explaining treatment preference, with urban respondents being significantly more prone to assert that injections are better.⁶⁴ Ironically, the most likely explanation for this difference lies in urban residents having more easy access to biomedical facilities and in particular to private clinics. In contrast to our initial assumption, people who choose injections even when they don’t need to are not necessarily driven only by prestige. False information by health personnel is at least equally important, with injections being a more costly option to the patient while being more profitable to the clinic.⁶⁵ In Madudu, health personnel could not secure a constant supply of intravenous malaria drugs and were therefore less eager to promote their use.

4.2.4 Cutting families to size

The second incidence of a significant difference between experimental and control group is notable in respondents’ views on family size. Particularly in Madudu, women participants are

⁶³ Our attention was first drawn to this aspect by a fascinating series of articles written by Luise White (1993; 1994; 1995). Several of the health workers we interviewed confirmed that patients often come with definite ideas about which form of treatment is most effective, explaining that injections are most popular, followed by capsules (which previously only contained very potent drugs, like antibiotics) and lastly, pills.

⁶⁴ Correlations with age, education level and other possible factors proved insignificant.

⁶⁵ The few clinic personnel we interviewed reported that if the patient has money, the preferred method of malaria treatment is to give them one injection and then sell pills for the completion of the course (since patients could not be relied on to come back). Assuming that the patient really does not come back, this is also the approach that is most profitable for the clinic.

much more likely than members of the control group to disagree with the statement that “Having many children is a great fortune” (70 percent as compared to 57 percent). This could be taken as an indicator that participation in the *Reflect* circles reduces the desire to have a large family. However, every fourth woman in our survey had a child in the year lying between our two interviews, whether desired or not desired. There was no difference between participants and control group.⁶⁶ Either participants do not manage to translate their desire for smaller families into practice or, at least in the interview situation, they feel obliged to conform to the “large families = large problems” ideology that has been propagated in the classes.⁶⁷

A closer look at the data suggests that both factors may be at play. Agreement with the idea that many children are a great fortune is negatively correlated to a respondent’s age and to the number of living children they have.⁶⁸ In other words, the older a respondent and the more children s/he has, the more likely s/he is to disagree with the idea that having many children constitutes great fortune. One may speculate that the actual experience of having many children brought the older respondents to this conclusion. However, a more realistic scenario is that even though everybody recognises the difficulties related to having a large family, only those who already have one and are old enough to no longer want many more children can permit themselves to moan about the negative sides. To those who are younger and with fewer children, it is of paramount importance to continue having children.⁶⁹ In sum, our survey results suggest that *Reflect* participation has some impact on the efforts women make to improve hygiene in the home environment and on their views about family size (only in the rural project). However, it does not seem that such measures have so far yielded any significant reduction in illness or resulted in increased use of family planning. In part, these findings confirm results obtained elsewhere, in particular the conclusion that perceptions are easier changed than actual practice. This point is often made in literature on adult education programmes. However, many authors argue that a change in perceptions will lead to changes in practices, maintaining that this tendency has been proven statistically in the case of girls’ education and that there is no reason to believe that the same should not occur in the case of adult education. A closer look at the background in which women participants are seeking to make changes illustrates the potential limits to this view.

⁶⁶ At least in theory, birth control is freely available in Madudu and Banda. By the time of our first interview, the sessions about birth control lay six to nine months back, so that a minority of the women would already have been pregnant at the time of debate.

⁶⁷ An image that was commonly used in the classes was that of a man cracking under the burden of carrying a large number of children on a large tray above his head. According to our respondents, the perceived advantages of having large families were not discussed in the classes. In Bangladesh several facilitators drew images of one young woman with many children and another with few, ensuring that the one with many children was presented as down-trodden and facing many problems.

⁶⁸ Both indicators are significant at the 0.01 level (Spearman’s). No other factors were significantly correlated.

⁶⁹ In a different *Reflect* project in Uganda, staff noted that discussions focusing on “the problems of a big family” regularly upset those women who already had many children. Facilitators were advised to be cautious and to reassure such women. One of the authors visited a circle where a woman facilitator (herself with very many children) was just dealing with the topic. Faces among the women participants were long while the facilitator raged about the evils of having a large family. In the end, there was delight among several of the middle-aged women when the facilitator announced that those who already had many children were not concerned by the advice she had just given – see Friedrich (1996). Talking to participants afterwards, it turned out that many of the middle aged women felt encouraged to have more children while the younger women were worried about this attack on their fertility.

4.3 How are results achieved? - a qualitative perspective

Every few weeks, Susan, the facilitator of Kilemba circle, spent a session monitoring learners' progress on action points. She would go through a mental list of questions such as "who has got a latrine?" or "who has not yet planted the five banana plants I told you to plant?" and learners would raise their hands to indicate the present state of affairs. Participants were often prone to scrutinise each other's claims rigorously and a woman making a claim that was deemed untrue would immediately be exposed. In most cases, she would laughingly withdraw her claim, perhaps saying that the latrine "is already there, in my head".

Susan and a few other facilitators had dealt with the issue of latrines as a first priority. While a health calendar, a matrix comparing treatment options, and other units on health and hygiene came early on in the syllabus, Susan chose to precede them with a map of the household only scheduled for later on. The guidelines for the construction of this PRA tool allowed facilitators a significant amount of leeway. They could draw a map of the individual households or of the village as a whole. They could discuss the number of people living there and what their situation is. Like all the guidelines for facilitators⁷⁰ it was assumed that the PRA tools would be used to represent a real situation. Susan, and most others, instead chose to draw an "ideal" household map, i.e. one that has a separate kitchen, a drying rack and a latrine. On some of the drawings that participants have made, one can see women sweeping the compound, neat houses with iron-sheeted roofs and flowers in the front yard.⁷¹ Asked about why she thought it important to adapt the syllabus in this way, Susan only replied, "How can they (i.e. the participants) go to the doctor if they don't even have a latrine?"

Going to the doctor is not something one does simply because one is ill and wants to get help. The kind of person who frequents doctors is "serious" and must be seen to be serious. In Susan's and many other people's thinking, having one's house in order is the first and most basic step to being a proper person. Anyone flaunting this order of actions may be judged preposterous and pretentious. A visit to the doctor signals a degree of sophistication that needs to be deserved. Thus Susan thought it inappropriate to discuss visits to the doctor with her participants before they had "learned" about domestic propriety. Her subtle appreciation of knowledge hierarchies, where "prestigious knowledge" must not precede "basic knowledge", clearly follows a different rationale from that applied by curriculum planners.

⁷⁰ It should be noted that facilitators often took part in elaborating the guidelines together with staff.

⁷¹ In Bangladesh a very similar graphic was referred to as "the neat and clean map" and several facilitators reported that they used the graphic to point out to participants where their households were still lacking in proper hygiene. This was one of the graphics that many women participants remembered well, and several expressed their disappointment that nobody had come to help them find the iron-sheets and furniture which their facilitators had insisted are a must for any decent house. In one circle in Mauluvibazar, the facilitator had drawn a map of the village with all the different houses assigning scores for the standards of health and hygiene observed in each one. Far more facilitators in Bangladesh than in Uganda professed to making regular control visits to their learners to remind them of how to maintain their households.

In this and most other *Reflect* projects, the learning process was structured to move from problem identification to the analysis of causes and only then on to the finding of solutions. And yet Susan's and others' initiatives to introduce a different order, one where self-improving solutions come before the debate of problems and causes (somewhat pre-empting them), does not necessarily come out of the blue. Her understanding reverberates with colonial and missionary discourses, with their emphasis on domestic and bodily hygiene as a necessary prerequisite to entering respectable society. Such discourses have evolved and are now firmly rooted in modern day Ugandan culture – they shape all the stakeholders in a *Reflect* project.

It is inconceivable to imagine that participants would use the discussions in the *Reflect* circle to carefully weigh up the pros and cons of latrines in a context where, quite independently of the classes, everybody is already certain that not having a latrine is seen as “backward”. Nobody in Susan's circle ever stated that they had not yet built a latrine because of not feeling convinced of its purpose. It was understood that those who don't have one can be shamed publicly and are to react with shame.

In Bangladesh, a certain tension arose around the use of soap. The programme makers in Mauluvibazar had (correctly) advised facilitators that ashes were a viable substitute in cases where participants did not have enough money to buy soap for washing themselves. Facilitators consistently reported that this was the message they passed on to learners. However, given the fact that ashes were thus associated with poverty, it is perhaps not surprising that many learners eagerly insisted that *Reflect* had taught them to use soap and that they used nothing but soap now.

Educational institutions are and have long been a key transmitter of Western health and hygiene standards. People in Uganda and Bangladesh know of the practices that are endorsed there regardless of whether they have ever set foot in a school or not. Most pupils are still made to believe that it is their civic duty to pass on health and hygiene measures picked up in school to others, with the result that educated individuals are at times zealously demonstrative with their knowledge. Unschooled people often find themselves at the receiving end of lectures heavy with the authoritative weight schooling lends to its graduates. Adult education programmes are then not only about learning new things. They also offer the potential to claim as one's own the knowledge one has been patronised with by others. Subsequently it becomes doubly important to participants that whatever happens in adult education classes conforms to their own preconceptions of schooling so as to enhance their own credibility in possessing authoritative knowledge.

4.3.1 Rushing to the hospital

Some of the debates about health and hygiene that take place in *Reflect* circles (and what participants make of them), cannot be appreciated without acknowledging the motivation

described above. In Kilunga, for example, the researcher observed a number of sessions on treatment options for various prevalent diseases. On a matrix, the participants outlined the existing treatment options, such as local herbs, self-medication, government dispensary, prayer, etc. As they were debating which form of treatment works best for which disease, prayer was assigned the highest score almost as a matter of course.⁷² Witchcraft was jokingly referred to a few times during the sessions but nobody would have dreamt of putting it up for “official” debate in this educational context. The fact that many men routinely used alcohol to cope with pain and illness was also omitted from the graphic.

The deliberations on the other treatment forms came close to the ideal of *Reflect*. Participants weighed up the pros and cons, asserting that local herbs work better for skin problems and stomach irritations than biomedical facilities, which were in turn identified as more suitable in dealing with serious cases of malaria or dysentery. As was common, at the end of the session the facilitator asked participants to comment on what they had learned from the exercise. This procedure was rarely taken on by participants in quite the way the innovators of *Reflect* had intended. Rather than standing back to evaluate just what was useful and what was not, participants straightened up, wearily waiting to see whether they were going to be picked out as a “volunteer”. The unfortunate one would then more or less confidently state what s/he thought the “lesson learned” ought to be. On this occasion the “right” answer was quickly found: “when we are ill we go to see the doctor immediately”.

Little of the diversity that had featured in the preceding debate was ever referred to again in the classes but the final statement became part of the facilitator’s quiz repertoire. When, a session became a bit slow or he had run out of things to do he would now ask, “What do you do when you are ill?” “I go to the doctor.” “What do you do when you can’t afford all the medicine?” “You buy for one day and then come back with more money the next.”

But where does more money come from the next day? In reality, most people will consider carefully whether to go to the dispensary again or not. Once they are there, it is the rule rather than the exception that health personnel order them to come back soon for more medicine.⁷³ Understandably, most people will only do this if they are not feeling better and if they can find enough money from somewhere.

In the weeks and months following the treatment matrix session, several of the participants were interviewed in their homes. Irene’s answers were typical of those of others:

⁷² In subsequent conversations with some of those who took part, it emerged clearly that they were thinking of Christian prayer. The connection people make between prayer and healthcare is not surprising considering that it was missionaries who introduced biomedical facilities in Uganda. The churches still retain a large stake in health provision. This is not least because they quickly realised that spirituality and health were closely intertwined in the cultures of Uganda and that changing the one without addressing the other would be impossible.

⁷³ Patients are meant to pay only a small consultation fee and in cases where they require exceptionally expensive drugs. In reality virtually everything must be paid for.

Researcher: "What is the most important thing so far that you have learned about health in the circle?"

Irene: "We learned about many diseases and about going to the hospital."

Researcher: "Did you not know about the hospital before?"

Irene: "I knew, but I didn't know its importance. Now I know that I must go."

Researcher: "So it is not okay to use local herbs?"

Irene: "It is. They can sometimes help, but when you take them and you are not better after three hours you must rush to hospital immediately."

Another participant put the time span one can allow after taking local herbs at two hours and yet another at five. According to both the facilitator and the researcher's own recollection, no hard and fast rules about such a time span had actually been set out in the sessions. The facilitator had merely said that it is best to go to the dispensary if a patient doesn't get better. Irene's and others' tendency to "rigidify" the information remembered from the circle illustrates how she thinks she ought to behave now that she has been educated. As an educated person, Irene thinks, one minds about time and functions according to a premeditated plan. The educated Irene sees herself as having a heightened sense of urgency and efficiency. At least in front of the outside researcher, she also identifies local herbs not as something she has grown up with and is comfortable with but as a force to which she must apply boundaries (i.e. three hours). By comparison, her public embrace of the hospital is unconditional. Again, during the sessions there was hardly any actual elaboration of the "importance" of the dispensary and Irene doesn't explain why she is now more convinced by hospital treatment than she was before. But neither she nor anybody else suggested caution in going there, let alone imposed a time limit after which one should rush to get some herbs if the patient hasn't improved.

Yet particularly in Madudu, and to a lesser extent also in Banda, many of the participants were privately critical of the treatment they received at the hands of health professionals. Considering the often unreliable opening hours, the long waiting times, arbitrary charges for treatment, the non-availability of essential drugs and the unfriendly and often poor service, this should hardly come as a surprise. None of the people we spoke to reported ever protesting about the situation, fearing that they would be denied access to treatment in future or, worse, be "poisoned" by vengeful professionals. Some complaints were raised in the circles but nobody ever suggested that not seeking biomedical treatment was an option worth contemplating, let alone making lobbying for better services one of the many action points.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ At first, seeing that all action points were encouraging individual self-betterment (sometimes by forming groups) without ever taking a confrontational line against the powers-that-be, the research team took this to be a reflection of what the organisers of the programmes judged to be the causes of poverty. Later on it became apparent that the line taken by staff, i.e. that encouraging civic courage would "only end up causing frustration because it doesn't go anywhere" was a sadly realistic assessment of the situation. This is not to say that civic action is generally impossible, but it is to say that using participatory methods is by no means a sufficient pre-requisite to successful civic action.

In Bangladesh, several facilitators strongly denied that they had ever discussed herbal remedies as a viable option in their circles, insisting that only hospital going had been encouraged. Asked what they saw wrong with herbal remedies they dismissed them to the realm of “faith” and “belief”, with one facilitator stating that they are unpredictable and that one can die of them. Another facilitator argued that “quacks” are illiterate, that they give “just leaves”, are unhygienic and that what they offer is simply “not medical”. Still, only two facilitators claimed never to have used herbal remedies themselves. In Mauluvibazar this apparent rigidity may have been enforced by the fact that all the tea garden workers were obliged to use the dispensary of the estate as their first port of call in case of illness. But even women participants living outside the gardens often started by strongly rejecting herbal remedies, shamans or healing practices, only acknowledging their place later on in conversations with the researcher. Facilitators reported that participants were sometimes reluctant to use hospitals because of the high levels of corruption and the ill-treatment they experience there. Nevertheless, the facilitators felt that this should not be an excuse for participants not to go there. One facilitator said that she had advised her participants that if everyone consistently went to the hospital for their medical needs, hospital staff would no longer be in position to sell the drugs to outside vendors and the problem of corruption would resolve itself.

Addressing ailments

Susan was plagued by back pains and after a few days of treatment with painkillers and quinine (!) obtained from a local shop, she decided to go to the dispensary. After waiting for a long time the nurse gave her a “diagnosis slip” which read “back pains” and sold her a few pills (which neither Susan nor the researcher could identify) and told her to come back in five days’ time. The charge was equivalent to \$2. Being a Reflect facilitator and a generally popular woman in the village, Susan’s illness attracted a lot of visitors. Over the course of a few days many women came with advice, promises to pray for her and local remedies. A little necklace with feathers brought by a close friend was put on as soon as it was given to her, whilst herbs brought by less well respected women were first kept aside to be discussed with other confidantes. Susan considers herself a modern woman and often laments other people’s backwardness – in particular their beliefs in witchcraft. Now asked about the necklace she shrugs her shoulders and says, “Who knows, maybe it will help.” While taking the pills from the dispensary according to whim (sometimes directions are written on the paper packets but not always), Susan also continued with the painkillers, quinine and a series of herbal concoctions. Added to that, she kept a couple of small stones in her mouth for a little while every day. For better or worse, she never went back to the dispensary and eventually the pain subsided. She noted with great satisfaction how many people had come to attend to her.

4.3.2 Eating with a purpose

To be conscientious over one's own body is to embrace a novel type of lifestyle, one where the body is not just instrument but also subject to the control and deliberate care of the alert individual. An example of this vision being attractive to many women can be glimpsed in the way women participants in Banda digested a topic on healthy nutrition. The highlight of these sessions was the visit of a qualified nurse who gave a lecture on the issue. While the occasional visits of "experts" rarely conformed to the participatory ideals of *Reflect* (and many other adult education programmes) it must be noted that they were highly appreciated by participants who regarded them as very useful precisely because they provided access to expert knowledge.

Few of the women will have managed to change their diets dramatically since, especially in the urban environment, eating a variety of foods requires money and time that they did not have. We were not so interested in the credibility of the claims women made, but more in what claims women thought it appropriate to make in the first place. Some of the women were visibly fascinated by the very idea of attaching importance to what one eats and certainly had a desire to experiment with their eating habits. One participant, Rita put it thus: "You (the researcher) eat with a purpose. Me, I used to eat whatever was available and if this meant matooke all week, mhmm."⁷⁵ Now Rita and others also eat "with a purpose" and not just at whim. In conversations with the researcher they would, without any prompting, start to get technical about food, explaining the difference between "body building foods", "energy giving foods", "protective foods" as well as casually mentioning the importance of vitamins or proteins. Such testimony of just how precious this knowledge is to the women goes alongside claims of rather harsh self-discipline. To one participant this meant no longer caring about what foods she actually liked to eat but to only consume those which were good for her body. Several women stated that they now eat meals at regular times during the day and that they can afford to eat a greater variety because they carefully measure the amounts of ingredients needed rather than cooking plentifully.⁷⁶

Like Frederece in our introductory example, a few women in Banda also remarked on how the newly acquired knowledge sets them apart from others. Having elaborated on her own food regime, Rita goes on to comment on the vulgarity of some of her woman neighbours. "Whenever they have money, ... they just go and buy kilos of meat", whereas she herself reports no longer giving in to such excess, consuming small amounts of meat, always to be coupled with some greens. Another participant reported how she struggled to educate her reluctant elderly mother who acted as a childminder to her children on how to prepare healthy meals for her children.

⁷⁵ Matooke is a cooking banana and the most popular staple food in the western and central regions of Uganda.

⁷⁶ In Bangladesh, facilitators sometimes told women to stop their husbands' alcohol and cigarette consumption and buy fruit instead. However, none deemed that their efforts had been particularly successful.

Participants passing on the knowledge they have learned in the classes to others outside is sometimes still celebrated in the literature as a desirable multiplier effect of any type of education. There is no doubt that passing on knowledge “through the grapevine” or people emulating the actions of others are powerful mechanisms of social change. However, it is wrong to see this process merely as “dissemination” or “sharing” of knowledge. Many of the incidents we have described illustrate how women seek to use their exposure to adult education so as to demonstrate that they have moved up and are a notch above the rest. In order to do so, they feel that they must be demonstrative with their knowledge in the same way that schooled people often are. When hearing such accounts, the researchers often gained the impression that successful attempts by women participants to patronise others were among the most empowering experiences the women could have had.

4.3.3 The link between adult education and health and hygiene practice

The link between adult education and changed health behaviour by women participants remains dubious mainly because few resources are invested in such research and also because there is no strong basis for doing large scale research (i.e. there is hardly any census information on adult learners). Some authors believe that there is little need to fill this gap, arguing that one can transfer findings from the plentiful research on the benefits of educating girls in the past two decades (see Moulton 1997). The analysis of census data from all over the world shows a strong positive correlation between girls’ schooling and reduced child mortality. The correlation between reduced fertility and schooling is also evident in the literature.

Such findings have been crucial in convincing policy makers preoccupied with population growth to make girls’ schooling a priority on the development agenda. However, the few studies that have been completed on the effect of schooling on women’s health and hygiene practices suggest that the impact is not clear cut.

Before making any claims concerning adult education enhancing the health status of women participants and their families, there are several issues which must be considered. Studies on girls’ schooling harbour few illusions about curriculum content being the direct cause of women’s changed behaviour in adult life. In the case of fertility control, such a link would be implausible since primary schools featuring lessons on family planning are few and far between. Yet the “common sense” view is that women with more education are likely to have better health and hygiene habits and status than unschooled women and that this is the cause of their higher infant survival rates.

Furthermore, most studies contain an implicit certainty when it comes to determining what constitutes beneficial health and hygiene practice. There is almost universal trust in a uniform set of practices such as using family planning, frequenting biomedical services and boiling drinking water. These are taken to be beneficial to women, their families and societies at

large. Our results suggest that there are circumstances where it must be regarded as fortunate that women are not hastening to fulfil policy expectations. For example, in the not untypical situation of biomedical care being both costly and poor, women may effectively be better off not wasting their money and time on it.

4.3.4 Causing girls to change?

How do these studies assume the education process to make its impact on behavioural change? Most commonly, schooling is envisaged as the mechanism by which girls are gaining the ammunition to later on free themselves from the expectations of their “traditional” environment so as to adopt “modern” behaviours. Where they are not changed directly through the curriculum, their transition is seen as a result of the “hidden” curriculum. Stambach (2000), with tongue in cheek, has aptly titled this vision the “education-to-the-rescue” perspective, where education is perceived as the rescue boat which lifts women from the treacherous seas of “traditional” practice.

Education practitioners and researchers still hold strongly to concepts involving rational-actor models, where education results in individuals having broader access to information which in turn enhances their ability to make the “right” choices. As we have shown, what is considered rational in these models tends to be narrowly defined. The kind of rationale women apply in juggling societal expectations is rarely recognised as “rational action” in such models (see Ewbank 1994). Thus the question of how education changes women and girls is still not matched by a similar interest in the influence of societal expectations of education. This is a serious shortcoming which blocks our understanding of the relationship.

4.3.5 Dealing with health professionals

To give one example, the excellent study by LeVine et al explicitly sets out to investigate how schooling for girls results in higher child survival rates. One of their findings is that “more effective interaction with a health practitioner is positively correlated with school attendance, literacy skills and aural comprehension of health messages in Mexico and Nepal” (LeVine, et al. 1994, 190). The authors conclude from the correlation that these are indeed the relevant factors and assume that enhanced performance results from a higher level of skills development.

Their analysis is typical in that it does not consider the equally plausible explanation that schooled women are less inhibited with professionals because they feel more entitled as a result of their recognised status as “educated women”. The study also attaches no significance to the circumstances in which their findings were achieved. In fact, the interaction they refer to with a health practitioner was part of the research interview and can not therefore be seen as a fully credible account of how women fare in real-life interactions with health practitioners.

There is no doubt that the acquisition of relevant skills can make a significant difference to the practices women adopt. The important point to maintain is that this transition does not occur automatically, as much of the literature on the impacts of education assumes. Instead our research suggests that societal expectations and pressures play at least an equally important role in shaping both the learning process and the actions and perceptions of individuals that follow from it. The evidence from our four field sites in Bangladesh and Uganda suggests that most women learners acquired a relatively low level of literacy skills and even those who could manage literacy tasks rarely did so in practice. Yet many of the women still maintained that literacy learning made them more confident in using biomedical facilities. This result is difficult to explain if we assume an automatic link between skills acquired and actions taken, but can be explained when considering the literate environment surrounding learners in the field sites. Even the urban context of Banda offers few direct advantages to those able to read and write, unless literacy skills are coupled with knowledge of English. In rural Uganda written materials are rare outside of schools and churches. Health providers often automatically assume their clients to be non-literate. Thus, when women emphasise the centrality of literacy learning this should not be taken literally. In their environments, becoming literate counts as a proxy for being modern and sophisticated. The actual practice of reading and writing is often secondary to this image.

4.3.6 Schools: islands of modernity, or strongholds of tradition?

If schools really had the capacity to mechanistically enforce change, there would be little reason to assume that adult women could not be “armed” in a similar fashion through adult education programmes. But schooling in Bangladeshi and Ugandan societies occupies a more ambiguous place. On the one hand, schools may be regarded as modernising forces. On the other, they have been around for some time and have become firmly embedded in local cultures, making it impossible to portray them as islands of modernity within “traditional” surroundings. Parents who send their children to school have clear expectations of what schooling will “do” to their children. They see schools as places of opportunity and also as places of “danger” (particularly for girls, who may be “spoilt”). It is often expected that a schooled woman will rebel against marriage norms, asserting a more individualist stance on matters such as choice of partner or fertility regulation. This will not come as something entirely unexpected to those around her. Her guardian(s) will have been aware of the “risks” involved in sending her to school. Such awareness and the decision to send a child to school immediately throw into question any simplistic notion of the out-of-school environment being firmly rooted in the “traditional”. The large chunk of the adult population of Bangladesh and Uganda which pays for children’s education presumably agrees at least to some extent with the kind of transformations associated with schooling.

4.3.7 Adult Education as schooling?

It is important to dwell on the place of schools in order to illustrate how the situation for women coming to adult education classes is different. To start with, adult education classes don't have the same status as schools do. Most of the people who don't attend adult education will have very vague ideas as to what the possible outcomes may be, but will feel perfectly entitled to have personal opinions as to what they ought and ought not to be. There is no societal blueprint delineating what adult education classes "do" to women that could be compared to the expectations that have historically evolved for schooling. The individual woman learner cannot therefore simply "act the part" because she cannot expect that everyone agrees what the script for her part is in the first place.

A second factor which plays against a woman learner making radical changes is that she is already a known entity in her environment. A school-going girl may be seen to be "spoilt" or "corrupted" by the formal education system, but to some extent this may absolve her of responsibility for her transgressions of norms.⁷⁷ A grown woman learner, by contrast, will find it much more difficult to convince others that she was helplessly exposed to the message of education. None of this is to say that women learners don't try to convince the people around them that they have been changed. Sometimes they do so successfully, while at other times they run the risk of being ridiculed or even seriously reprimanded for being "pretentious" and "overly ambitious".

Women learners must then be selective about the kind of changes they initiate. Building a drying rack or keeping the compound meticulously clean are, by any standards, non-offensive actions, by which women can safely seek to "fool" others into thinking they are more sophisticated than they would normally be entitled to act. But suddenly wanting to start using family planning or wanting to visit the health centre more often could easily be seen as overstepping the mark, not least because such initiatives may well interfere with other peoples' interests. The likelihood of success has little to do with what women actually learn in the classes but more to do with whether they manage to convince everyone around them that going to adult education classes can and should be regarded as equivalent to schooling.

Several aspects of adult literacy programmes can be explained from this vantage point. Evaluators are often uncomfortable with the way literacy participants insist on education having whisked them out of ignorance (the "literacy-opened-my-eyes" gambit) because the current policy trend prescribes that learners are to pull themselves up by their own hair. But learners sometimes have good reason to foreground their lack of agency in the process. Their insistence that the project has transformed them completely is necessary for them to convince

⁷⁷ This is not to say that transgressions are thus more easily forgiven, it merely implies that they are, to some extent, expected.

everyone (sometimes including themselves) that they are entitled to act differently now. At the same time, learner claims to have emerged from ignorance (“I was like a child”) do, of course, contradict programme makers’ assertions that adults are not empty vessels and must be appreciated as knowledgeable.⁷⁸ In this context, we may also reconsider the frequent requests from learners to be provided with “proper” classrooms, manufactured learning materials, or even uniforms. These paraphernalia of schooling help women in their quest to make adult education a respectable activity. A visible, material commitment by a big institution such as ActionAid certainly adds weight to any claims of (self-) transformation they attribute to the project. However, many programme makers are slightly embarrassed by learner requests for more generous inputs not only because of the cost involved in honouring them but also because such requests illustrate that learners “digress” from being interested in skill acquisition only.

It then appears that many of the interactions in the classes are guided by the preconceptions held by participants and other people in the project area of education and those who provide it. Our observations illustrate that a participatory approach like *Reflect* can encourage debates that would otherwise not take place (which must be a good thing in the context of adult literacy programmes where debate is usually difficult to come by). But it cannot be expected to transcend the historically evolved, cultural and institutional context in which it is used. Even under more conducive circumstances, ActionAid and BCDP would have been hard pushed to shake off the images created by their predecessors in health education. Missionaries, colonial and post-colonial officials, often in conjunction with (male) local leaders, have long assured that caring for good health was never simply and only that.

4.3.8 Innocent sexual vagrants⁷⁹

In a curious inversion of today’s policy priorities in Uganda, colonial officials in the first decades of the twentieth century were much concerned about women having too *few* children. Low fertility rates, it was believed, were mainly due to sexually transmitted diseases and among them most prominently syphilis. Influential medical professionals sounded the alarm bells when releasing figures estimating that 80 per cent of the Baganda people were infected. For a while, Buganda was believed to be on the verge of extinction. The scenario came to be widely discussed even beyond the borders of the protectorate because it touched a raw nerve with many colonial agents. Syphilis was a new disease to Buganda and the spread on “virgin soil” among an “innocent” population caused ethical dilemmas for colonial administrators. They resorted to blaming the spread of the “epidemic” on the introduction of Christianity and the “deculturation” that was seen to have followed from it.

⁷⁸ The finding that most graduates of literacy programmes are keen to downplay what they knew before joining the programme contradicts Burchfield’s observation that women participants interviewed may “be reluctant to admit that they ever behaved differently”, a bias that would tend to belittle their achievements (1997, 11). Obviously, if the trends we observed were also prevalent in Burchfield’s study site, the credibility of her before/after questionnaire methodology would have to be questioned.

⁷⁹ The historical sources of the contents presented here are drawn from Vaughan (1991) and Summers (1991)

Colonial administrators tended to be fiercely protective of “native custom” as a homogenous body of norms and rules and the only space within which an African (particularly an African woman) could exist harmlessly and unharmed. The attraction of this position lay, not least, in the legitimacy it lent colonial claims to exclusive power and control over all state matters. By setting up African cultures as functional but static and fragile, colonial fears of a loss of power were almost inevitably concentrated on all factors with potential to challenge the status quo. One common explanation for the incidence of syphilis then was that Christianity, with its aversion towards polygamy and its comparatively humane punishments against adultery, had granted women unprecedented levels of sexual freedom which they were ill-prepared to handle. The prospect of untamed African, female sexuality gaining ground could not fail to make colonial officials anxious. Obviously, the choice of this explanation for the spread of syphilis was also warmly welcomed by the male chiefs who had long complained that Christian missions were undermining their patriarchal authority.

Unsurprisingly, missionaries were loathe to accept that they may have been the cause for women taking liberties, though they accepted that female promiscuity was likely to be the cause of the dilemma. Refusing to share in the admiration many colonial bureaucrats expressed for the sophisticated means with which pre-colonial Buganda reportedly controlled female passions, the missionaries insisted that it was the “innate sinfulness” of Africans which should be blamed here. Christianity, far from being the problem, was to be the solution.

Over the years, church and state came to complement each other’s measures on the disease. The state undertook mass screenings of women, which were deemed to be voluntary by virtue of all the (male) chiefs having agreed to it. Meanwhile, the missionaries sought to divert women’s attention away from the sexual preoccupation they were reportedly suffering by offering classes in mothering skills and domestic science. With the benefit of hindsight, it is today clear that only a very small proportion of those diagnosed with syphilis at the time contracted it through sexual contact. Most were suffering from either yaws or endemic syphilis, which have similar symptoms to venereal syphilis while having very different causes.

As this illustrates, health policy can be, and often has been, a drastic and powerful instrument of imposing behavioural norms, and can easily serve interests entirely disconnected from the immediate well-being of individuals. No sooner do poor people become aware of *having* a health problem than they face more or less subtle accusations of *being* the problem. The campaign against syphilis sketched out above was by no means the only or last health-related initiative by which ordinary Ugandans were made to feel inadequate. Contemporary health initiatives are still marked by this experience and often face a suspicious public. Annual polio vaccination drives are, for example, a routine operation in many contexts but in contemporary Uganda the government organisers have had a long struggle for acceptance

with the public. This has involved fending off small but sustained counter campaigns by opponents who fuelled popular fears of vaccinations, intimating that they are part of a government plot to make Ugandans infertile or brainwash them into becoming government supporters for life. In a similar vein, several respondents in Uganda remained to be convinced that HIV/AIDS was not a ploy by Europeans to prevent Africans from having children.

Without some knowledge of the history of health interventions it would be simple to dismiss such fears as mere ignorance. Against the background just revealed, fear of conspiracy against health service users seems understandable and healthy scepticism advisable. In this context, we must also reconsider some of our earlier findings from a new angle. So far, we have emphasised how participants consciously seek to associate themselves with “modern” health and hygiene practice so as to attain prestige gains. Now it is clear that ambitions of individual advancement are only one side of the coin. Because the various institutions involved in providing health care to poor Ugandans have persistently conveyed more than just health advice, participants would have to fear being seen as immoral, dirty and backward if they openly rejected the authority of biomedicine. So debates in *Reflect* circles can easily be unduly biased in favour of biomedicine, not necessarily because the implementing organisation is actively seeking to promote this agenda, but more because it fails to convince participants that it is significantly different from the many other agents who promoted health beforehand.⁸⁰

4.4 Conclusion

In other circumstances, many of our findings could easily be used to expose the inappropriateness of “top-down” education and its propensity to impose dominant knowledge. There we would expect to find curriculum contents that are out of touch with learners’ realities, and would not be surprised at learners being asked to boil drinking water or go to the doctor even in circumstances where these are clearly not viable options. In the context of projects that embrace a participatory approach, our findings take on a more controversial significance. Participation is widely considered to be the means by which the education process becomes thoroughly rooted in local realities. The consistent valuing of local knowledge is thought to guarantee an appropriate, “practical” form of education. And yet, we found that in our field sites learners were often prone to embrace action points that they knew to be impractical.

The view is often expressed that the *Reflect* process has been distorted by not being participatory enough. While some of our examples may support this view, we cannot stop there. Our findings do not support the assumption that more or better participation automatically leads to more “practical” results. Instead, we found that “being practical” was

⁸⁰ However, it would be wrong to give the impression that earlier interventions on health issues are to blame for all the misunderstandings arising in interventions today. Many complications also arise from the still large and poorly understood differences between Western and African aetiologies.

simply not always the first priority of either participants or facilitators. What was endorsed in the classes reflected their ambitions to be modern and sophisticated, to say and do the things they deemed appropriate in a context of “schooling” and, last but not least, to please the implementing organisation. These are perfectly valid motivations. The way women such as Frederere or Irene pursue them through the classes speaks less of how education has empowered or domesticated them and more of their own authorial presence in attempting to present themselves as successful “converts of education”. The lasting image of health and hygiene education that emerges from the field sites is one where women themselves prop up a disciplinary regime using the prescriptive messages they associate with education. Fortunately, this construct is rarely seen to impose its own rigours too harshly.

In theory, the emphasis on participatory approaches being people-centred should make it uncontroversial to accommodate women’s desires to be associated with status-enhancing, prestigious health and hygiene practices. In practice, however, two barriers stand in the way. One can be traced back to our earlier observation that participation has replaced literacy as the agent that is perceived to cause progressive change in adult education. Although the principal source of change was thus transferred from an external agent (i.e. literacy) to participating individuals and groups, many of the modernising ideals associated with literacy have effectively remained intact. Thus, descriptions of participatory processes often cling to narratives of rational self-transformation brought about through rigorous self-analysis, leaving little space for considering participants’ non-rational motivations. While this tendency affirms the modernist credentials of participatory ideology, the second barrier stopping many practitioners from appreciating women’s ambitions more fully is, ironically, linked to the romantic glorification of “local knowledge”.

Well-meaning attempts to privilege local knowledge or local perspectives can easily be patronising and constraining. They are problematic because it is difficult to pinpoint what distinguishes local knowledge from other forms of knowledge. In practice, the concept of local knowledge all too often coincides neatly with all that was formerly known as “traditional”. Thus, when development practitioners discuss local knowledge about health, one is likely to hear about local herbs, intricate rituals and wise old men and women. Injections, toothpaste or medical doctors, by contrast, are rarely discussed as part of local knowledge, irrespective of how much they may or may not be part of life in a given locality. Development practitioners’ “valuing of local knowledge” is often confined to what is considered benign traditional wisdom, existing at the margins, threatened with extinction by a more powerful, invasive and expert knowledge (Grignon and Passeron 1989; Sardan 1990). This populist tendency may provide some practitioners with the warm feeling that their actions are helping to preserve a culture under attack but it is certainly not helpful in providing the broadest possible perspective on the ambitions actual locals harbour. Our research suggests that learners are often keen to use education as a means of reaching beyond the local and this may explain why they treasure using foreign words such as “vitamins” or

“carbohydrates” and why many want to make solemn pledges to reforms that are far beyond their scope.

Although the ways in which learners express their ambitions are obviously shaped by historical circumstances that have often been oppressive, this in no way reduces their validity. Implementers of adult education are then not called to find ways of conscientising or sensitising learners to reconsider their ambitions. Instead, adult educators are challenged to note and accept that even the most sophisticated methods cannot escape history. At present, there is still a strong belief that *Reflect* is a method which allows people to express themselves openly and assists them to ripple through the accumulated weight of history, throwing out the bad and preserving the good. In the following chapter we look more closely at some of the assumptions commonly made about the virtues and effects of “open debate”.

For decades, literacy programmes have been struggling to ascertain that learners engage in meaningful dialogue and debate. Whether the tools employed are key words, conscientising photos or PRA graphics, they are always aimed at easing discussion. Given how much emphasis the various approaches have invested in this theme over the years, it is surprising how little interest there is in the way learners take to these methods and indeed whether they notice any difference in the way they talk and communicate. The following chapter looks at the way learners claim to talk, asking whether their ambitions in this respect can be tallied with more commonly heard reports of literacy learners gaining self-confidence or ‘voice’.

Chapter 5

A talking cure? Reflect participants and the public sphere

In Chapter 1 of this report we posed a question about why women not only join literacy classes, but keep coming back to them, week after week and, in many cases, year after year. We have seen that to some degree women and their families simply surmised that this was what ActionAid wanted of them, as the church and the government had demanded it in the past; and it might therefore lead to opportunities of a more useful kind in future. We have seen, too, that in Bangladesh the practices of many NGOs led women to believe that the ability to “sign” was a prerequisite for access to micro-finance schemes. Not least, we have seen that women often had their own complex reasons for embarking on a vigorous and visible project of adopting self-improving, modernising ways. However, none of these interests seemed to be strongly connected with literacy *per se*. Talking, on the other hand, was something that *Reflect* circles did a lot of. In fact, one of the most striking similarities between the findings of the Uganda and Bangladesh research is that women literacy learners were actually far more interested in the ability to “talk properly” than in the skills of manipulating written characters and numerals.

For Ugandans this meant, above all, the hope of learning to speak English, formerly the language of colonial power and now the language of commerce, of nurses and doctors, government officials, schools, NGOs, newspapers and billboards advertising gleaming modern consumer goods. For Bangladeshis it meant mastering *sadhu bhasa*, the “proper” standard Bengali taught in schools and spoken by the elite. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that literacy classes derive much of their appeal from the perceived connection between schooling and these prestigious forms of speech, rather than from the connection between schooling and mastery of written texts. In addition, though, *Reflect* participants showed pride in their new-found abilities to organise their thoughts when talking, to structure an argument and speak in a calm, detached way in public. Since both Uganda and Bangladesh have their own rather formidable traditions of eloquent political and religious oratory, we struggled to work out what this meant.

“Talk” is easily the main activity of most of the *Reflect* classes we observed. Participants chat informally before, after, and during sessions; they answer questions from the facilitator and make contributions to debates, both formally and casually. Moreover, when they speak of the benefits of having been in the class, many women refer to their new-found confidence or authority to talk with powerful outsiders – with foreigners, NGO staff, government officials. In Bangladesh, this was explicitly presented as a matter of skill, of *knowing how* to address such people with the right tone of voice, gestures and forms of address, as well as a matter of possessing the “right” to talk in such an elevated way. And Bangladeshi women also hoped that their literate status would shield them from the tirade of abusive, humiliating speech that often precedes or stands in for physical blows from husbands and other men.

All too often, research into adult literacy programmes narrowly focuses on reading, writing and discussion content as the active agents mediating change. Some reports mention

enhanced talking capacity as a benefit women claim to have got from literacy programmes, but don't question where it comes from or explore its importance (Gugnani and Dikshit 1991). In others, it can be inferred from quotes by women participants which seem to suggest that talk might be an important issue (Burchfield 1997). The basis for this marginalising of orality is the assumption that literacy is a higher order skill that transforms those who come to master it, whereas talk is thought of as spontaneous, "natural", barely requiring skill or artifice. In our field sites, however, talk is indeed a matter of artifice, for it is the currency that makes or breaks social relationships. One can see that for poor women with few other social resources, the ability to use one's tongue to persuade or harangue, flatter or shame, lie or disguise, would be crucial. But as linguists have shown, in every culture "the gift of the gab" involves mastery of rules, hierarchies and nuances every bit as complicated as the elements of a successful prose style.

Armed with this understanding of talk as a rule-bound, structured social transaction, we began to investigate the hypothesis that participants and facilitators deliberately structure class talk as different, more sophisticated or more egalitarian than everyday talk by the participants and facilitators, and that this allows women to experiment with prestigious genres and vocabularies of talk and expression.

From this hypothesis, it was easy to go one step further, and speculate that such a "talking cure" would ease women's entry to the "public sphere", and that, as suggested in the 1996 pilot project evaluation, women who had been participants in *Reflect* would become more active in village meetings, local elections, school management bodies and community organisations. Perhaps, with their earnest discussions of community problems and ritual of collectively agreeing on solutions to these problems and formulating action points, the circles provided for women a kind of miniature "public sphere" that allowed them to gain confidence as interlocutors to councillors, bureaucrats, NGO staff and others. Perhaps the use of PRA would help women to systematise their own knowledge, thus providing them with the confidence and skill needed to make themselves heard where it matters to them. It seemed that the PRA process offered participants an opportunity to elaborate arguments, consider varying perspectives and take part in debate in a participatory, democratic spirit. Perhaps the circles taught them new negotiating techniques which, coupled with access to sources of prestigious, authoritative "modern" knowledge and elite registers of speech, gave them "bargaining power" in a very literal sense. Perhaps it provided a "counter-cultural space" where women could safely challenge the rules of the dominant discourse.

After spending a great deal of time exploring these hypotheses, we concluded that many women participants did indeed enjoy the process of recording their discussions onto flip charts and producing written action points at the end of the process, but not quite for the reasons we had predicted based on participatory development theory. And they did gain confidence in their ability to speak up in front of their husbands, their employers and powerful outsiders, but again, for rather different reasons than we had imagined. Participants' confidence seemed

to have more to do with their success in emulating the norms and speech of their “social betters” than with the workings of a “counter-cultural” process or the flourishing of critical debate in the circles. Simply put, participation in *Reflect* circles did not give women influence. Rather, it gave them a better sense of how to handle those powerful people known in Bangladesh as “influentials”. We turn now to a detailed discussion of our findings.

5.1 Talking in circles

Both women and men behave differently in the *Reflect* circles than they would do at home or elsewhere. For participants, the *Reflect* circles are awkward and new, marked out not only as educational institutions but also as the hub through which one gets connected to rich benefactors such as ActionAid or the often influential families to which the facilitator belongs (particularly in the case of Bangladesh). It is seldom obvious to anyone how one is meant to behave in a *Reflect* circle – should one act as if in school, church, a village meeting or in a completely new way? Added to these insecurities are more personal anxieties. Some new participants fear that they may not be entitled to be there. Others worry that their reputation could suffer when they are identified as illiterate. Yet others may be concerned that they may be seen as keen to make money through a development programme rather than through their own efforts.

5.1.2 “Serious” circles

The initial challenge for any literacy class has nothing to do with reading and writing. Participants’ first aim is to prove to ActionAid, other people in the area and themselves that proceedings in the class really are “serious” and respectable. This has many implications, ranging from the way people dress to seating arrangements, materials used, and the way people talk to each other. There is no one script structuring talk in the classes, though in one way or other, everyone will have an image of schooling. As NGO staff attuned to the *Reflect* model often complained, both participants and facilitators often wanted to emulate school regimes, with a teacher who commands, sets and controls tasks, and learners who follow instructions. But usually, within the space of the first few sessions, a rhythm emerges that combines school-like rituals with the spatial and social rules of other institutions such as the village meeting, the church service, and even the NGO workshop. The facilitator suggests a few observances such as, for example, talking in turn, not swearing, having a prayer or song at each session, and thus begins to structure procedure in relation to familiar social forms while also making it clear who sets the tone.

5.1.3 Church circles?

In Bangladesh, where NGOs are thicker on the ground than in Uganda, many of the participants had experience of the proceedings of micro-finance groups and others had spent time in government-sponsored literacy classes through the Total Literacy Movement. Both

of these models helped to inform the proceedings in *Reflect* circles. In Uganda, school classes and church services seemed to be the most relevant model for circles. It was not uncommon to see participants crossing themselves when leaving the shelter during sessions, while others take a quick bow towards the blackboard. Particularly in the early stages of a class, participants are often solemnly quiet or else whisper to each other while waiting for sessions to start. To speak or laugh out loud is considered inappropriate at this stage. When we asked about the significance of these practices, participants were usually at a loss. To them, the link between Christian religious practice and schooling was “natural” and thus beyond question.

5.1.4 “Gendabalanci”

Other rules at first appear more alien to the context. Gender equitable seating arrangements, for example, are a novelty that Ugandan facilitators only learn about during *Reflect* training. The idea is to create an environment that enhances equitable debate, where everyone has equal access to the proceedings and sits in one group, rather than in cliques. Even some facilitators who had been hostile to the debating of gender issues during the facilitator training made efforts to encourage gender equity through the engineering of seating arrangements. In some cases, action preceded words, with facilitators ordering participants where to sit, rearranging them at leisure, making it very clear to everyone that they could not simply sit anywhere, that there was a system to it all and only one person who knew how to work it. Initially, many participants were intrigued by this novelty. While such zeal rarely lasted beyond the first few sessions, in at least one circle “gendabalanci” went on to become a well-known expression among participants, who widely used it to jokingly attack those who entered the circle and steered towards sitting down with their best friend...

5.1.5 Facilitators and the maintenance of authority

Many more rules come in “naturally”, without requiring special mention. The idea that the facilitator is always right, for example, is usually taken for granted no matter how ostentatiously facilitators repeat that “it is you who know, not me”. It is also not surprising that some participants need to raise their hands before talking while others don’t, or that some participants can challenge what others are saying, while others can’t and yet others wouldn’t even dream of it. In Uganda, the gender and age of either facilitator or participants can make a big difference to these dynamics of classroom interactions. One young male facilitator, for example, was observed facilitating with far more confidence when the participating LCI chairman was absent. When the LCI leader was present, constant reference and deference to him effectively undermined the facilitator’s authority. In Bangladesh the class and educational differences between facilitators and participants were much greater than in Uganda, so that facilitators faced even less challenge to their status as respected and revered teachers.

In Netrokona, *Reflect* circles provided one of the few settings in which the mainly young women facilitators from elite families came into sustained and close contact with poor women, other than as maids or in some other subservient role. This in itself was quite something, and the fact that *Reflect* training emphasised the respect and encouragement that facilitators were meant to show to these women – treating them as equal participants rather than ignorant underlings – made this experience all the more dramatic. It should not be assumed, however, that this was an entirely new or mould-breaking form of interaction between the wealthy and the poor. Hossain (2001) shows the extent to which indigenous Bangladeshi models of development are based on longstanding practices of charity as a personal relationship between a rich individual and specific poor people who depend on him or her, and are closely linked to a traditional idealisation of poverty as an inherently virtuous and noble condition. Such notions are flexible enough to embrace the interactions in a *Reflect* circle.

In any case, regardless of how much was new about the relationships that *Reflect* circles encouraged between poor Bangladeshi women and their social betters, these relationships were still hierarchical and highly rule-bound. Most facilitators were at pains to show tolerance, kindness and patience towards participants, and participants seemed emboldened to treat the facilitators with greater familiarity than they would in other settings. But this suggests that as in Uganda, the circles we observed in Bangladesh were structured, formal and ritualised settings, by no means places where participatory approaches had fostered a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Facilitators and participants were able to temporarily ease the protocol of caste and class subservience only because the authority of the young women leading the circles was reinforced by other forms of power: the moral authority derived from the philanthropic self-sacrifice of the facilitator herself, and the ideological authority of her role as a teacher, as a mediator of learning, knowledge and the written word. Outside the classes, facilitators had the connections which allowed them to make things move for women participants, say, by providing a small loan or, more rarely, by writing a letter of introduction to a higher authority, such as the panchats.

5.2 **Serious matters: flip charts, benches, and iron-sheets**

In creating and going along with the rhythm of the classes, participants take cues from each other, draw on their own experiences of other formal and informal settings, and thus also express their aspirations both for themselves and the class. Dress is one important marker of the status classes enjoy with participants and facilitators. Women participants in Uganda regarded it as mandatory to wear “smart” clothes when coming to classes and would rather miss lessons than turn up without having bathed, ironed their clothes and straightened their hair. For a long time, Susan, the facilitator in Kilemba in the Madudu project, made a point of wearing Western style clothes when teaching. The first time she flaunted this self-imposed regime, about one year into the classes, came at a time when everyone was particularly frustrated with the failure of ActionAid to reward participation with money loans.

Everybody understood that her change of costume was intended to signify a transfer of loyalty away from ActionAid and towards participants (who never wore Western style dress).

The story of the Madudu project (told in Chapter 3), where high expectations were followed by widespread disappointment and frustration, was graphically illustrated by the physical appearance of learners and circles. In the beginning, Susan took it upon herself to criticise some of her male colleagues for what she considered improper dress. Creased shirts, slightly torn trousers or dusty shoes were simply unbecoming appearance for any respectable facilitator.⁸¹ She prided herself in having been the first in the whole area to erect a literacy shelter, and her gleeful satisfaction somewhat spoiled the ambitions of other facilitators to prove they were cutting edge performers. But soon several circles had built shelters and the first to arrive at each session would automatically pick up a broom and sweep the dust from the floor. In some circles, women independently decided to make a new type of mat, smaller than those commonly used in the area, just big enough to sit on yet easily rolled up and carried along, once the session finishes. In Kilemba, a group of participants would collect the blackboard from Susan's house. They would then follow her in procession to the circle carrying the blackboard, stools (for her and the researcher), chalk, flip charts, markers, an attendance book, guidelines for teaching and a guest book. Arriving at the shelter, Susan would take her time hoisting the blackboard onto a stool. Attempts to somehow attach it higher up were many, but failed due to the shelter's lack of supporting walls. After hanging up flip charts with the help of generous amounts of masking tape, Susan would take some time sorting through her books. By the time her stage was set, she would look up from her books and quietly wait until the last whisper had died down. The participants sitting in front of her in a circle would straighten up, pull their dresses into place, and make sure that the name tags they had made for themselves were visibly attached to their bosoms.⁸² Though such formality was rarely sustained throughout a whole session, once the lesson stopped it was not uncommon to see a slight shuffle about who would gain the privilege of carrying items back to the facilitator's house. In short, participants made significant efforts to show their reverence for the program.

5.2.1 The start of the decline

The first sign of decline came with the masking tape running out. For a while Susan resorted to re-using old strips, then hung up only blank flip charts to write on, not those representing previous lessons. A more serious blow came shortly after, with the markers running low. Susan considered it essential that anything she wrote was "for the record" and had to be on flip charts. The blackboard had so far only been used when participants were meant to demonstrate their writing skills and Susan only wrote on it when she was setting exercises.

⁸¹ The importance of "proper" dress is a theme that is endlessly repeated in many school and church settings throughout Uganda.

⁸² Everybody knew each other by name before the circle started, the tags were an innovation Susan had picked up from seminars elsewhere. They were much appreciated by everyone and added to the "conference character" of the venture.

Her blackboard writing was often slow and deliberate, making it very clear to participants that they were the sort of people who wouldn't comprehend if she didn't slow down. Susan's writing on flip charts, by contrast, was speedy and much smaller. She was fully aware that only a few participants were able to decipher what was written there but didn't consider this an obstacle, for the main purpose of flip chart writing was for her to provide ongoing proof of her superior abilities. Susan was inclined to take offence at reminders from ActionAid staff that markers and flip charts were expensive commodities, reading this as a clear signal that ActionAid was belittling her by counting her as one of "them" rather than one of "us". Obviously, she felt, they did not understand how crucial were her interventions as a champion and translator of their cause.

Where development workers would count the initial enthusiasm, the building of the shelter and the weaving of special mats as positive indicators of participants taking "ownership" of the project, it later turned out that participants themselves took a radically different perspective. When the hoped-for credit facilities and other benefits did not materialise, participants insisted that ActionAid must at least provide them with benches and iron-sheets for the roof. This was not simply an attempt by participants to bargain for all they could get. They genuinely felt that ActionAid had a responsibility to assist them in proving to other villagers that the circles were a serious affair.

As it became increasingly clear that attempts to make this project look "serious" would be left to the participants and facilitators alone, they distanced themselves more and more. Not only did Susan change her dress code, she eventually abandoned the use of the blackboard. After that, Susan and the handful of participants still remaining gathered next to the shelter rather than inside it. Some participants now came directly from their gardens, in their work clothes and without their mats and exercise books. Still, at the sound of a car approaching, the small congregation quickly stumbled inside, just in case an ActionAid staff member was coming on a field visit. During the last few weeks of this research, participants abandoned the shelter altogether and sat at the facilitator's house for informal chats.

5.2.2 Commodification of the circles in Bangladesh

Similarly, in Bangladesh, the provision (and occasional misappropriation) of *pukka* shelters, facilitators' umbrellas, exercise books and other equipment was a constant source of tension between participants, facilitators and NGOs. A Bangladeshi researcher employed in the early stages of this project submitted a series of field reports consisting almost entirely of scandalised observations on the shambolic surroundings in which many circles were forced to meet, and a litany of complaints from facilitators and participants on this same theme. By contrast, the UK-based researchers were mystified by this focus on the seemingly marginal and tedious issue of material inputs, and thought that it proved how little she understood the *Reflect* approach. They had absorbed without question the assumption, common to many

participatory development activists and to the Protestant tradition, that worldly paraphernalia, material surroundings and all attention to ritual and outward appearance are merely ostentation and a distraction from the “real”, inward and invisible process of salvation, or participation, or conscientisation. Only later in the research did they realise that for participants, such “extras” as masking tape, markers and iron-roofed shelters constituted an essential element of what *Reflect* was all about.⁸³

5.2.3 Cash for credibility

Whether pedagogically necessary or not, willingness to spend more programme funds on materials, shelters and equipment would clearly have lent more credibility to the participants’ activities in the eyes of their community. This, however, is not to say that more resources automatically lead to more recognition and greater benefits for women. It merely illustrates how, in an environment of extreme resource scarcity, the symbolic value of having such items can easily outweigh their use value. However, NGOs and donors frequently want programme organisers to demonstrate that learners really are interested in learning and learning alone (just as Christian missionaries became obsessed with separating “genuine” converts from those who were only attracted to the trappings of a Western lifestyle, and just as Protestant reformers in Europe felt it necessary to strip away the vivid colours, gorgeous music, elaborate rituals and fanciful images that had enlivened medieval churches). Frugality in using equipment then becomes the proof of the pudding, exacerbating tensions between facilitators and the organising NGO, and between local NGOs and ActionAid. Nevertheless, the fact that the *Reflect* approach does involve giving facilitators a steady, if modest, supply of marker pens, flip chart sheets and other prestigious and scarce equipment to use more or less as *they* saw fit, was evidently an important boost to facilitators’ pride and confidence.

The second, and more important aspect of this elaboration is that long before the first graphic and discussions have started in a circle, participants and facilitators create a formal, “serious” educational environment, which not only serves their own aspirations - educational and otherwise - but also helps to quietly accommodate existing power differentials among participants. In short, the settings thus created prove incompatible with a participatory development ideology which emphasises that meaningful debate is most effectively conducted in an informal, casual atmosphere, in a spirit of mutual respect where learning from each other is the overriding aim. Declining expectations and material supplies did lead some classes in Madudu to become more informal, but this was an expression of participants’ and facilitators’ frustration, not an appreciation of participatory learning methods.

⁸³ Anyone who has ever seen the long shopping lists which schools in Uganda routinely pass out to pupils’ parents for purchase will instantly recognise how closely linked education and commodification are. It is the norm for these lists to include many consumer items, such as toilet paper, sanitary pads, detergents, mattresses, which, to most people, are by no means items in common use.

Having thus considered the material setting of the classes, we now turn to classroom interactions themselves. How much plausibility is there in the claim that it is the formal proceedings of literacy classes which provide women with the confidence to express “voice”?

5.3 “Come on, you, participate” - Understanding classroom interactions

The combination of literacy teaching with PRA graphics was the most prominent innovation of *Reflect*. The graphics are the tool through which debates are meant to be structured and guided. There were interesting differences between Bangladesh and Uganda in the way classes operationalised the construction of graphics. In Uganda, many facilitators were uncomfortable with the graphics and reduced their use to the minimum. In Banda, many of the literacy shelters were physically too small for the construction of graphics. The fact that they were often situated in courtyards, only metres away from the bustling activities of neighbours, was an added disincentive to engage in anything that might attract attention. Added to that, most of the handful of learners who remained in the classes over time had a strong desire to learn English and/or become literate. Facilitators sometimes made efforts to use some elements of graphics, usually drawn by the facilitators directly on flip charts and with relatively little involvement from participants. This was rarely met with the same enthusiasm which participants here and elsewhere displayed for using syllable cards and recombining them as new expressions. Some facilitators felt guilty about not using the graphics and were worried that this would be regarded as performing poorly. In reality, discussion was simply not a priority among participants. Only a very few debates, such as the one on nutrition which involved expert input (see Chapter 4), managed to capture significant interest.

5.3.1 Use of graphics and “discussion”

In Madudu, literacy teaching featured less prominently in many classes and the programme had made deliberate attempts to focus on the discussion element of *Reflect*. Discussions in the circles did at times get very animated and it was clearly evident that participants enjoyed debating. Graphics, however, only very rarely played a part in either initiating or structuring debates. While all facilitators started off using them, most gave up quickly. Those who persisted usually considered the graphics as an end in themselves rather than a means to an end. Participants were either rushed to finish a product or were made to repeat it several times, “so that they understand fully”. There were also some clear preferences in the choices of graphics. Maps, which are often considered to be a relatively easy tool to use, were unpopular with facilitators. Calendars and matrices were considered more “scientific” and were more often used.⁸⁴ In most classes, maps were only used during the first couple of months. Afterwards, an occasional matrix would be drawn by the facilitator on a flip chart, but it was rare to see PRA activities which went beyond this. The questions designed to

⁸⁴ Once the principle structure of a matrix or a calendar is understood, it is indeed much easier to facilitate, offering far more structure for a facilitator to hold on to, and more direct opportunities for comparisons than maps.

stimulate discussion were interpreted by all facilitators as a means of probing for the “right answer”. Where more lively debate took place, it was unconnected to the graphics.

Most Bangladeshi facilitators keep a large number of graphics, most of them clearly elaborated with much effort. According to the facilitators we interviewed, the main purpose of the graphics is to effectively convey a given message, be it in favour of clean houses or against dowry payments. Facilitators praised the graphics for “helping to make people understand better” and, in line with this intention, only allowed participants to assist in developing graphics according to directions. Participants equally saw value in the graphics and distinguished them from previous efforts to direct similar developmental messages at them by the fact that graphics depict their own personal situation. They are quick to point out that it is this direct link to their own environment which spurs them into taking action. Comments such as the following are typical: “Before, we knew of latrines but we didn’t take it seriously. Now I have seen that me also I must have one.”

Everybody give me two points

Susan’s main “adaptation” of the guidelines elaborated during her facilitator training consists of dispensing with the construction of PRA graphics on the ground. Instead, she swiftly draws up the framework of a tool on a flip chart (i.e. the grid needed to make a calendar or matrix) and then fills it in by probing individual participants on what she should put where. “Incorrect” answers are either “corrected” by her directly, or are thrown back to the audience for reconsideration. Done in this fashion a graphic can be completed in less than fifteen minutes and Susan derives considerable satisfaction from being efficient with time and will often remind participants to speed up and “keep time”, seemingly convinced that this adds to the urgency of the message conveyed.

Susan is not untypical when she refers to virtually all talk occurring in the circle as “discussion”, not least because she has learned during her own training that “discussion” is what is meant to happen during sessions. The guidelines that Susan has received from ActionAid offer questions which facilitators can use to structure debate around the graphics constructed. Susan sticks to these questions religiously. She writes one on a flip chart and starts collecting “points” (using the English word). “Come on, you, participate. Everyone give me at least two points, Nalongo you start.” In this fashion, long lists are created with speed and Susan frames them with discourses she delivers. Such discourses are invigorated by frequently prompting participants to supply the continuation of what she was going to say (“...and then we are going to plant potatoes. Then we are going to plant the what? - chorus: the potatoes”) or by knitting in short yes/no questions, sometimes rhetorical in nature, sometimes not. Often the response will come in unison. At other times participants break out in laughter as answers differ. Susan will then either repeat the question or will elaborate through further questioning or soliciting of comments before regaining her rhythm.

Susan has a way of showing quite clearly which solutions she prefers. She does this through asking suggestive questions, by listening to answers selectively, by asking carefully chosen participants to comment on comments made by other participants and, most effectively, by stopping the debate when she sees fit and retaining from it what she deems appropriate. Throughout debates Susan always retains her position as master of ceremonies, she gives and takes the floor, interrupts, uses strong body language to show approval or disapproval, speaks loudest, stands up while all others sit on the ground, occasionally mocks participants and illustrates points by gesticulating wildly.

Both Susan and the participants profess to having come a long way since the first lesson, stating that they are now (i.e. about eight months into the course) free to express themselves and no longer fear to talk in public.

In both Uganda and Bangladesh, we observed a tendency for facilitators to be far more controlling and far less “participatory” than PRA facilitators are usually assumed to be. And still, participants and facilitators were persistent and convincing in characterising the discussions as enjoyable and useful to themselves and others. It is important to recognise precisely what it is that was valued here. Our evidence suggests that participants largely reiterated the same developmental messages and common-places they have been exposed to for several decades. Occasions where developmental paradigms were challenged were rare.⁸⁵ The crucial distinction setting the *Reflect* programmes apart from preceding efforts is that *Reflect* participants articulate the messages themselves rather than hearing or seeing them elsewhere. Discussions in *Reflect* circles were often long drawn out exercises in guessing what the “correct” conclusion to a lesson should be. Even though the action points were no less prescriptive than developmental messages conveyed in radio advertisements, on posters or in school textbooks, the circle participants felt that they themselves were now the legitimate conveyors - rather than just passive recipients - of such messages and thus become part of something “official” and “important”.

5.3.2 Measuring up

Yet, before anyone becomes too enthusiastic about praising *Reflect* for enabling participants to “take control of their problems” or “create their own texts”, it is important to bear in mind that tools such as the “neat and clean map” or the “family planning map” do more than simply encourage participants to reproduce orthodox messages from NGOs and the state as to what poor people must do to better their lives. “Participation” in preparing and discussing the maps introduces an element of competition, increasing the pressure that individuals feel to show that they “measure up” against their neighbours in complying with dominant

⁸⁵ An example would be an old man who, in face of the laughter of his fellow participants, insisted on the place of witchcraft in society, resisting efforts by the circle to have his own practices relabelled (and thus sanitised and weakened) as “traditional medicine”.

norms. Our previous discussions of circle debates on family planning and health care options have conclusively shown that “seeing” what one needs is not primarily a matter of analysing one’s own situation but involves having one’s “shortcomings” publicly exposed. While subtle coercion of this kind can be extremely effective in producing what development workers like to call “attitudinal change”, it is hardly a recipe for the kind of free, open and egalitarian debate portrayed in training materials for *Reflect* and PRA.

Indeed, it is obvious that “closed” rather than “open” debate is necessary to ensure that participants do eventually come up with the “right” conclusions. Susan’s example not only shows how this can be accomplished but also reveals further features making this procedure attractive to participants. To start with, learning is presented as linear and progressive in a way that is visible and comprehensible to everyone involved; it becomes a finite task. The snippets supplied by participants not only allow Susan to check for everyone’s attention, they also affirm what has been said and allow the group to move further along with her.

A further important advantage of debates progressively moving towards “finding” the one and only possible conclusion is that this tendency provides at least a momentary sense of unity. Particularly in rural areas, conflicts between individuals often quickly permeate village relations in general, and tensions of one sort or another are the norm. It then constitutes a welcome change for participants to publicly unite behind a given point of view. Perhaps due to the prevalence of tensions, unity was a much revered virtue in all our field sites. The procedures observed seemed designed to manage controversy. The facilitator usually sets the scene and decides at which points other people’s contributions come in. More often than not the contributions are defined as factual in nature, either requiring participants to affirm something mentioned before, to make true/false assertions, or to supply a brief piece of information. When controversy does arise, intended or unintended, it is up to the main speaker to decide how much space to grant individuals’ contributions. This is made easier by the fact that any participant intervention longer than a short sentence is an interruption to the rhythm of the procedure and the facilitator can therefore quite easily dismiss it as a deterrent to linear progression if she so chooses.

Many of the resolutions or action points participants solemnly adopted would be difficult for anyone to disagree with: “we must stop fighting with each other” or “we must work hard” or “we must always wash our hands after going to the toilet”. Many classes in Bangladesh sought to maximise the official and prestigious character of such resolutions by writing them down and having them signed by all participants. In Uganda, facilitators sought to heighten the sense of sophisticated debate by teaching and using English terms that, on first sight, seem of little use in the village context. Thus, participants were eager to learn expressions such as “action points”, “head office”, “baseline study” or “Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques”.

Many participants associate uneducated people with being “unstructured” and “having no plan”, while educated people “know how to think and plan”, “they have an intention, they don’t just go saying this or that”. Highly structured talk is therefore an important status marker allowing participants to disassociate themselves from their “uneducated past”. Making “points”, drawing up long lists, keeping a close watch on time and lavish use of flip charts and markers are then all attractive means to make a visible transition to being an educated, modern person, one who can tell others what is right or wrong. To us, this suggests that *Reflect* practitioners are on to something important when they emphasise the value of involving facilitators and participants in producing their own “texts”, rather than simply making them passive recipients of literacy primers or other materials.⁸⁶ The entire business of inventing the rituals and the spatial and temporal ordering of the circles, the symbolic role of the flip charts, tape and markers, and the discussion, agreement and recording of the action points, can all be seen as a part of this process of creating *self-validated* texts.

What needs to be acknowledged, of course, is that it is quite possible for a creative and highly meaningful process to result in texts that emulate and even reinforce, rather than challenge or disrupt, established norms and received wisdom. The act of producing one’s own authoritative and official-sounding text is audacious enough. As the history of charismatic Christian sects and spirit possession cults in colonial Africa shows, the more such texts can convincingly *mimic* established orthodoxy, the more ultimately threatening they may be to those who have previously held the monopoly on the production of valid truths and legitimate authority. What is potentially “radical”, or at least mildly disruptive, about this in the Uganda and Bangladesh contexts we studied was not the fact that circles had discussions, or that they wrote down their conclusions in the form of action points – we have already seen that these processes tend to be highly constrained by gender and class hierarchies, and rarely resemble the “open”, egalitarian exchanges idealised in the PRA and *Reflect* literature. Nor was it the actual content of the lists, which as we have seen was usually conventional in the extreme. What was, however, stealthily subversive was the fact that circles dared to “steal” the symbols, hierarchies and rituals of established authority – including the use of writing, but also the use of flipcharts and marker pens, the imitation of classroom procedures, the appropriation of church-like rituals and English phraseology in Uganda and that of “posh” discourse in Bangladesh – in order to validate their own “talk”.

The dynamics of “action points”

Action points are an innovation of the *Reflect* approach that has clearly captured the imagination of participants, facilitators and development workers. While adult education projects the world over have ambitions to initiate change, few mark this out as a distinct programme element, with its own, modern-sounding label. The Ugandan facilitators who were asked about the reasons behind not translating the word into Luganda thought this

⁸⁶ Which is not to say that all engagement with texts and materials generated outside the circle is necessarily passive, let alone negative.

question strange. To them it was obvious that the concept was alien and was made more desirable by being so. Some also insisted that there could be no adequate translation of the term. Even though facilitators' manuals did in some cases include translations into local languages it is true that these never captured the air of targeted, decisive activity which the term "action points" conjures up (they were more of the "things that can be done"- variety).⁸⁷ On one occasion, a small group of facilitators was observed in a bar, discussing action points. One male facilitator considered action points the most vital aspect of teaching and also the easiest (for the learners). Dan proudly boasted how he had obliged all his learners on day one to have a latrine built within three months. The others had to admit that they had not imposed time limits but had to agree that it was fundamental to get all participants to do all action points. Strict rigidity is considered a virtue befitting educational activities, and this also turned out to be Dan's downfall in this debate. Another facilitator remembered, "We have been told to teach them first, then do writing and only then action points." Dan was irritated to be corrected and sought his way out by claiming that it was "action plans" which could only be introduced after discussion and literacy, while "action points" were at the discretion of the facilitator. The debate about differences between "action points" and "action plans" was long and heated.

In Bangladesh, facilitators did not mystify action points in the same way, but also had reason to consider them as the quintessence of the *Reflect* process. During their training, facilitators were told what the action points could be, and while trainers emphasised that these were only suggestions, there could be little doubt among facilitators that their performance was being measured according to how many action points they got their participants to implement. Among the various monitoring forms the *Reflect* Co-ordination Unit devised was a table where participants and facilitators were to detail the action points that had been proposed during the period, the ones that had been selected for implementation, how they were to be implemented, who was to implement them, if they were indeed implemented and if so, how and by whom (see Saldanha, et al. 1999).

A national evaluation then went to the effort to count that each circle had, on average, implemented no less than 77 action points, with one circle reporting to have carried out a staggering 378 action points (Hussain, et al. 2000). Thus, the Bangladeshi projects spent a considerable amount of time and effort planning, standardising, and documenting action points, placing heavy emphasis on timeliness and holding individuals responsible.

⁸⁷ "Making points" is a concept that unschooled Ugandans sometimes associate with the efficient seeming manner of educated people. It was observed that during village meetings people refer to their own ideas as "points" (using the English word) and on one occasion, when a group of men were composing a letter to a highly placed official and enlisted the help of a *Reflect* facilitator, she scolded them for their lengthy formulations: "Do you think important people have time to read all of that? They want 'points' - dat, dat, dat, dat (cutting the air with her straightened hand)." The men were visibly taken by the idea and started copying their text onto a new page, making paragraphs preceded by dots.

5.4 Talking freely

Women participants both in Uganda and Bangladesh spoke of having learned to “talk freely”. The meaning of this varies from speaker to speaker. Some women were referring to the space and time they had in the circle to meet with others and have conversations. The extent to which women had the opportunity of exchanging with others outside of the circles varied widely, and this was a noteworthy benefit to those on the periphery of the community (either geographically or socially), while not being of much significance to those with many social contacts. To the former group, “talking freely” meant increased confidence in speaking to the other women in the circle, who were their social betters and could either deepen their exclusion or help them to join the mainstream. To the latter group, “talking freely” meant increased confidence in speaking to outsiders, people of high status (officials, religious authorities, etc.), or in front of audiences. In NGO literature, empowered women are often portrayed as independently taking action against injustices. However, few of our respondents reported the new-found ability to talk freely as the result of a newly-discovered “I know how to stand up for myself” attitude. Instead, women speak of their own conversion into respectable, decent persons who have only now managed to become worthy of other people’s respect. Women report changes as a result of self-betterment and self-regimentation rather than as a result of a more critical outlook on their environment (which is what the Freirean ideal of “conscientisation” would imply).

Many Bangladeshi women, for example, attributed their confidence gains to the greater exposure to “formal” Bangla, they experienced in the circles. Having been educated in secondary school, *Reflect* facilitators have had some exposure to “proper” Bangla and told us that they do occasionally use it in the classes. For the most part they reported making no special effort to impart these skills to participants, but given that written Bangla is more standardised than spoken Bangla, literacy teaching confronts the learner with a different version of their own language. Many of the participants with whom we discussed this considered the learning of “posh” Bangla highly desirable, and an integral part of becoming literate: “We want to speak like you do, like city people. We don’t want to use village speak, it is not nice”. On another occasion, a woman learner explained how she had learned in the class to address men who are unfamiliar to her as “sir”, whereas beforehand she would have addressed them as “brother”.⁸⁸ She and other participants regarded this learning of “posh” language as an integral part of becoming literate. It is not as if she did not know of the existence of the word “sir” before, nor was she unaware of the contexts in which it could be used. What the sessions in the circle awakened in her is the idea that she herself could also be entitled to talk posh.

⁸⁸ Such statements were often repeated by women in Netrokona. In Mauluvibazar classes sometimes mixed languages with many Hindu and Urdu speaking women using them to brush up on their Bangla.

We have mentioned that most of the Bangladeshi facilitators came from a more privileged class or caste background than their participants. Nuances in language utilisation are a key signifier of such differences in many situations. While most facilitators (and NGO staff) would have regarded any formal attempts at teaching “standard” Bangla preposterous, many facilitators did hold judgements about the “foul” and “dirty” language participants were using prior to the circles. To them, the “need” for reform seemed self-evident. Several facilitators told us of how they would call on a participant to stand in front of them and “pretend” that the facilitator is an important stranger whom she needed to greet in a suitable manner. Such role plays on social etiquette were sometimes supplemented by facilitators speaking v-e-r-y c-l-e-a-r-l-y, and making participants speak after them.⁸⁹

The facilitators’ self-assured urge to teach participants to speak “properly” models language difference as something that comes about through variations in technical mastery, not class difference. Understandably, facilitators prefer to be recognised by their participants as being skillful rather than privileged, and this is not without attraction for participants either, since it suggests that they themselves can and should be upwardly mobile.

There are clear differences in the way that Bangladeshi and Ugandan women report their progress in “talking properly” through *Reflect* activities. In Bangladesh, women mainly expressed their satisfaction with having “learnt” to use words and expressions they consider to be more sophisticated and polite than those which they themselves ordinarily employ. In Uganda, women equally emphasised their new found ability to speak “with good manners”, but this referred less to the refining of their accents or choice of words than to their improved abilities in speaking English.

English

English, and in particular spoken English, was much more passionately desired than literacy by virtually all participants in urban Banda, and by quite a few participants in Madudu. In Banda, this eventually led to the programme dedicating a significant amount of time to the teaching of English. While the programme makers had access to a multitude of methodological hints on how to teach literacy to poor women, there was a relative dearth on how to teach English to this target group. Donors, academics and policy makers do not share poor women’s ideas of English being a tool for empowerment. Instead, English is rejected as a vice of cultural imperialism (a criticism that literacy is often curiously spared from) and as something that is only useful and necessary for those working in bureaucracies.

In urban Banda, many of the women participants had relatively little use for reading and writing, while English was often heard in this multi-ethnic community. In some cases, the

⁸⁹ In at least one circle in Uganda the facilitator did instruct women on proper ways for a woman to kneel, how to sit modestly and how to be a visitor without being an “intruder”.

advantage of knowing English is obvious. Market traders seeking to catch the attention of passing consumers can often not be sure of the language they will understand. Several of the women participants in our sample had been frustrated by losing customers through communication problems. But ease of understanding was only one side of the story. Addressing the passer-by in English can also be a flattering pleasantry, recognising the potential customer as the sort of person who would know English. In the same vein, calling out in English reflects well on the trader behind the stand, marking him or her out as a “person of reason”, someone that an educated person like yourself can do business with. The market women also felt that English speaking customers were those they could least afford to do without, reputed as they were to be less arduous hagglers and more carefree spenders.

For any inhabitant of Banda seeking to communicate with as little misunderstanding as possible, Luganda would probably be the language of choice. But for anyone who also wants a bit of status and recognition, English is an essential. By virtue of its status as the language of power, English exudes prestige and is an effective tool for discrimination. Thirty seven per cent of those who had learned some English in the circles reported using it at home, making this the second highest venue for use of English after the *Reflect* circles themselves. This high figure came as something of a surprise to the researchers, since most households shared a common language other than English. Furthermore, in our previous contact with participants we had often discussed their desire to learn English with them, and the purposes they mentioned then were mostly related to career development or ease of access to services.

On the basis of our survey findings we went back and asked women more specifically about the use of English at home. Women do not only want to be in position to greet visitors in English, they often need it to understand what their husbands or children are saying when they suddenly switch to English. One woman, Sylvia, reported how her husband often switched to English when he started to abuse her. Informing him that there was little point in abusing her in a language she didn't understand made no impression on him, and now Sylvia wanted to know English so as to understand what he says and then square even with him by hitting back in English.

We contend that even though only a minority of Ugandans speak English, it is part of everyone's life. Sylvia's case is no exception. Even in Madudu, the majority of non-English speakers were extremely wary of the small, powerful elite with a language of their own. “Who knows, they could be talking about cutting you up,” was a comment often heard from non-English speakers in both Banda and Madudu.

Given who speaks English and the spheres only accessible to English speakers, it is not surprising that many non-English speakers take it to be a naturally superior language. Challenging and overcoming the superior role that English has taken on by anything but

natural means would be a long-drawn-out and arduous project, which few people in Uganda seem intent on. In the meantime, learning English is probably among the more promising ways for an individual like Sylvia to challenge some of the oppression she is subject to in her own home.

5.4.1 Using new skills

In practice, the researchers found it difficult to identify situations where women had actually tried to put their new “skills” to use. Most women seemed to genuinely value “learning” them, but could not think of many occasions – other than their interaction with ActionAid staff and the present researchers – when they had made use of them, let alone reaped a benefit from them. Asked for specific examples of how this newly gained confidence manifested itself, the women in question would usually cite examples from the literacy classes, such as visits they had received there by foreign visitors or officials on exposure trips. Hosting such important visitors is taken as a great honour and participants are understandably proud when they manage to host an important visitor with dignity and style. Such incidental effects of development projects are rarely recognised as being of significance but our results suggest that they are. We shall return to this point later in this section.

5.4.2 Sweet talking: Reflect circles and gendered norms of speech

How far, then, can the interactions in the circle be characterised as “counter-cultural”? How much do they foster change, and where do they simply reproduce existing power relations?

As noted earlier, the way participants talk in the circles differs markedly from the way they would talk when meeting each other on the road, in the bar, or the market. *Reflect*, and many other participatory development approaches, purports to put poor people in the driving seat and regards “open debate” as an essential pre-condition for this aim. By contrast, women (and men) who come to the circles often reproduce the kind of formalistic discourse to which they have otherwise only had access as passive recipients. They rightly consider ActionAid and other NGOs as powerful mediators in this discourse, and while discussions in the circle sometimes reveal women’s frustration with their own powerlessness, they rarely signal any ambition to break with this powerful discourse. Instead, women display much ambition to become more central and active agents within it. “Closed” debate, of the type described above, is much more in line with such ambitions. It is not only used in the classes but is also the preferred style of visiting dignitaries such as political leaders, clergy or development workers. It is attractive precisely because it emphasises the difference between a speaker and her audience, marks her out as an educated person and invites listeners to align behind her. “Open” debate of the kind envisaged in *Reflect* is a much more delicate proposition, one that has relatively few reference points in our field sites.

“Talking in a good manner and with a soft voice” is what Beatrice claims to have learned in the classes. (Similar feelings were expressed by one of the participants in the focus group in Bangladesh.) Her mock-prudish expression while saying it made it abundantly clear that Beatrice is at no risk of fully retreating into the subordinate position she seems to embrace in her words. “Sweet talking” is how she describes the strategy she applies when wanting to convince her husband to buy her a dress or to send her adopted, handicapped son to school. It involves not only “modest” manners of speaking but also kneeling while greeting her husband or when serving him food, cooking his favourite food, preparing his bathing water and clothes, and – as Beatrice adds with a meaningful glance – “playing nicely” (i.e. having sex). Beatrice does not say that she learned “sweet talking” in the classes, but she and other women do claim to have rediscovered docility as a strategically powerful tool to get what they want.

At first sight, Beatrice’s reported behaviour signals the deepening rather than the transforming of gendered roles. This is rarely regarded as being an effective path to emancipation. A brief look at the opinions men harbour about their wives’ participation in *Reflect* suggests that caution must be applied. Much of what the women say is told with a different slant by their husbands. During our first survey, the male partners of participants were asked whether they had noticed any changes in their partners since they had become participants. More than a third of all men who saw changes (75 per cent of all men did) either claimed that their wives now “have more respect” for them or “know how to behave”. After hygiene improvement, this is the most important area of change men observe and one which they describe quite differently from their wives.⁹⁰ One woman, according to her husband, has stopped bullying the children. Another man expresses relief about his wife losing her temper less often. Yet another has noticed his wife’s cursing diminished. Several men report that their wives are now educating the children with more diligence.⁹¹ The efforts women are making to accommodate visitors, cook well, and so on are also being noticed. Only one man complains that his wife has now become “big-headed” while others claim satisfaction at there now being “less need to command her, because she understands easily”. Another man is proud that “she is now modern” while a third man has seen the most dramatic of changes in his wife: “She has become human.”

All of these statements need to be taken with a pinch of salt. Both male and female respondents in our survey may well have been under the impression that ActionAid’s aim in offering education to women was to imbue them with a Western sense of domesticity (see also Staudt and Col 1991), and may have taken that as the yardstick against which to measure their own commentary. There are nevertheless some interesting observations to be made about intra-household communications. Both men and women attach value to harmonious

⁹⁰ Only one woman claims to have more respect for her husband as a result of the classes.

⁹¹ More men in Madudu than in Banda made this observation. Qualitative interviews reveal that the answers are likely to refer to women being more strict with their children, which, in this cultural context, may well include physical punishments. It is unlikely that the men were referring to women teaching their children how to read and write, as was the case with many Bangladeshi women.

relations between husband and wife and present *Reflect* participation as conducive to this aim. Both observe a greater deference in women towards men but differ markedly in how they interpret this. Women present efforts to keep their husbands happy as a strategy calculated to mould him into shape. At the same time, husbands seem not to notice any cunning schemes through which they are manipulated, instead rejoicing at the ease with which they control their wives, which some feel the classes have helped bring about.

5.4.3 Wifely respect?

In reality, wives in Madudu and Banda are anything but easy to control. Female subservience that is truly respectful is something that women often deliberately withhold from men, precisely so as to express their discontent with the way men are not fulfilling their side of the bargain. The code of respectability women are subjected to also supplies them with a range of possibilities to mock and humiliate husbands, privately or in front of visitors. How his wife treats a man is not just a matter of personal comfort to him but also crucial to his public reputation. In a situation where nagging disrespect from both sides is the norm rather than the exception, it can indeed be a gainful venture for a woman to startle her partner with some “undeserved” respect. Men’s somewhat patronising talk about being able to relinquish control over their wives now that education has made them more responsible can equally be seen as an attempt to justify a status quo in which they are yielding substantially less power than they feel entitled to. A wife who behaves “unwomanly” because I, her husband, have generously allowed her to become educated and modern is then easier to accept than, say, a wife whom everybody knows only acts sourly towards me because I don’t give her money.

The situation where women present *Reflect* as a “feminising” influence on themselves, while men portray it as a useful, if marginal, prop to their masculinity can only be understood in the context of rapidly transforming gender relations in both Uganda and Bangladesh (see Chapter 2). In other words, the confident affirmation that one now knows how to act as a “proper” woman or that one is a “real” man is so attractive because the lived reality of most men and women has long outpaced societal ideals and norms about gender still held dear in Bangladeshi and Ugandan society.

5.5 Talking back: women’s voice, collective action and the virtues of group formation

Despite the evidence recounted above, we did witness several occasions where participation in *Reflect* circles clearly was a factor giving women greater confidence to assert themselves on issues important to them. Perhaps the most impressive examples came from the tea estates of Mauluvibazar in Sylhet where, after discussions in the circles, women tea pickers confronted the foreman about sick pay entitlements routinely withheld from them. According to the stipulations, workers are to receive half pay for days on which they are too ill to work. Previously, those who knew about this regulation did not dare contradict the foreman (to

whom this scheme offered extra income). After discussing the regulation in the circle and receiving encouragement from the facilitator, several women felt confident that they could stand up to the foreman. In the face of a group of protesting women, instead of a single claimant, the foreman soon agreed to honour the demand. The women thus managed to set an important precedent.

Similar factors were at play when another group of women on the same tea estate challenged their supervisors on the weighing of the day's harvest. The women had long noticed that the amounts recorded regularly undercut the kilos they had actually plucked. A short while into the circle activities they started to record their daily amounts on the walls of their houses or in their exercise books. On its own, however, the ability to fix matters in writing proved insufficient for the initiation of change. The first barrier that needed to be overcome was that the writing on the scales and in the official record books was in Latin script, while the women were just learning how to read and write using the Bengali script. At the participants' request, the facilitator taught them to recognise figures up to 50 in Latin script. However, even then women still found that their objections were simply brushed off. A woman who could and did now accurately expose inaccurate recordings was no better off than the one who complained on the basis of a more or less vague suspicion. In both cases, the foreman brusquely ordered the women to move on. Continuous agitation through the facilitator played a major role in eventually convincing the women that they needed to present a united front to the foreman.⁹² A show of unity was particularly effective in getting accurate recordings and full pay because foremen were not used to women taking such action. The importance of organising women in groups has always been an explicit aim of *Reflect* and in this context women indeed had little other opportunity to organise since theirs is a relatively isolated work environment.⁹³

Poor women volunteers

In 1997, a sudden drop in attendance in the *Reflect* circles in Banda's Acholi quarters (zone B1) first alerted the researchers to the vulnerability of women from this area who were in desperate search of an income. Learners stopped attending classes because they were walking five miles to Port Bell every other afternoon to pick water hyacinth which, at the time, was an endemic problem in Lake Victoria. Standing at the shores of the lake, overseeing the vast amounts of foliage floating on the water, it was immediately obvious that this group of thirty or so workers stood no chance of making any serious contribution

⁹² Most facilitators knew the foremen who were to be challenged personally, some were related to them. It seems that in cases where the relationship was too close (i.e. facilitator was daughter or sister of foreman) participants never even asked for assistance and facilitators didn't offer any. Facilitators who offered assistance were more often found to be related to the group supervisors (also exclusively male) working below the foremen without any involvement in weighing and recording. None of them reported any negative consequences as a result of their initiative, but without probing from the researcher, several facilitators commented how they themselves had become politicised through incidents like this.

⁹³ While many participants insisted that there had been no protests at all before the circle started, others report that it did occur but more haphazardly. There was also no consensus about how lasting the impact of the protests was, and at least in some cases foremen found new ways of cheating the women.

to resolving the problem. But according to the women, this was their “job” even though they had never been paid in the three months since they first started work. In fact, rather than getting paid they themselves had paid varying amounts of money to the initiators of the project which they understood to be bribes for getting jobs. They had been told that they would have to work without pay for two months and that they would then start receiving a salary. When two months had passed the date was pushed back by a further two months, until early October and the unpaid work continued. Understandably, the women were very anxious about their prospects of ever getting paid.

The story from the supervisor of KUWAC, “Keep Uganda Waters clean and productive”, initially had a different ring. He emphasised that all those present were “volunteers” committed to saving “their” lake. And yet, virtually all of those present were Northern Ugandans recently migrated to the area and with no other stake in the lake than that of getting a job. On the way to his administration building, another supervisor joined us and thanked the researcher for the visit. He pointed out how morale had been low among workers, and rejoiced at the boost to morale which the presence of a white visitor would undoubtedly effect.

On entering the offices of the NGO, we pass a “no vacancies” sign hanging in the window, and once inside the supervisor is quick to point out his certificate of registration. He reports having enrolled 600 volunteers for this work each of whom paid 1000 Uganda Shillings (\$0.70) for membership and 2000 Uganda Shillings (\$1.40) for swimming lessons. The main backer of the project, according to him, is Ken Lukyamuzi, MP for Lubaga District and a well known environmentalist and opposition politician, whose support for the project until then had mainly been in the form of providing vehicles to transport people to a demonstration aimed at preventing the hyacinth from being sprayed with chemicals. A funding application that the NGO had made to the EU was said to be still pending but it became obvious that, for the time being, there was no money in sight.

As this version of the story was relayed back to the women returning to their homes in the Acholi quarters, the atmosphere was one of anger and distress. They kept insisting that they were neither volunteers nor members but workers, and that they had paid to get jobs. One woman had paid the equivalent of \$30 against the promise of an “office job”. The next day, the researcher visited the *Reflect* circle in B1 together with the BCDP adult education co-ordinator.

In the discussions, the women agreed that they had never been properly taught how to swim and that only a very few had received certificates, which was a serious grievance. But the more serious issue was, of course, the wages. One woman insisted that she was not directly promised anything but others were adamant they had been promised a daily wage but could not agree whether that was to be 3,000 or 10,000 Shillings. What were

they to do next, they asked the researcher, who, overwhelmed by their desperate will to keep hoping, first passed the question on to the other women in the circle who were not involved with the hyacinth scheme. They cautiously advised the workers to stick with the project for a fourth month and see whether the promise that had been made by the supervisor would be honoured. Only if money was then not available should the workers give up. The BCDP adult education co-ordinator reminded the women of the value of learning, telling them that they would not be in this precarious situation if they had asked the supervisor for written contracts right from the start. Nods of approval duly followed. Then the researcher added his two pence worth by cautioning that jobs which one has to pay for should be treated with the greatest suspicion. Not terribly helpful advice, as it later turned out, since the few jobs that are actually available to poor people frequently require payment to secure them. He also suggested that the women might want to challenge the supervisor on his accounts, perhaps with the help of the LCs. The polite nods made it perfectly obvious that this was a lofty suggestion indeed.

Not long after this, the researcher learned that the supervisor in question had been seriously beaten up by a large group of workers and was only rescued by police who apparently took him to prison. After that, none of the women returned to Port Bell for work.

In Madudu, Uganda, a number of women also reported having become more effective public actors. One woman, Nakiyanja, related how she used to go to meetings without ever speaking. Now, at the last parents meeting in the local primary school she protested openly against a request from the headmaster for parents to contribute to a building fund. She evidently voiced a popular sentiment and enjoyed the recognition she received for her contribution from other parents. Another participant, Rita, had been asked by the priest of Kilemba to lead an open prayer session at the end of mass one Sunday. The circle of people who had previously been asked to talk in front of the five hundred strong congregation was pretty exclusive, consisting either of men or older women, and Rita rightly considered her appointment (though temporary) a considerable privilege.

Rita, Nakiyanja and many other respondents attribute such encouraging experiences to having become literate. Women credited literacy with such transformatory powers even in situations where being able to read or write evidently made little difference one way or the other. More in-depth probing revealed that they were referring to an image of what it means to be literate and educated, rather than the practical use of reading and writing in a given situation. When we asked women how being literate had helped them change, they attributed success to increased cleverness and wit, as well as to the exercise of more self-restraint, “not just talking anyhow”.

In all *Reflect* projects that we observed, there was evidence of women using the circles to challenge existing gender norms. Some participants occasionally speak out where and when women are traditionally neither expected nor encouraged to speak out, and to an extent their newfound status or confidence helps them to “get away with it” and not be ridiculed as mad, drunk or stupid. This widens perceptions of what is acceptable behaviour for women. Such “speech acts” are not the sole domain of *Reflect* participants, but are obviously important experiences not only for the women concerned but also for those women and men who witness and hear of their actions.

Yet none of this evidence seems to justify the next step that we so badly wanted to make, from greater confidence about speaking out in public, to women inserting themselves as fully-fledged interlocutors in the village meeting, the local council, the court of elders. It justifies even less the step to women mounting a collective challenge to patriarchal norms and values. Women participants – like the tea-pickers in Mauluvibazar or the water hyacinth clearers in Kampala – do find occasional reason to act collectively, and are quick to use any allies and any legitimating symbols they can to strengthen their hand. A quick glance at the history of colonial Bengal and colonial East Africa will show that women in both societies have a rich tradition of informal mobilisation to draw upon, and have been mounting effective collective actions (from riots to parliamentary delegations) for decades without the benefit of flip charts or action points.

However, despite their readiness to repeat common NGO messages about the benefits of “unity” and co-operation, women’s day-to-day motivations for attending the literacy circles are far more likely to centre on achieving greater acceptance in society by individually advancing towards conformity with elite norms. In urban Banda, some circles, such as the one of market women, brought women with seemingly similar interests together.

The market women were, at the time, facing harsh conditions prior to a refurbishment of the market area by the contractor managing the market. Though by no means shy, the businesswomen never made any attempts to collectively oppose the measures unfavourable to their businesses. Instead they competed with each other for the positive attention of the man managing the market, mainly by being deferential to him.⁹⁴ For better or worse, many people in Uganda are sceptical of attempts to undertaking collective action, often rightly suspecting those initiating it of harbouring selfish motives.

Why, then, are development workers so attracted to the tea-pickers’ story, to the image of women participants raising *their* “voice” to challenge the norms which govern society? As much as women who become empowered are characterised as achieving self-realisation, one rarely hears of any women who become reclusive and isolated as a result of being

⁹⁴ It should be noted that the same market women did, outside the *Reflect* circle, co-operate quite closely when it came to dealing with personal problems (deaths, illness, marital and housing problems, etc.).

“empowered”. On the contrary, empowerment is seen as the opening through which women slip so as to become social and political beings.

We have argued that some kind of “conscientisation” process is crucial in order for NGOs to make sense of their vision of development. Literacy programmes turn out to be especially well suited to the job. Modern literacy practitioners share with their colonial forerunners a deep-seated assumption that in the silent interior reflection of reading and writing, the individual emerges from the morass of tradition, discovers his own conscience and learns to impose his rational will on the world. And this is reinforced in the setting of the school where individual achievement is constantly assessed. Moreover, our notions of literacy are closely linked to modernist ideas of “participation” as an expression of individual agency. Protestant reformers valued literacy because the experience of reading and interpreting the Bible for oneself, without the intermediation of priests and rituals, put an individual in direct touch with God and made him master of his own conscience, an active participant in his own salvation. Centuries later, Marxist revolutionaries valued literacy because the ability to read newspapers and political tracts made individuals able to participate in political struggle and debate.

5.5.1 Collectivism

As much as literacy learning is regarded as an individual’s trajectory from tradition to modernity, the agencies promoting it are uncomfortable with the prospect of unloosing unbridled self-interest into what they take to be the fragile equilibrium of the “community”. The learning process is therefore characterised as a communal activity, one which encourages “collective action” and “group formation”. As the earlier statement from the Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa (see Chapter 3) vividly illustrates, strategies of indirect rule generated fervent anxiety about the need to preserve social cohesion and communal identity, while continuing to weaken or co-opt forms of traditional authority that might potentially pose a threat to stability or a block to the labour demands of the colonial economy. Africans were often portrayed as incapable of functioning outside of groups. Some colonial authorities held the view that the capacity to be fully-fledged individuals was beyond Africans, possibly even dangerous to them. Collective identities were seen as an inherent characteristic of “primitive cultures” and the supposed absence of individual self-interest was often romanticised by European observers (Vaughan 1991). The introduction of institutions such as boy scouts, girl guides, or mothers’ unions were deliberate attempts to wean youth and women away from stubborn ethnic, tribal and kinship ties, while substituting new sources of social and moral cohesion in forms more amenable to colonial control. Such institutions, based on the principle of voluntary association rather than ascribed status, were deemed just right to bring Africans around to seeing the “bad” in some of their ways (for example female circumcision) while maintaining what was regarded as “naturally African”, namely group mentality (see also Burke 1996).

Among today's NGOs, the emphasis is less likely to be on smoothing the dangerous transition from traditional to Western ways. Instead the focus is on transforming the intractable landscape of third world politics into the Tocquevillian vision so beloved of democratisation theorists, "A society in which ordinary citizens are engaged in all sorts of cross-cutting civic participation, with thousands of earnest, diligent civic groups working assertively but constructively to help ensure that a reluctant government gradually becomes responsive to citizens' needs and sheds its habits of indolence and corruption" (Carothers 1999, 222/23) – and, we might add, that a reluctant patriarchy gradually cedes women their rights and sheds its habits of indolence and violence.

Women's emancipation, after all, is a controversial venture in all societies and is often seen as something that destroys moral values and family structures and leaves households defenceless against the ravages of the wage labour economy. By situating the change process in groups, it becomes "indigenised", allowing development agencies to deny playing any role. At the same time, the innate virtues assigned to group formation are such that worries about a collapse in moral values can be soothed. Practitioners often underline the importance of women (or other marginalised people) pooling their knowledge, discussing and analysing their ideas, and preserving what is still considered valuable while dismissing what has become a burden. Framed in this way, groups extend the rationalising effect attributed to literacy (or *Reflect*) from the individual to the collective. Emphasis on the dynamics sparked by group activity can then also absolve development agencies of responsibility for some of the outcomes generated in development activities funded by them.

Five to a group

The Kilemba *Reflect* circle formed several small groups of three and four, each of which was allocated a small area of the plot of land which the circle had been given by a local landlord. Over several months, the circle members had dealt with issues of unity and co-operation in their lesson and had underlined that their endeavour was, in the words of one participant, "to make modern co-operation". To her, this meant that they would actually work together, not just help each other out. Even though most of the women participants had access to sufficient land resources, many took part in the initial clearing and planting. They enjoyed working close to each other and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about this communal project. Nobody seemed fazed by the fact that this venture held no promise for increasing the women's income. The women were doing the same activities they would otherwise have done on their own, only now they were spending more time shuttling back and forth between the communal field and their own gardens.

The questions which facilitators took from the guidelines and posed to participants initially seemed open-ended, asking whether working in groups would be advantageous. They soon evolved into questions about how to form groups and what they were useful for. Had facilitators and participants decided that forming groups was not suitable to

them, they would have had to abandon the debate guidelines very quickly. In the event, all circles who started this unit at least attempted to form small groups. Most of these groups purported to be doing the same things that people otherwise did on their own, i.e. animal rearing or farming. In Kilemba, women participants insisted that the activity was about “showing that we are a community” and professed not to care about the extra work it caused.

The picture soon changed. By harvest time ActionAid had not helped the groups as the participants say they had promised to: “They said we should go in groups and work together and then we will be helped, even if the groups failed we would be helped.” The extent to which promises were made remains unclear but soon the small groups also faced a multitude of internal struggles over how to divide up the crops, who had worked most, who had paid for fertilisers, etc. Several participants dropped out at this stage and some swore never to work in groups again. During individual interviews participants rolled their eyes at the researcher’s reminder that they themselves had beforehand presented material gains as a negligible part of their motivation, as if to say, “How can you work without getting anything?”

It should be noted that, in this area of Madudu there was not a history of successful group formation and at the time of the research there were no functioning groups outside of church-related activities, although there were a couple of groups which were formally in existence. Three male elders from Kilemba and surrounding areas spoke to the researcher about their efforts to initiate groups. All three had been professionals in Kampala and elsewhere and had wanted to initiate income generating groups on returning. The three felt that the groups they had initiated were either dormant or had failed. Reasons for this vary according to perspective. The three blamed the “ignorance”, “backwardness” and “mistrust” of their contemporaries for the demise of the ventures, while other people in the village (mostly men) were uniformly convinced that the three had initiated groups only to appropriate money from less worldly-wise folk.

During the next season only two women made use of the land around the *Reflect* circle and they insisted that this was an individual and not a group activity. One year on, news of a World Bank/GoU credit scheme possibly coming to the area resulted in frantic forming of groups of five (“five, they want five in each group”). Among the few members of the *Reflect* circle who were still attending regularly this was cause of a considerable amount of tension. Several of them did not want to be in groups with each other, but couldn’t openly say it. They obviously still wanted to be part of a group so as to get access to credit. When interviewed in private nobody could explain why it was necessary to be in a group so as to get credit, nor why it was paramount that there had to be five members to each group: “What I know is that they want us to be in groups of five. That is what they want and then they will give us our money.”

5.5.2 Groups for good?

Thus, the function assigned to collective organisation in many ways still resembles the function given to it by colonial administrations: it is seen as a means of taming the potential risks of modernisation (or democratisation) into a benevolent and predictable process, and weakening what is seen to be “bad” in traditional social structure (patriarchy, or the caste system, for example) without the risk of casting women adrift in the stormy seas of capitalist self-interest.

Whether wittingly or unwittingly, by designating groups as the venue where women’s empowerment is to take place development agencies are reiterating the colonial concern with preserving the “good” while weeding out the “bad”. The image of groups being something “traditionally African” or “traditionally Bengali” also allays fears that rejection of patriarchal values might leave women morally adrift, prone to become selfish and self-centred.

5.5.3 Women as watchdogs

In this light, it is ironic that in both our Uganda and our Bangladesh sites, community members often viewed *Reflect* as morally suspect hives of flirtation, gossip and adultery, not as stabilising forces reinforcing moral cohesion, social order and consensus. In Uganda, the *Reflect* circles were not particularly targeted at women to start with. The majority began as mixed groups. As is common in many literacy projects, the initial drop out was high. In both Banda and Madudu, men were quicker to leave than women, creating some all women classes and others with “token men”. Attempts to find out why men were dropping out were initially frustrated by men denying that they had actually dropped out. In Madudu particularly, whenever the facilitators met any of the men, they would assert that they were indeed still members of the class and should by no means be struck off the register. Only a year later did the motivations of the men in Madudu become clearer. Several of the women started complaining to the researcher that no material benefits were forthcoming for them. Apart from their own desire to obtain such benefits, this also caused trouble with their partners who complained that the women were “wasting their time for nothing” in the classes. This came as something of a surprise, since the reality of domestic financial arrangements observed up until then suggested that most women and men operated separate and only partially overlapping budgets. Now it appeared as if this was contradicted by the partners of women learners impatiently waiting to get their hands on whatever material benefit the women would get from the programme. But closer inspection revealed different motives for men’s complaints. Men had left the classes when they saw that material benefits were not forthcoming immediately and had encouraged their wives to stay on as “watchdogs” until time came for them to come back and demand their own share.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ When a team commissioned by the World Bank to do an evaluation of the project (Oketch 2000) organised literacy tests and focus group discussions many of the men made sure that they took part.

Even though all the men questioned in the surveys said that they were happy for their wives to go to the classes, during less formal interactions their anxiety was clearly visible. At first, the idea of having a wife standing in at the classes may seem a clever scheme, not only to the man in question but also to his friends. But when the benefits don't materialise he looks a fool. If a woman then still insists on going (which a few did) her partner soon wonders whether she has other reasons, the most likely suspicion being that she sees another man there. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence among Ugandan literacy practitioners about men who don't want their wives to join the classes out of fear they will meet other men. Usually such concerns are not taken seriously. If they make their way into reports, it is only as an example of the blatant male chauvinism which it is useful to mention so as to underline the importance of empowering women in the first place. As much as such incidents do underline the sexism inherent in Ugandan culture, the image of the archaic patriarch stubbornly insisting on his privilege is far from reality in the majority of cases. It is from a position of weakness, not strength, that many men fear for their wives' chastity when they go into public. They feel entitled to control their wives but realise that, in practice, their means of control are limited since few men manage to fulfil their roles as providers and protectors anywhere near satisfactorily (Silberschmidt 2001). It is often men's failure to conform to norms of masculinity which leads women to consider extra-marital affairs⁹⁶ and men to lash out against them, often violently. A married woman who is suspected of having affairs not only spoils her own reputation, she is also an embarrassment to her husband.

Adult education classes and other regular public occasions, such as church services, are then objectively the safest venue to look for a new partner. A "decent" woman in Madudu is subject to subtle restrictions on her mobility, she can leave the house if she has "serious" business (going to the fields, fetching water, visiting the health station) but she is not to "loiter in the streets". If seen alone more than a couple of times with the same unrelated man, nobody would have much doubt as to the nature of their relationship. At church or in adult education classes there is more opportunity to observe each other, throw glances and steal a few moments of inconspicuous encounter on the way out. The notion of adult education classes being an arena for extra-marital affairs is not a figment of the chauvinist's imagination; it does happen. The inherent contradiction of social norms which stipulate that women are to be faithful while men are to be promiscuous means that one side has to give.

Literacy and indecency in Bangladesh

Conflicts between *Reflect* facilitators and local leaders are nothing exceptional. In Mauluvibazar, a facilitator suddenly faced the eruption of a long-simmering resentment against her teaching activities from religious leaders. The aggressive attacks against her were caused by the discovery of some love letters written by one of the female learners to a man of different caste. The letters were discovered just after the young lovers had eloped

⁹⁶ Particularly when she is under the often realistic impression that the fruit of her labour passes through her husband's hands on to other women.

with each other. Now the facilitator faced accusations that her literacy teaching had encouraged not only this particular illicit love affair but also promiscuity and cultural decline more generally. The facilitator's attempt to argue that the two had been having an affair long before the woman joined the class, and that the letters were merely a new way of expressing their love for each other, didn't convince. Pressure mounted as religious leaders continued to publicise the event, causing major embarrassment to the families of the two. Eventually, the facilitator discussed the matter with each of her participants individually and, as a group, they went to the couple's temporary residence so as to convince the woman that her actions had been misguided. To everyone's relief, the woman agreed to go back to her family. A few months later, both families agreed to a marriage. The facilitator was not only relieved that the personal attacks against her had stopped, she was also content that things had now been arranged in a manner she agreed with. Asked why she in particular had been under attack and not, say, the implementing agency, the participants, or the husbands who allowed the women to go to the classes in the first place, she was at a loss. But it is not difficult to guess. In this community where women are either house-bound or underpaid tea labourers, her own budding independence stands out to some as a shining example of freedom and to others as a threatening example of indecency.⁹⁷

As these stories remind us, "open" debate of the kind envisaged in *Reflect* could be extremely risky to women. The rest of this chapter presents four case studies of women from the Madudu project, illustrating how they "do" politics, react to it and become embroiled in it. Only one of the studies directly involves a *Reflect* circle, since our principle aim here is to provide a clearer picture of the context in which literacy projects and other development interventions operate, so as to illuminate how concepts such as "voice", "open debate" and "public sphere" fail to correspond with the ambitions and strategies of real women.

5.6 Empowered and manipulated: Reflect participants and Local Councils

5.6.1 Susan's motives versus circle initiative

Through a combination of Susan's zeal and selectivity, the Kilemba circle always covered more units in less time than the other circles and proudly finished all the prepared units "in first place". Now Susan asked participants which topics were most pertinent and should be prioritised in the near future. Participants came up with the following list:

- Co-operation among us and in our homes
- To know more about our behaviours
- Problems of animal rearing in our homes
- Slashing of the road
- To get more awareness
- New ways of cultivating

⁹⁷ The special status of this woman facilitator seemed to derive only partly from her work as a *Reflect* facilitator. In contrast to most other facilitators in Bangladesh she had a regular occupation, managing a shop together with her husband's brother.

“Slashing of the road” stands out as the most precise of the above suggestions but it is probably Susan’s more or less subtle influencing which pushed this topic to the top of the agenda. Once the participants had agreed that slashing the grass by the side of the main feeder road leading into the village was paramount, Susan hung up a few signs along the road, informing others of the impending activity. She also arranged for herself to announce the activity in both the Protestant and the Catholic Church. Her note read, “Everyone in Kilemba is called to come and slash the sides of the road on Friday, 26th of March at 8 am. Anyone who reads this message pass it on to those concerned.”

Forty seven people, mostly active and passive members of the *Reflect* circle in Kilemba, showed up on the day and slashed a big chunk of the high grass bordering the road into Kilemba. Susan co-ordinated the activity and marked herself out as its key patron by supplying those working (men and women) with some porridge which she had cooked and paid for herself. For reasons that became evident all too soon, the LCI representatives⁹⁸ had not endorsed the circle’s activism. Thus, taking part came to be seen as just as political an act as not taking part. The volunteers did not treat those who did not take part lightly. Cut grass was dumped on their fields and young plants were casually destroyed. Abuse was shouted at those who did not abandon the work in their shambas (fields) to join the “communal” effort.

Later on, Susan would portray herself as the voice of reason that tried to stop the worst of the excesses but failed because her participants were now so empowered that “even I can’t tell them anything anymore”. However, anyone who saw Susan in the situation itself could not fail to notice that her attempts at “being reasonable” were purposely designed so as to be challenged and swept aside. Her reminders to the cutters that their actions would inevitably provoke the wrath of the LCs were clearly not designed to calm the situation down. On the contrary, it was out of spite against the LCs that most volunteers came forward to join this activity in the first place.

The venture worked in more than one way. Slashing roads does enhance safety and comfort while travelling into the village. It was this spirit of concern for public well-being that Susan emphasised initially, but she soon stopped hiding her glee at the smack in the face she had administered to the LCs in initiating this activity. It is normally the LCs’ responsibility to mobilise villagers for communal labour (quite similar to the way colonial chiefs used to do in the past). But in many villages in Madudu they deliberately “forget” to do this only to then go around with the police and collect fines from anyone owning land bordering the road. Preferably, this is done just before Christmas or Easter, which is when everyone wants to have money in their pockets for a big celebration. This year, Susan and the participants spoiled the racket and made some waves for weeks to come.

⁹⁸ Local Council representative at the village level.

Susan was keen to ensure that this activity really did contribute to the embarrassment of the LCs, so in the next session of the circle she asked participants to list answers to the following question: “The LC1s, what did they contribute to the slashing of the road?”

Answers from participants:

- Nothing
- They don't know the aims of *Reflect*
- They thought it was for participants only
- They think that participants want to take their coats
(i.e. figurative for taking away their posts – some LCs had got coats from government)
- They are jealous that *Reflect* people had mobilised
- They think we have taken over their work (i.e. are threatened by us)
- We have stopped them from collecting Shs 5000
- LCs complain that the facilitator is trying to erode their respect
- The LCs don't want development in the place
- The LCs don't know the purpose of uniting people
- LCs saying that we will not slash the road that the facilitator has taken
- They thought that no one would come
- They wanted to fail the facilitator, going around telling people not to come
- They were happy afterwards since the LC3 had complained of non-cooperation
- They are shy, they pretend to be annoyed but actually they are ashamed.
- They have left the road to the *Reflect* circle
- Those who have not helped should start where we left off
- If LC1s don't help, we participants will complain to LC3
- Those who had a problem may come and continue the work within a week otherwise they will have to start at the other end.
- Those who refuse to work with us will have to work twice

Participants knew full well that Susan was not interested in hearing about genuine efforts that the LCs might have made to support the circle's endeavours. They were also aware that Susan had her own agenda in wanting to show the LCs up. As much as they expressed their own sentiments, they were also seeking to flatter her. This was neither the first nor the last time that she more or less demanded her participants to pledge allegiance to her personally. Her dislike for the LCs was based on more than simple contempt for the way they acted or failed to act: she had stood for the post of LC1 chairperson herself and had not been elected. She had also wriggled her way into the position of *Reflect* facilitator against the will of the LCs. Still, the statements participants made here are also testimony to their pride in having acted against authority and in their own, somewhat self-righteous and unfounded, claims to now be in position to impose rules on others.

As it turned out, the LCs never chose to interpret the action as public protest against them. Instead they congratulated people on their initiative while singling Susan out as “not having gone through the proper channels”. Apart from a few quips against Susan in public, most of their reaction took place privately, hinting to participants that Susan may have received money from ActionAid that she then didn’t pass on to them. The following year, any repeat action by Susan was pre-empted by the LCs officially commissioning her to mobilise people to do the slashing. She refused on the grounds that they should pay her money if she was doing their job (which is nominally unpaid). That year roads overgrew and nobody seemed too bothered. Several participants claimed that there were no (or at least fewer) fines sought from them.

The fact that, on this occasion, the LCs followed a self-serving strategy is not exceptional - but neither is it the norm. Interestingly, the women LCs (who made up half the councillors) were least supportive of Susan’s efforts, perhaps feeling more threatened than the male LCs by her obvious ability to mobilise support. Instead of considering themselves an avant-garde for women, most of the female councillors were not inclined to act on their appointment and were no more engaged than the men. On this occasion, one of the female councillors in question felt compelled to disprove any potential suspicion of her exercising female solidarity with Susan by loudly dismissing her initiative as not only inappropriate but also vicious. Still, gender parity on LC committees is one of the key legislative measures the government of Uganda has taken to promote gender equity at the grass roots. During the survey exercise, we thus sought to quantify how far the confidence women claim to have gained through the classes translated into their seizing new opportunities in local politics.

Table 4: **Do you normally attend Local Council meetings?**

	Yes				No				
	1999		2000		1999		2000		
<i>Madudu</i>	woman participant	(41)	63%	(41)	63%	(23)	37%	(24)	37%
	woman control group	(22)	54%	(22)	52%	(19)	47%	(20)	48%
	husband	(45)	92%	(46)	94%	(4)	8%	(3)	6%
<i>Banda</i>	woman participant	(23)	58%	(19)	48%	(17)	42%	(21)	52%
	woman control group	(14)	58%	(16)	67%	(10)	42%	(8)	33%
	husband	(9)	75%	(9)	75%	(3)	25%	(3)	25%

Our results suggest that participation in the *Reflect* circles has not encouraged women to go to LC meetings. In Madudu figures remained the same over a one year period, while in Banda participants appear to have gone to meetings less than before.⁹⁹ Neither is there any evidence that more women spoke during meetings. Of those women attending meetings, half claimed to speak, compared to over 90% of husbands. The figure is the same for 1999 and

⁹⁹ This may be a result of one LC1 chairman falling out with BCDP, antagonising the participants in one area.

2000. Interestingly, almost half of all women participants going to LC meetings in Madudu also held a post, and so did their husbands, while only a couple of women in the control group boasted similar responsibilities. The LCs had been involved in recruiting for the programme and, at least in the beginning, it was considered a privilege to become a participant. It is likely that women who had status in their own right or through their husbands gained privileged access to the circles and stayed in the expectation that ActionAid would reward them in money or kind. In Bangladesh, similar provisions for women with privileged access to posts were popular with NGO projects and also often resulted in wives of powerful men seizing the opportunities.

In Banda, far more people live under the jurisdiction of one council and leadership posts are subject to much competition. The proximity to Kampala means that local leaders are party to political activities on a grander scale, sometimes involving access to funds. It is therefore not surprising that very few respondents were involved in leadership activities. The facilitators and organisers of the programme had access to these spheres, but participants were for the most part far removed. While local leaders in Banda can wield considerable power and respect (along with a lot of unpaid and onerous tasks) it is debatable to what extent attendance at meetings or even occupying one of the “lower” posts (other than LC chairperson or vice chairperson) will make a difference to a woman’s life. To start with, it must be recognised that there are very few LC meetings, sometimes less than one a year.¹⁰⁰ Secondly, both in Banda and in Madudu, public meetings (LC or otherwise) rarely allow much space for ordinary citizens to have their say. Where such opportunities arise, men and women are keen to voice their opinions but have little space to do so. The more likely scenario is one where local leaders beg people to attend meetings at which they are to be “sensitised” about one issue or other. The people who show up to listen to sometimes very patronising speakers are likely to have given in to the pressure exercised by those leaders who recruited for the event, or may simply be hoping to receive a free drink at the end. In this situation, the woman who steadily walks past a meeting ground, rejecting the invitation to join the meeting by stating that she prefers to pay for her own drinks, may be far more empowered than the ones who take part. The following case study examines the deliberations of a public meeting involving this type of ambiguity.

5.7 “Once a teacher, always a teacher”: demonstrating leadership and authority in Kilemba

Several days before a newly appointed high district official was to come on “familiarisation tour”, the sub-county officials and LCs were busy imploring ordinary folk to attend the rally which was to take place in his honour. On the day, however, school children who have been obliged to attend make up two thirds of the audience of no more than 300 people. Only

¹⁰⁰ In Banda, the lack of general meetings is balanced somewhat by smaller, target-oriented meetings, but even here activities tend to concentrate with the office of the chairperson.

about 20 women and 80 men vie for the limited audience space in the shade. The improvised hangar provides barely sufficient shade for the 15 officials sitting with the visitor, mostly in such a fashion that the audience sees their backs. As I (i.e. the researcher) sit down on the concrete veranda of a neighbouring office building, the commanding officer from the nearby army barracks is speaking through a megaphone, barely understandable due to the poor sound quality. He talks at length about the army presence and the resulting displacement of farmers. He explains that this has been agreed to by the villagers and that there shouldn't be any complaints, that everyone affected has been promised 30,000 Shillings per acre compensation by the government. All they have to do to get this money is write a letter to the relevant authorities. Alas, there are still people planting new crops and even building new houses on the land.

He goes on to talk about development and how people should get their act together and work hard. Taxes must be paid, because otherwise there won't be any security. There are many thieves in the area, and if security goes down it will get worse.

After he has finished two school choirs (mainly consisting of girls, as is usually the case) are marched into the small U-shape where the officials sit and begin to sing. One choir sings, "Oh RDC, we are so happy to see you here, you are welcome." The other school has chosen, "Peace, it is peace which allows us to go to school, we are so happy that we can learn." During this, two secondary girls are directed by the headmaster to come forward, pick up a basket with sodas and kneel in front of the officials, for them to pick a soda of their choice. The parish chief then takes on the role of master of ceremonies and ushers the school children in and out. Several teachers walk around with serious looks on their faces, administering preventative punishments to pupils.

After the singing and a few consultations in the VIP area, the RDC, fully clad in a dark suit, gets up and introduces himself in Luganda: "I used to be a teacher, and once a teacher, always a teacher." With these words he rejects the microphone and orders a chalk board to be brought into the U-shape. He starts off by saying how bad it is to waste time and that everyone has come late, not like the bazungu (white people) who are always on time. "When I say 10 a.m. you come at noon, when I say 2 p.m. you come at 4 p.m." He then turns around and directs his imposing frame towards the sitting LC3 Chairman: "when I say noon you come at..." The LC3 Chairman smiles obediently as he hastily tries to get up, but before he manages to supply the correct answer, the RDC has already barked it out: "... 2 p.m.." The LC3 sinks back into his seat, only barely managing to hide his school-boy embarrassment. This sets the tone for the non-stop lesson to come during the following two and a half hours.

The RDC turns on the assembled officials. He comes down hard on one of the headmasters. "Sit down, that is wrong!" is the reprimand gleefully observed by the crowd of present and

former pupils. He orders a retired pastor from the Church of Uganda to read passages from the Bible (“read!”). The first such passage is from the Book of Genesis, about God creating the world in seven days. He interrupts simply by falling in, marvelling at just how much labour God invested in his undertaking, how he had it all planned out, otherwise one could not possibly complete such a big project. He emphasises how God didn’t sleep during all this time, and how it is all being run down by... “you people of Madudu not paying your taxes!” The pastor is told to sit down. The RDC turns around to the sub-county officials and exclaims how he is sick and tired of leaders who want to convince him that the people are too poor to pay taxes. “Those same leaders drink one crate (i.e. expensive, bottled beer) after another and then they come to me saying they are poor and want motorcycles. You are setting a bad example!” The assembled leadership takes this in its stride. “It is not true, you are rich, look around you, everything is there as God has made it for you, but you are happy with just some potatoes and a bit of drink.” The audience is very quiet now, listening attentively. Tax collection is a very sensitive issue. He again orders the pastor to read, specifying the passage (“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s”) and driving home his point that not paying taxes is against the will of God.

“You have a new road here between Mubende and Mityana. It is so quick to get to Kampala now, it takes hours not days, like it used to. Museveni (Uganda’s president) was wrong to give it to you! What do you do now? You go to Kampala for 10,000 Shillings and then you come back claiming you are too poor to buy a hoe. How much does a hoe cost?” He repeats his question with reprimand in his voice, signalling that this is one of the few questions to which he will not himself provide the answer and that it should have been forthcoming long ago. The price is volunteered as 3,000 Shillings (\$2) and there is some embarrassed laughter in the audience. It must be noted that very few people from Madudu ever go to Kampala, let alone for leisure purposes. Still, most people in the area are quick to criticise others’ excessive spending on non-essentials, so his populist criticism is easy to agree with.

The RDC then goes on to write on the board (not visible for most of the audience) how many homesteads there are (about 2000) and how few have paid taxes (about 250). He warns that it is an offence not to pay taxes and that people will go to prison. Poverty is no excuse since anyone can make money. “Even a woman can raise chickens when she stays at home.” To illustrate his point about people not being poor he starts writing on the board all the items needed for a woman’s outfit, along with their prices. He does the same for a man’s outfit (for the man this includes a bicycle, but no watch, as my female neighbour points out to me). Where I am sitting, the prices he quotes are discussed but no one points out to him that people in Madudu tend to buy their clothes second hand at much cheaper prices than he suggests. In true teacher style he asks the audience to add up the prices, only to then do it himself swiftly, mumbling, efficiently scribbling down retention. Naturally, the sums are impressive. “And you are claiming to be poor? You are rich!”

Next, he tells the people of Madudu how they fail to work properly. “You only work in the morning! At noon the woman goes back and cooks and at 1 p.m. the man comes and expects to find water for bathing and food.” Betty, who sits next to me and follows attentively (she is remarkably successful at saying the last word of his sentences before he does) now comments, “Ha, but which crops are those people planting?” Others around me giggle at the idea that men would come from the field later than women. The RDC says, “And after eating you just sleep, when the children come you just tell them to eat and keep quiet!” Betty leans over to me. “Do women not wash?”

This leads on to a serious rapping of men, who spend so much money on drinking. 500 Shillings per day is volunteered by the audience as the money an average man would spend on alcohol every day (that would equal a water glass of waragi or five glasses of local beer). The RDC again orchestrates a calculation of how much this costs per month and, predictably, the outcome shocks. “And you complain about taxes? And it is so easy to make money - you can just leave some animals with your wives, but you don’t want that.” Almost everybody in the area does rear animals but that seems irrelevant at this point. “You have one chicken and you can sell it at 5,000 Shillings but then it gives birth and you can have eight and they can again give birth.” In yet another lengthy calculation on the board it is found that eight chickens would bring in 40,000 Shillings. A few of my neighbours quietly remark that one barely manages to sell chickens at 3,000 Shillings. Then he goes on to criticise how many men don’t realise the potential of their wives and that beating them isn’t helping matters. Men are also branded the worst offenders when it comes to matters of bodily hygiene, defecating everywhere, not washing properly. The example of cats and how they are so clean is evoked. “So then who is more intelligent, cats or men?”

Now, the RDC turns to the children. He expresses his satisfaction at seeing so many school children here and asks them whether they enjoy going to school (chorus: “yes”) and comments on how wonderful it is that President Museveni has brought this opportunity to everyone. This caring interlude ends when he asks the children if there are any children in the village who don’t go to school (chorus: “no”). After the children have hesitantly affirmed that there are “some” children who don’t have uniforms or shoes¹⁰¹ he tells them to urge their parents to get them proper shoes and uniforms. “It’s a disgrace for you not to have them.” He also says that he will clamp down hard on teachers who wear slippers and torn clothes.

The RDC further implores the children that they should work hard and have a “vision” (using the English word) for the future. That children are also to blame for not getting on in life, always wanting mandazi and kabalagala (types of cake) and missing school to get money for these sweets. That is not being “serious” (uses English word), they should be determined to succeed not only in primary school but then later in secondary school and in

¹⁰¹ Very few primary pupils have shoes in the area. A pair of shoes is mandatory for secondary pupils, contributing to the difficulties many parents face in paying for their children’s education.

university. Yes, they can all go to university if they and their parents are committed. "Once you have been to Makerere University you have no worries. But lack of proper vision and commitment unfortunately means that the people of Madudu remain ignorant." He searches out the headmaster of the secondary school and asks how much the fees are per term. The headmaster quickly stands up straight and replies (in English, though asked in Luganda), "37,500 Shillings." The RDC pulls back, shakes his head. "That is nothing, really, anyone can afford that." He proceeds to add up the number of chickens it takes to earn 37,500 Shillings (\$19).

In contradiction to what he has said before, he now claims that poverty does exist and lists it, together with "diseases" and "ignorance" as the key problems of the area on the black board. He then underlines "ignorance" and insists that that is the only valid cause of problems (widespread agreement). Bible quotes follow in the accustomed fashion and the RDC scores points when he interrupts the pastor mid-sentence so as to recite a whole passage himself, from memory. Immediately afterwards he orders the pastor to read it out again. Everyone is amazed that his recital was true to the word and my neighbours exclaim, "My friends! See that man?" Someone behind me asks whether the new RDC is a born-again Christian and is told by others that he isn't, just a very educated man. At another point the RDC scolds the pastor for misreading and again causes gasps of admiration at his superb knowledge of the Bible.

Now it is the women's turn and even though the RDC makes allowances for women working harder than men, and being in many ways more responsible than men, all of this is found to be in decline. The example chosen concerns the upbringing of children, where women no longer instil discipline on children, who are let loose and not made to be serious about tasks. Both men and women's drinking is to be blamed for this. As he raps women for their negligence of children one of my female neighbours asks in an aside, "Do men not have children?" Another reason for moral decay among children is that families are so mixed up these days, a woman feels she can't be as strict with other women's children as with her own or she simply doesn't care about them, causing jealousies. Women are also no longer fulfilling their responsibility to create a harmonious home: "How is a man supposed to feel appreciated when he is being served the food of yesterday?" Again, ignorance and laziness are to be blamed here.

During his lecture the RDC rhetorically asked several times, "Do you get me?" At one point he goes as far as saying, "It is important that you understand me because I don't want to come back next time and find that nothing has changed!" By the time it came to an end, long after the above deliberations were finished, he did not seem to expect questions or comments from the audience, but a few were dealt with before he retired into one of the administrative buildings leaving some 50 men and women to gather on a few benches beneath the tree where some LCs now handed out local beer in plastic bags with straws sticking in them.

The most often heard comment right after the rally was finished was that the RDC was a very good teacher. Susan added, “He said so many things one can’t remember them all, some of them you don’t want to hear but then, when you lie in bed late at night, you think a bit and realise that he is right.” Over the next days and weeks, her own and other people’s thinking presented itself more critically. One young man, who started off commenting very shyly that it was not for him to have an opinion on the RDC, eventually let off some steam. “These people sit in their offices and write on a few papers and they call us lazy. We are not lazy. Let them come here and find out. Why can’t they ask us why we do this and not that. This year we planted maize and now the price is bad, so now we will plant groundnuts for the next season. We have our reasons. Could he work here for just one day? Could he manage?... You know what people say about him? He is not with us.”

It is considered normal that those in power are “not with us”. Leaders who are considered to be sympathetic are fondly revered but also ridiculed if they don’t take advantage of their posts. It is also expected that leaders talk down to their flock, “educating” them. Perhaps the most striking observation about the RDC’s lecture, from the perspective of this research, is how seamlessly schooling, Christian practice and political authority amalgamate. Nor is it coincidence that he chooses to convert the audience of a political rally into no less than three different school classes (i.e. the officials, the children, and the adult audience), addressing them as a teacher rather than as a politician. The legitimacy of modern leadership in Uganda (and many other places) is inextricably linked with being schooled and with the embracing of Christian values. While many of the rhetorical means the RDC employs here may seem crass to the outsider and certainly didn’t meet with the full approval of the audience, many of his remarks did strike a cord with popular sentiment. Who would doubt the integrity of a man who objects to the wearing of slippers in public places? Many in the audience would agree that “decent” footwear is a matter of self-respect rather than money, even when their own experience may suggest otherwise.

We have chosen this case study, not so much to show what women are up against when joining politics, but so as to show how authority presents itself to them in the public sphere, what role models they have for the fashioning of their own ambitions. Many leaders act in this manner when they wish to be regarded as a role model and, for long stretches, the RDC’s speech is a vivid testimony to his fervent support for Protestant ethic ideology. It is in this context that one can understand where *Reflect* participants take their cues from when they insist they have become more disciplined, harder working, cleaner and less indulgent through being educated. While it is evident that the audience on this occasion did not blindly idealise the RDC, it is equally clear that the RDC acted as was expected of someone occupying such a privileged post.¹⁰² If women participants want to “act the part” in the public sphere, they could do worse than to emulate him.

¹⁰² In our interviews with LCI chairpersons “educating the populace” was often mentioned as the primary responsibility of local leaders.

In the last two case studies, we turn away from the “official” public sphere and consider how two women seek to make progress on two very different issues. One of the two, Susan, is considered to have a strong “voice”, while Naluyima is an example of the limitations imposed by low status.

5.8 “I kept quiet” - powerful silences and muted speech, the strategies of a strong woman

Susan has by now become familiar to the reader as a very confident woman. The fact that she spoke English, was the first person to welcome the researcher to Madudu, and functioned as his host throughout, quickly made her a natural first port of call for any news that transpired. Susan occupied a unique space in Kilemba. She was a highly respected and generally well liked woman. Many women and men came to her with intimate problems and valued the advice she gave. Though she was entitled to some respect as the former wife of a powerful local leader, she garnered plenty more in her own right. Added to the role of confidante, she was also a former school teacher, involved in church activities, and last but not least, the *Reflect* facilitator. Still, Susan had reason to be careful of her reputation not only because she was divorced and consequently poor, but also because she was having an affair with a much younger man and did not mince her words when it came to dealing with village politics.

It is worthwhile dwelling on Susan’s way of talking for a moment because soon into the research it emerged that she was the woman most aptly described as having a strong “voice” in Kilemba. In other words, Susan’s example illustrates where the boundaries of acceptability were drawn for women. If she couldn’t get away with saying or doing something, no other woman would have dared trying.

“I kept quiet” was a sentence that crept up frequently in Susan’s accounts of conflict situations she had been involved in. Head slightly bent, hands coyly folded behind her back, it was only her quietly knowing smile which betrayed the ambition to present herself as the perfect example of female modesty. Susan’s silences were never intended to be the demure subordination much valued by many Ugandan “uppers” (particularly, but not only, men) as a sign of respect from “lowers”. Her silences were never only a sign of respect and in many situations they were openly disrespectful, aggressive silences which often succeeded in stopping a shouting adversary in his tracks. There are few more frustrating experiences than shouting at somebody who pretends not to listen, but perhaps the situation where Susan can legitimately claim to be acting respectfully by keeping silent in face of a storm must be one of them.

At other times, Susan would fall silent when she wanted to hint at something without saying it. A particularly interesting incident happened while she was supervising a group of workers helping to construct feeder roads. The treatment she and other workers received from responsible officials from the Ministry of Works was shoddy, to put it mildly. She and all the

other men and women workers quietly accepted the humiliation of being kept in suspense over payments, shouted at for allegedly unsatisfactory work, lack of clear instructions and arbitrary dismissals. There was much shouting and complaint once the officials were gone but only muted protest while they were present. One day, an evaluation team of donors and high-up ministry officials came to the area, particularly to consider the welfare of the workers. Susan proudly demonstrated and explained her work to them but when they asked her to comment on relations with the responsible officials she became evasive, unforthcoming with words and eventually fell completely silent. No amount of encouragement from the evaluation team convinced her to say anything on the issue. To the outside researcher this first seemed like a waste of perhaps the most potent - if not only - opportunity to voice protest against what seemed to be glaring injustices. But Susan was little perturbed by her move and did not regard the situation as a failure, least of all hers. Had she spoken out she would have made herself vulnerable to counter-attacks from the responsible officials (who were nearby and could have seen her) but perhaps more importantly, she could have alienated the evaluation team whose biases she could not be sure of. A forceful tirade of complaints from her side could easily have led them to think that she is the kind of woman who "takes herself to be important". As it stood, they could not fail to notice that Susan was seriously unhappy with the responsible officials. Her silence added to the credibility of her unspoken accusation since, in this cultural context, it emphasised her personal integrity and marked her out as a modest if not simple woman who conscientiously adheres to tradition.

A few days later she was one of only two "foremen" asked to report at the Ministry's offices in Mubende Town. Once there, she met the evaluation team again and this time she let them "crack" her and volunteered the misgivings she and the other workers harboured against the responsible officials (who were present). When she later on recounted the event to the researcher she was still relishing the procedure, how the important people on the evaluation team had agreed with everything she said, how they had thanked her for her bravery, and how the responsible officials didn't get away with any of the excuses they were trying to make.

The responsible officials could talk but they no longer had voice while Susan, through her silence, had added crucial power to her voice. One cannot help but admire the cleverness with which Susan here manages to reverse norms which are meant to control women's speech (by occasionally restricting them to silence) into a powerful weapon for herself. Leaving aside the credibility of her complaints, it is clear that she skilfully steered the members of the evaluation team to be protective and trusting of her. Obviously, such strategies are limited in scope, and they don't work for everyone, but the mastery of speech and silence Susan demonstrates here certainly explains why other people's respect for her is usually coupled with a dose of mistrust. Therefore, for Susan to constantly say, "I kept quiet" is a way of reminding her listeners and herself that she does care about female respectability. This was important because in reality Susan shouted rather more often than she cared to admit, although her accounts of having "shouted to the maximum" were comparatively rare. They

were invariably told with a laughing chuckle at the digression that she regarded her own actions to be, while also containing a strong sense of pride in being a person who flaunts norms.

5.9 “I have nothing to say” - Actions and words of a woman with little status

Other women and men in Kilemba had much less room for manoeuvre than Susan. Naluyima was a participant who was a victim more than manipulator of the power of talk. This was not because of any particular lack of confidence or verbal skill on her part, but because her social position as a divorced, barren and relatively poor woman was so tenuous. When she was accused of witchcraft, her membership of the *Reflect* circle seems to have afforded her some protection from the gossip but less by giving her (or neighbourhood women collectively) a voice to speak out against the accusations, than by lending support to her implicit claim to be an orderly and respectable woman, and by other women participants pledging support to her, if only in private.

After she discovered that she was barren Naluyima “voluntarily” left her husband, unable to bear both his and her shame. She settled on her uncle’s land in Kilemba and began to struggle for a new existence on her own. This already difficult project came under question when the baby of a woman living a few doors away died after a short illness. At the funeral one of the mourners prayed aloud and his prayer suggested that Naluyima had killed the child.¹⁰³ Funeral prayers are one of the few ceremonies where ordinary villagers get a chance to speak publicly. It is not uncommon to use such occasions to lash out against personal enemies, but this is usually done by imploring particular moral standards, holding up certain individuals as particularly virtuous. It is very rare for such attacks to be as personal and direct as seems to have been the case here. Unsurprisingly, the accusation caused a stir, Naluyima struggled with tears, and most others did not know what to say or where to look. Meanwhile a few members of the dead child’s family continued to perpetuate the accusation in muttered voices, glancing viciously at Naluyima but never attempting to put her on the spot or even arrest her. Eventually, the tension fizzled out as the ceremony continued, allowing Naluyima to quietly slip away. In the days and weeks that followed, many of her fellow participants privately expressed their sympathies to Naluyima, assured her that they did not believe the accusations, and advised her to wait until the storm had blown over.

She herself was initially prepared to abandon her newly built house to try and start afresh somewhere new. She decided instead to stay on, and later attributed this decision to the advice and moral support she received from other participants and Susan, the facilitator. During an interview a few months later, Naluyima reported that she had never tried to clear her name, stating that she had “nothing to say” to her accusers (i.e. she didn’t feel entitled to

¹⁰³ It was not alleged that Naluyima had physically laid a hand on the child, rather it was implied that she had caused the death through witchcraft. It should also be noted that the researcher was not present at the funeral but interviewed various people who were present starting two days after the burial.

confront them). She felt that the threat emanating from the event was slowly diminishing and was glad that she had retained her house and land. At the same time, she was much aware that the stigma of being known as a woman who potentially exercises special powers maliciously would stick. “They (i.e. everyone around her) see me differently now.” The immediate consequence to her was that she had to accept a serious dent to her reputation which was painful to someone with so keen a need to feel a sense of belonging.

Judging from the comments of others, Naluyima was at some considerable risk during this period. There are no set norms as to how to deal with people accused of witchcraft. Informants who were asked about what they thought could happen to her were generally at a loss, stating that anything and nothing could happen to her. Several stated that they would not be surprised to see her die soon but equally thought it plausible that the incident could end up being of no consequence. The issue remained the subject of rumour and debate for a few weeks and, after initial confusion, the question that came to be most fervently debated revolved around the motives of the baby’s family for launching this attack on Naluyima, rather than whether she was guilty or not. To the researcher’s knowledge, the family never retracted their accusations nor were they asked to do so by anyone. But after a short while, they stopped repeating the accusations.¹⁰⁴

It is impossible to say why the accusations stopped but it is likely that the family of the dead child was sensitive to the subtle shift in the debate. They must have noticed that uncomfortable questions were being asked about the adequacy of treatment the baby had received prior to its death, or realised that some people suspected that they were keen on Naluyima’s land which was bordering on theirs. The most embarrassing but also most common suspicion was that they were jealous of the way in which Naluyima made money through hard work and that they were seeking to shame her into paying money to them.

It is also possible that some of the women participants supportive of Naluyima could have networked so as to focus public opinion on the motives of the family rather than on Naluyima. But it must be cautioned that none of the women who made pledges of support to Naluyima were nearly as single-mindedly behind her when talking to the researcher in private. Here they preferred to leave open the question of guilt, hinting that one simply couldn’t know whether she had done it or not. Effectively, none of the women participants interviewed about this incident could remember a single moment where they had spoken out in favour of Naluyima to a third party. Still, the conversations Naluyima and other participants had about this matter (mostly outside of circle sessions) were numerous and usually centred around others expressing their pity for Naluyima and their disgust at such unreasonable accusations being levelled against her. Susan in particular fostered a sense of certainty about Reflect participants per se being incapable of such vile acts. Others followed

¹⁰⁴ According to other informants in the village. In front of the researchers only one member of the family once insisted that Naluyima was a killer suspect - and he was heavily intoxicated at the time.

her lead and advised Naluyima to simply ignore “rumours”, classifying them as unworthy of a *Reflect* participants’ attention. And yet, it seems Naluyima was wise enough never to demand more than pledges of support, she accepted all sympathy with a stoic face, reports that it did constitute vital moral support to her, but never put anyone on the spot about how they were actually going to help her.

The most likely reason - apart from plain luck - for this incident eventually passing off with relatively little harm done to Naluyima lies in the accusation having been too blatantly implausible and too obviously imbued with self-interest. Also, nobody outside the family had a particular grudge against Naluyima or thought her a worthwhile target for financial exploitation - both factors which could otherwise have led seemingly unconnected people to rally behind the family.

Getting other people on side is a very common strategy in situations where one is accused of something or wants to accuse somebody. Most other incidents of a similar nature to the one just described would be impossible to recount here because of their tendency to spread and become very complex very fast. The exchange of accusations is often deliberately aimed at widening the conflict agenda so as to make new allies. For example, the family of the dead baby could have sought to blame other bad deeds on Naluyima, such as a stolen or failed crop of a farmer who might want to recuperate some of the loss, thus making for a good ally. If Naluyima had had the social resources she could have launched a counter-attack, deliberately dragging out other people’s dirty linen so as to form strategic alliances against her adversary, but her own lack of status would have made that a high risk strategy.

Considering official channels

Naluyima never thought of going to see the LCs about the situation she was facing. Would she have been well advised to go down this route? Conflicts were frequent, both in Banda and Madudu, and sometimes escalated to the extent that outside intervention became necessary. Although regulations foresee that the entire LC executive (consisting of ten members) should hear cases, in reality this is rarely practical and often only one or a few members make up the judgement team. With very few means of enforcement at their disposal, judgements of the LCs inevitably had to gain popular support. In Madudu, this often meant that one party was condemned to pay for the “cost” of the court sitting by buying drinks.¹⁰⁵ On several occasions it was observed that LCs were reluctant to mount procedures if it was clear from the beginning that neither party was willing or able to bear such expenses. Procedures were often long and arduous and LCs were sometimes found discouraging people from bringing cases. One LC chairperson in

¹⁰⁵ Predictably, this obligation most often fell on the person who was seen to have most to lose, regardless of whether they were accuser or accused, found guilty or innocent. In one case, this meant that a man whose house had just been accidentally burnt down by another (very poor) man found himself borrowing money so as to be able to pay LCs to record all the properties that had gone up in smoke.

Madudu forwarded all cases to the police station. This worked well as a deterrent since the police was a long walk away and would inevitably require payment of far more money than the LCs could have demanded. In Banda, proceedings were more informed by a Western, legalistic sense of justice but there were also financial charges levied which were meant to deter people from pursuing cases. One LC chairperson, who was known as being women-friendly, introduced charges because she faced seemingly genuine problems with the large number of judgements that were not honoured: “Today they (i.e. unhappy women) come to me crying, then we discuss, I call the man to come, we discuss more and in the end I divorce them. Tomorrow, I find she has moved back into his house, what do I look like then?”

Table 5: Accusing and being accused in Local Council courts

Have you ever taken someone to the LCs?	Never		Once		Several times	
	1999	2000	1999	2000	1999	2000
<i>Madudu</i>						
woman participant	(49) 75%	(46) 71%	(10) 15%	(17) 26%	(6) 9%	(2) 3%
woman control group	(36) 86%	(33) 79%	(6) 14%	(8) 19%	0%	(1) 2%
husband	(30) 61%	(25) 51%	(13) 27%	(15) 31%	(6) 12%	(9) 18%
<i>Banda</i>						
woman participant	(33) 83%	(31) 78%	(7) 18%	(4) 10%	0%	(5) 13%
woman control group	(22) 92%	(19) 83%	(1) 4%	(3) 13%	(1) 4%	(1) 4%
husband	(8) 67%	(10) 83%	(3) 25%	(1) 8%	(1) 8%	(1) 8%
Has someone else ever taken you to the LCs?	Never		Once		Several times	
	1999	2000	1999	2000	1999	2000
<i>Madudu</i>						
woman participant	(55) 85%	(62) 95%	(9) 14%	(2) 3%	(1) 2%	(1) 2%
woman control group	(40) 98%	(40) 95%	(1) 2%	(2) 5%	0%	0%
husband	(31) 63%	(33) 67%	(13) 27%	(12) 24%	(5) 10%	(4) 8%
<i>Banda</i>						
woman participant	(38) 95%	(37) 93%	(2) 5%	(3) 8%	0%	0%
woman control group	(24) 100%	(23) 100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
husband	(10) 83%	(10) 83%	(2) 17%	0%	0%	(2) 17%

Our figures confirm what most other LCs stated as their policy, i.e. “matters of the home are not our business”. The table shows that, for better or worse, far fewer women than men prosecute or are prosecuted through the LCs. LC trials are still very much men’s affairs. Reflect participants are seen to be slightly more likely than members of the control group to appear in LC courts, either as accuser or accused, but the differences are not significant.

Respondents were also asked to broadly specify the nature of the case. During this exercise it emerged that on very many occasions it is impossible to say who is accuser and who is accused. Quarrels heat up to a point where either party threatens to take the other to the LCs and then end up doing it. Interestingly, while most of the cases reported by men are to do with fighting, money stolen or property violated, more than half of all cases women brought to the LCs were about domestic violence. It is difficult to comment on this figure without further knowledge of the details, but given the lack of LC enthusiasm for this type of case, it must be interpreted as a sign of how prevalent domestic violence is and how few means of addressing it are open to women. It is by no means a sign of how much trust ordinary women invest in LC procedures.

We have only touched on some of the complexities involved in judicial cases brought in front of the LCs but it is already clear that it would presently be problematic to unreservedly encourage poor women to entrust themselves to these paralegal institutions. How well a woman presents her case can make a difference but there are many other factors (whether she can pay, nature of the case, status of her adversary, her own status, previous relationship with LCs, etc.) which play a more important part.

Naluyima's failure to talk in this situation shows how little "voice" women actually have when "talk" in the neighbourhood can so quickly turn against them. The fact that Naluyima is a single, barren and relatively poor woman certainly is a key reason for her having been accused of witchcraft on this occasion. But there are other, equally important but less tangible factors at play. In this and many other similar cases, allegations of witchcraft served to discredit adversaries. Witchcraft can be a very effective allegation in this respect, given the difficulties of defusing all the suspicions which inevitably arise. The obvious result of such tendencies is that seemingly straightforward conflict situations can quickly turn into complex webs of accusations and counter-accusations frustrating any attempts at disentangling who is in the right and who in the wrong. Public opinion then becomes the most important factor in determining who is vilified and who isn't.

This is where an ability to talk convincingly can be very useful in turning the tables in one's favour. It can involve being witty and sharp in the way one talks but it also entails having a feel for whom to talk to, about what and when. Having a wide knowledge of other people's sore and strong points then constitutes the raw material from which useful allegations and counter-allegations can be produced. Taking into account the perspective of the other women participants, this example gives an idea of how carefully women consider when and where to put their own credibility on the line. Even though Kilemba by no means fits the stereotype of a tightly knit community, the way one is talked about matters immensely and few people would risk their reputation by taking a stand when they don't have to.

5.10 Acknowledging the limitations to collective action

Stories of the political empowerment of women tend to focus on “democratic” activities, women getting their way by taking rational action, moving through the institutions, making an argument loud and clear. The examples of Naluyima and Susan illustrate how women who want to have an influence on public life must pull all registers available to them, including subversion, coercion and covert action. As the case of Susan suggests, even a poor woman and her calculated silence can cause powerful people considerable embarrassment. However, in practice the temporary embarrassment of a powerful adversary is rarely sufficient to have a long term impact on the local power balance and it occurs only exceptionally. In the majority of cases, the economy of talk reproduces rather than challenges gender norms, for it relies on identifying “deviants” and setting them apart from “orderly citizens”.¹⁰⁶

In the context of Uganda, or at least Kilemba, this then also suggests that there are limits to women, or indeed *Reflect* participants at large, collectively tackling problems that require a long term commitment. While there were many issues on which women recognised that they had common interests (domestic violence, men’s drinking, male appropriation of their money, etc.) this never led to the idea of mounting protest together. Naluyima’s story illustrates how crucial the moral support received from peers in the circle was to her, while also leaving many doubts about just how much more support she could have mustered had things become more serious, given that her peers in the circle were already wondering whether empathy for Naluyima’s plight was worth entering into disagreement with a large, moderately influential family.

The example of SUS in Netrokona stands at the end of this chapter since it aptly illustrates the challenges relevant to our analysis and to the further progress of the rights-based approach. SUS has recently added a new branch to its activities, where a group of local lawyers have agreed to each take on one case at a time without fees. SUS representatives inform villagers of this scheme and make the initial link with the lawyers. The scheme receives no donor funding and SUS consciously minimises its own involvement so as to avoid partiality. The scheme is young and only a few cases have come forward so far, all of them involving women suing men, sometimes their husbands, over either dowry payments or early marriage. SUS by no means obliges any woman to sue but ever since the *Reflect* circles have been running, nobody in the villages can be in any doubt over the position SUS takes on these issues. Field workers are the ones who choose potential candidates for court cases, usually only after mediation within the village has failed.

¹⁰⁶ For example, an adulterous wife may not seek to defend herself by pointing out that she is not acting any differently than her husband (who can brag about the same action she is punished for). But if she hinted that her committing adultery was due to her husband’s impotence (i.e. his failure to “be a man”) she would find it easier to gain the understanding of others.

It was not possible to research any of the cases in more detail but it certainly is extraordinary that poor women would choose to go public with their own cases of dowry or early marriage, exposing their family and possibly themselves to considerable embarrassment. For those women who are wanting to be martyrs for a cause, the scheme must be extremely valuable. However, its coercive potential with those women who don't necessarily want to stand in the limelight cannot be denied. They may find it difficult to resist the offer, particularly if somebody connected to SUS knows of the case and has helped to mediate prior to escalation. They may feel a degree of dependency due to having a loan from SUS or hoping for one in future. As one staff member pointed out, field workers and former *Reflect* facilitators could also be excused for thinking that they would gain brownie points for bringing up cases.

5.11 Conclusion: need to adjust the lens

We must concede that our initial assumption that *Reflect* circles act as a rehearsal ground in which women practise before taking up their rightful place in the public sphere, where they go on to express agency and gain “voice”, was naïve.

In the projects we studied, both participants and facilitators eagerly appropriated the circles as a chance to imitate and experiment with the discourse and, just as importantly, the paraphernalia of some powerful “modern” institutions in their societies: NGOs, churches, government offices. While our study did not attempt to compare *Reflect* to other literacy methods, it did seem that the relatively unstructured “curriculum” and the emphasis on discussion and on the production and listing of action points gave facilitators and participants broad scope for collaborating in inventing their own authoritative and “official” rituals and texts. This, of course, resulted in some outcomes that were outwardly at odds with the *Reflect* approach, when participants were seemingly more interested in reproducing hierarchy than dismantling it, more interested in perfecting feminine “sweet talk” than in having a “voice”, and more interested in proving their ability to convincingly copy the forms and the content of elite discourse than in validating their own experience and knowledge.

We have speculated in this chapter that these raids on the storehouse of dominant culture offer a limited form of empowerment in and of themselves. We would venture that the confidence gains regularly reported by women learners from literacy programmes the world over are largely derived from the sense of being an active contributor to something “serious” and formal, something they would not normally be part of. *Reflect* circles may provide a particularly conducive setting for this, insofar as they probably offer far greater scope than a conventional literacy class for participants and facilitators to produce and validate their own “texts” (again, taking this term to include not just the written lists of action points, but the entire range of spatial, temporal, bodily, verbal and written symbols that participants construct when inventing the rituals of the circle).

However, we have only partially confirmed our hypothesis that women translate the confidence and skill acquired in *Reflect* circles into a more articulate, forceful and successful pursuit of their own interests outside the circle. What we sought to answer is where the actual gains of such rehearsals lie, and how far women manage to transfer them into situations outside of the classroom. We did come across instances where women participants expressed “voice”: they demonstrated, voted, sued in court, spoke up in meetings, insisted on their rights. However, these were exceptional experiences, not borne out by the survey data, and not in line with the ambitions women generally pursued in the classes. Becoming a democratic citizen was not the main priority of women participants. Even those women who demanded their rights rarely did so on the grounds of principles like justice, equality or fairness. Instead an increased sense of personal respectability, discipline, sophistication and decency was mentioned as the legitimate cause for laying claim to greater say.

It is important to recognise that the way women - in Madudu and elsewhere - fashion their self-transformation is distinctly different from the way development workers and academics portray the same change processes. We can take Naluyima’s story as a simple account of how *Reflect* failed to provide her with enough “voice” to effectively “take control of her life”. Stories of failure are rarely told. They are worth telling, but Naluyima’s experience doesn’t fit into this category. The intense level of ambiguity is the truly noteworthy aspect in her story. Those involved, including herself, the other villagers and the researcher had virtually no control over how this affair developed and yet, intentionally or unintentionally, many of the same people influenced the eventual outcome. Everybody, but in particular Naluyima, was acting from a perspective of partial information with many factors, such as witchcraft allegations, long standing allegiances and secret plotting creating dynamics which made “taking control” seem a very lofty ambition indeed. Though Naluyima was acutely aware of her own lack of control, the option of bringing in higher authorities, such as the LCs or the police, offered no comfort that they would “see it right”.

We argue that the ambiguity in Naluyima’s situation represents a typical dilemma faced by poor women and men. We can’t be sure whether the passivity she reported as her sole reaction really was all she did or could do. The various examples involving Susan illustrate more clearly how in situations where control is difficult to come by, one must struggle to respond strategically, making use of all means available, not just democratically condoned ones. Susan’s actions are clever and often effective. Yet even she does not fit the bill of a woman with “voice”. When in the name of public service Susan mobilises for collective action, she also seeks personal revenge and self-promotion. While she demands transparency she engages in intrigue. Where she acts like a self-effacing, modest village woman, she cleverly maximises the chances of getting justice for her workers and herself. Susan’s repertoire explodes that which development workers usually attribute to women with “voice”, who only ever seem to walk on virtuous paths.

So far, we have not found any conclusive evidence that women's participation in the *Reflect* classes enhances the role women play in institutions designed to regulate public life. But we have shown that many important decisions are negotiated "on the fringe" and that the circles and their participants take an active part in shaping public life here, outside of the officially sanctioned channels (i.e. voting, council meetings, public consultations, etc.). In fact, on issues that we were able to observe evolving over longer periods of time, we often found that "behind the scenes" diplomacy and campaigning were equally crucial in pushing an agenda as formal democratic channels, whose role was often limited to representing the status quo. In Bangladesh, we came across a multitude of situations where NGO staff described a woman participant as having "stood up for herself", either to protest dowry payment, early marriage, divorce or polygamy. On closer investigation it turned out that the initial step each woman had taken was to ask the facilitator for advice. Often the facilitators used their own connections to intervene on the woman's behalf. Such strategies were entirely consistent with the status quo in the communities we studied, where any woman in difficulties would first look around for a philanthropically minded patron (a wealthy individual, or an NGO) to help her out, and where members of the elite prided themselves on such acts of benevolence towards the poor.

This may explain why participants report greater confidence or skills in engaging publicly, but our attempts at capturing this by investigating their interactions in the official public sphere yielded little evidence to show how their skills were being put to use. It is obviously much more difficult to judge how women participants are faring in "behind the scenes politics", i.e. the struggles that are carried out away from public scrutiny, alongside rather than within formal democratic procedure. The example of women like Susan demonstrates how relatively empowered women need to assert themselves equally in all of these settings.

In the development literature, women with "voice" struggle for a cause which is distinctly their own but which is also always curiously in line with current development thinking. Out of principal, they prefer public, transparent, democratic means of struggle. They demonstrate, organise petitions, lobby representatives. They prefer open confrontation to covert action and subversion, and make maximum use of state institutions (formal political, legislative, etc.). They don't lie, deceive or go behind other people's backs to achieve what they want to achieve. They either are oppressed or side with the oppressed, and never use their voice to be oppressors. We have argued in this chapter that this picture is primarily based on development workers' own seduction by the "benevolent Tocquevillean vision" of a "public sphere" driven by earnest associations of citizens pursuing their interests openly and rationally – itself a vision heavily influenced by modernisation theory's concern with forming new kinds of "groups" to replace the moral coherence and social control lost when traditional social bonds are weakened.

Accounts of PRA debates sometimes give the impression that participants can be temporarily divorced from the power relations they live in so as to consider issues from new perspectives and vantage points. Graphics convey the impression that critical issues can be extracted from reality, objectified and reshaped to then be re-implemented in reality. Such a transformation is unrealistic. The use of PRA does not and cannot upset the power dynamics prevalent in the environments we researched here. Moreover, it is questionable in how far “open debate” should be a desirable ideal in contexts where participants’ interests are so intertwined that they would make themselves very vulnerable by exposing details of their private lives in PRA graphics. The concept of “voice”, much used in contemporary participatory approaches, values situations where women are assertive and exercise public resistance to those more powerful than themselves. These kinds of actions are regarded as superior to those where women may act opportunistically and appear docile. For reasons we have seen in this chapter, this is not a realistic or particularly helpful distinction. Far more common than instances of deliberate heterodoxy are situations where women can articulate their own interests only under cover of overt flattery and submission to powerful actors. In the process they may stretch, subvert or even subtly mock dominant representations of gender and class roles, but they do not reject them outright or attempt to assert alternatives. This discrepancy between image and reality is counter-productive for NGO staff (who then face the distinctly non-participatory task of urging women to adopt the “right kinds” of agency). It also means that NGOs may misread or simply miss the aspects of participatory methodology that women do find genuinely “empowering”, such as the opportunity to produce their own self-validated versions of “authoritative” texts and orthodox knowledge. And it is of serious concern at a time when development efforts move to encourage poor people to demand their “rights”. We return to this issue in the conclusion.

In light of the findings presented, the following, last chapter suggests that a downscaling of expectations in literacy programmes and a greater modesty with regard to the power attributed to methods could still allow for the celebration of the small, incremental but nevertheless significant gains that learners report.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Bargaining with literacy

This study has charted the trajectory of a participatory methodology over three years and two continents, tracing its complex development from the ideals of the *Reflect* Manual to the institutionalised routines of development agency staff in two countries to the strategies of the women who enrolled in *Reflect* classes.

Along the way, what was intended as a vehicle for emancipation and liberation often turned into a vehicle for domestication. Rather than challenging the world as it is, women sought ways of adapting themselves better to its hierarchies. Rather than overturning established gender relations, women sought to impress their men with their new housewifely skills, their mastery of polite feminine ways. Rather than rediscovering a discarded minority culture and language, women used every opportunity to improve their fluency in the dominant language. Rather than subverting orthodoxy, women were keen to lay claim to received wisdom, to repeat with sincere conviction the mantras of the modernisers and the uplifters, and to stress the connection that the *Reflect* programme gave them to the powerful development agency.

It is important to repeat that our findings are shaped by the limitations as well as the strengths of our ethnographic approach. We gained intensive and sustained insights into the aspirations and practices of women learners, facilitators and NGO staff involved in a handful of *Reflect* projects, but obviously, we cannot and do not claim that what we saw and heard was typical of all *Reflect* programmes. Even the projects described here may have changed considerably since the research was completed, through continuing efforts to improve the training and support given to field staff and facilitators, or because of other changes in the development context.

However, we think it would be a shame to dismiss the literacy circles that we studied as isolated “bad examples” or “distortions” in an attempt to protect *Reflect* and other participatory methodologies from some of the fundamental questions that we have tried to raise in this report. Other ethnographic studies - including Julia Betts’ doctoral thesis on *Reflect* in El Salvador, Cathy Kell’s work on adult literacy programmes in South Africa, and a growing body of work exploring PRA in practice – depict contradictions and tensions very similar to those that we have sketched out here. It seems clear that the experience of participatory development in practice, when subjected to close observation, is often very different from the expectations of “empowerment” that have powerfully shaped *Reflect*.

Nevertheless, we have argued that for some women, these raids on the storehouse of the dominant culture are indeed empowering. Cleverly used, they allow individual women to create a little more room for manoeuvre, a bit of prestige or “cultural capital” to be deployed in times of crisis or to be added to an ongoing project of upward mobility for the family.

Only those middle-class readers whose cultural and social capital comes already built in to their life experience – readers with university degrees, professional careers, and an insider’s

easy fluency in the codes of global capitalism – can reject these gains as insignificant. By contrast, field staff whose place in the dominant culture is more marginal had a more realistic understanding of what women might be able to achieve through participation in *Reflect* and of the importance of these achievements.

On the other hand, it is also clear that these were gains made by *individual* women. Because they were fundamentally based on strategies of accommodation, they did not and could not lead to any overall change in the collective position of women, even at the local level. The prospect of achieving social change through individual “empowerment” is an appealing one, but one that makes little sense outside of some extraordinary historical moment of political or cultural struggle.¹⁰⁷ Of course, gender relations in both Uganda and Bangladesh are changing in ways that are still poorly understood. But these are long-term shifts in economic and social structure, and not the product of development engineering.

It is perhaps inevitable that demand for certainty is highest in situations of greatest uncertainty and to some extent participatory development approaches answer this demand. By re-asserting the enlightenment view that the world can be made and unmade through human agency and that every individual has the same capacity to be the subject of her own history, PRA embodies the promise of orderly progress. Viewed from this perspective, it is not surprising that expectations of PRA have spiralled to soaring heights, giving rise to a seemingly endless series of claims about the power of participation. In a climate where “failure” of participatory projects to deliver on such claims invariably triggers calls for more and more pure participatory practice, it is not surprising that some ask whether we are subjected to the “tyranny of participation” (Cooke and Kothari 2001). If participatory approaches are to retain a legitimate place in struggles for justice and inclusion without either losing the argument to instrumentalist visions of development or becoming incorporated in them, it is vital to invigorate critical debate about the limits of participation. This study has been an attempt to inject some fresh life into these debates through an ethnographic perspective on how participation occurs in practice. Our findings may reveal comparatively modest “impacts” but they are significant nevertheless.

6.1 **Downscaling expectations: the illusion of technique**

It is a common assumption in much contemporary development work that the right set of tools and “attitudes”, passed on through “training”, will enable individuals to break through the accumulated weight of culture and social structure, so that changed consciousness precedes (or even substitutes for) change in social relations (empowerment). This is an understandable and even an admirable aspiration, but it can lead practitioners into setting themselves a trap of impossible expectations.

¹⁰⁷ And it is worth remembering that such moments always have their costs, perhaps especially for the most vulnerable.

An exaggerated faith in empowerment, or participation, through the application of techniques or methods seems to be part and parcel of the belief that development occurs through modernisation. In the 1960s and 1970s, literacy was the preferred technique of those who had inherited the Enlightenment tradition. In the 1980s and 1990s, PRA, and similar “participatory” approaches, became the empowerment tools of choice.

Brian Street has showed how would-be modernisers so often press literacy into service as a kind of technology for the rational thinking and individual autonomy that modernity (or democracy) requires. In fact, of course, this valorisation of written language and “educated” styles of discourse helps to legitimise the very power relations that development organisations claim they seek to change. Mubende villagers were all too ready to undermine their own authority to speak in public forums with their perception that their speech is “unstructured”. And *Reflect* participants in Netrokona and Mauluvibazar were eager to show how they had learned to emulate the “civilised” and “articulate” speech of elite and middle class Bangladeshi women in preference to the “crude”, “loud” and “ugly” talk of the villagers.

The “radical” philosophy of Paulo Freire, which inspired *Reflect*, politicises this assumption rather than discarding it. Freire valorises literacy as the means for introducing abstract thought and systematic analysis to the oppressed – who, he argues, are otherwise trapped in a mental miasma of fatalism and superstition. More mainstream NGOs, unable to carry forward Freire’s effort to make literacy a part of the class struggle, drop the class struggle and retain the literacy part, simultaneously institutionalising and professionalising it as a “programme”. Methods of participation are often an integral part of such depoliticising and professionalising trends, even going one step further by proclaiming participation *as* method. Here, the artificial and closed ritual of the PRA exercise comes to substitute for any genuine voice or influence in the wider society.

6.1.2 The expectations trap

Development workers, not to mention those who fund and support their organisations, need “something to get them out of bed in the morning”, as the saying goes. Structures of poverty, patriarchy and injustice are deeply entrenched in Bangladesh and Uganda, seemingly beyond the reach of human agency. The poor have little space for overt resistance, and change is a slow, murky, mostly opaque process, full of reversals and disappointments.¹⁰⁸ In this context, the notion of “empowerment” through easily accessible methods and tools – and the underlying paradigm of modernisation – can be enabling, even necessary. It sets up a teleology of sorts that shows how individual actions will lead towards the desired outcome, simplifying the story in ways that make it possible (and compelling) for us to bring about change.

¹⁰⁸ Marx would have been quick to remind readers that to be enmeshed in structures that are largely invisible to us and beyond our control is in the nature of capitalist society everywhere, and not a specific feature of life in so-called “underdeveloped” countries. Our comment is intended in that spirit, and not as a disparagement of the formidable energies and capacities of poor people in Uganda and Bangladesh.

But myths also have their dangers. In many development organisations, the conflation of methods with outcomes leads to an exaggerated picture of “impact”. We see this in the common tendency for one NGO to take credit for gains that in reality are the result of the efforts of many actors. We see this when NGOs take credit for changes that in reality are mainly due to action by the state, or arise from the social relationships and cultural resources that poor people themselves create and sustain (as when a South African NGO recently advertised its success in enlisting grandmothers to care for AIDS orphans). More fundamental, however, is the tendency to ignore or drastically simplify and foreshorten historical process. Long-term processes of change in social and economic relations drop out of sight in favour of a simplistic equation between individual “empowerment” through a limited term NGO programme, and the desired improvements in the position of women or poor people. Like witchcraft, development mythology reduces a complex and uncontrollable chain of causality to a simple transaction between individuals, mediated by an esoteric technique.

Thus, amongst literacy organisations, it is common to see results that *might* be expected over decades as part of a complex large-scale transition to a literate society (such as more active citizen scrutiny of the actions of government) being “achieved” practically overnight by micro-projects. Moreover, the alleged impacts are usually ascribed to the beneficial effects of the “methodology” or “skill” (literacy) itself. This is by no means confined to literacy or *Reflect* programmes – it is endemic in the micro-finance sector in Bangladesh, for example.¹⁰⁹

It has become clear that *Reflect* circles can, at times, be a socio-political force in their own right, while also potentially functioning as a pawn in individual agendas. We have deliberately sought to enter into some of the more complex situations illustrating the many factors informing women’s strategies, thus showing how any simplistic notions of “what *Reflect* does” are misplaced. We have also shown that straightforward answers to the question as to what would constitute an empowering change to women are difficult to come by. Being able to stand up and speak out on one’s own behalf are certainly crucial abilities in many situations but in others silence or even physical absence from meetings are equally confident and clever actions. A very detailed knowledge of the context is necessary before attempting a judgement of what constitutes empowering action and what doesn’t. Obviously, the benefit of hindsight informs our analysis here and underlines the limitations development agencies, and in particular their field staff, are facing when initiating and supervising *Reflect* projects. Under normal circumstances, there is weak staff capacity to anticipate and plan for how the *Reflect* process will be received, re-interpreted and put to use by local women and men (or, in development speak, how it will “impact on” them).

This low capacity to predict outcomes should by no means be embarrassing to individual development workers. It should be far more cause for concern that employees in many

¹⁰⁹ It is, of course, also a common tendency in more economic approaches to development, for example when statistical correlations between “education” and “fertility” are falsely interpreted to describe a causal relation (Jeffreys and Jeffreys).

agencies routinely (feel obliged to) make confident claims about what development approaches such as *Reflect* can achieve. Indeed, they can hardly even pose the question raised in the last paragraph – how the *Reflect* circles will be received and re-interpreted by community members. The overwhelming bias in development organisations is to rather ask how their projects and methods will “impact on” local people. This only reinforces the pressure that virtually all stakeholders in a development project are under, be they “beneficiaries”, agency staff, or donors, to present projects as an effective way of orchestrating positive social change. Therefore, a process of selective reporting and listening at all levels often effectively serves to transform messy realities into success stories of community development.

The story of the Kilemba circle slashing grass by the roadside, for example, could and would normally be presented very differently than we have done here. Both the participants and the facilitator were initially keen to report this activity as stemming exclusively from the debates in the circle, underlining the disorderly state of affairs before the project started and how grateful they are for the progress they have made ever since coming under its influence. Susan’s insistence that participants rather than herself were active agents in this activity says relatively little about actual procedure but speaks volumes about how well she understands the importance of downplaying her own influence while celebrating the emerging forcefulness of participants. Representatives of any development agency would be content to collect such evidence of *Reflect* having an empowering impact, and would have little incentive or opportunity to further investigate the plausibility of such claims. At the same time, Susan’s strategy of self-deprecation is only a mirror image of how development agencies and their employees routinely discount their own involvement to that of “facilitator”, thus downplaying any influencing or arm-twisting they might have engaged in during the course of a project. In this way, projects appear to empower and politicise participants while themselves remaining distinctly non-political.

By forgetting about history, dropping the politics and foregrounding methodologies and techniques, development organisations may be able to convince themselves and others of “impact”. But the result seems to be a kind of inflationary spiral (each NGO feeling the pressure to “keep up with the Joneses”) in which expectations become ever more idealised and at the same time, less and less clear (see also Riddell 2001). This is ultimately demotivating for frontline development workers, who end up feeling confused and alienated by the gap between rhetoric and reality and take refuge in the rigidly bureaucratic implementation of (“participatory”) methods. And it stands in the way of a realistic and nuanced understanding of the aspirations of the “beneficiaries” themselves and what they might actually find useful (as opposed to irrelevant or even dangerous) about a development programme. A perspective that values *Reflect* processes as expressions, not engines, of social change may find it more difficult to quantify the “value added” by *Reflect* but it will help to avoid the approach being used as a quick fix solution.

ActionAid undertook this study in a deliberate effort to develop a less mythical and more contextualised understanding of the role that *Reflect* plays in the lives and struggles of poor women. It took the risk – a considerable risk in light of the intense competition amongst international NGOs for profile and funds – that the findings would show some of its work in a less-than-glorious light. And indeed, the result is a relatively modest inventory of small and tenuous gains – not the sweeping narrative of personal and social transformations, or the dazzling array of statistical correlations so often claimed. Nevertheless, we think these gains are significant. They matter immensely to women who have few allies and few resources. More evaluations undertaken in this spirit (though not necessarily in this depth) would go some way towards ensuring that we move beyond participation for participation's sake.

6.2 Celebrating small gains: Reflect as a social marketing tool

The action points produced by *Reflect* circles were strikingly similar to the development messages commonly included in more conventional literacy primers and promoted by government and NGOs through many other channels. They were therefore already familiar to most women in the study communities. The responsibility of learners themselves to change their behaviour was always the theme of the action points, as with standard development messages. On larger issues affecting the lives of people in the area, such as slum evictions in Dhaka or changes in land tenure in Mubende, the circles maintained a polite silence (which is not to say that resistance and subversion were not going on in other settings and discourses).¹¹⁰

However, no matter how orthodox the content, the idea that edifying messages could be derived from the experience and knowledge of learners themselves (and the underlying notion that the illiterate poor are capable of rational and informed discussion) was quite radical in itself. Staff and participants both felt that the fact that “development messages” were embedded in a discussion of local realities made them more effective and memorable. In all of the circles it was notable that discussion was valued and encouraged. Even when some NGOs in Bangladesh dropped *Reflect* and took up a primer-led approach (usually for funding reasons), most of them made an effort to introduce learner participation and discussion into the new curriculum.

It may be quite missing the point of action points to expect participants to formulate any challenge to development orthodoxy. Rather, what women seemed to value was being able to claim this authoritative knowledge as their own (and presumably *Reflect's* ability to translate personal experience into standard formulations of modern wisdom aided in this). While the claims women initially laid to having gained knowledge often faded quickly, many asserted they had greater confidence and could now offer advice to their neighbours.

¹¹⁰ With the current shift towards rights-based approaches, many projects do now endeavour to address larger issues - see also the discussion at the end of this conclusion.

Moreover, the stress on individual action was part of the appeal of the action points. Rather than simply being told that a latrine is sanitary and good for your health, how much more appealing and “modern” to be part of a group whose members make a decisive public resolution that “we will build latrines”. The feeling of being in control and making plans for improving one’s life was something that many *Reflect* participants recounted enthusiastically – even if this usually remained at the level of word rather than deed.

6.2.1 Reflect and communications skills

Recently some *Reflect* practitioners have embraced a very wide-ranging definition of communication skills in which alphanumeric literacy is only one “code” among many, not a master template. Not surprisingly, given that women in the study communities had little access to the formal economy and little direct contact with state bureaucracy, our study confirms that the acquisition of reading and writing skills was not a top priority for most of the learners. Nor did it prove very useful to them once they finished. Learning to speak and behave in an “educated” manner was far more important. On the other hand, it did often matter to them that *Reflect* was defined as a literacy programme (not a sewing circle or a prayer group) and had many activities connected to reading and writing, because this allowed women participants to appropriate some of the status attached to “education”.

6.2.3 Status and prestige

The participatory aspects of *Reflect* were valued by women when they could relate “participation” to their own aspirations for social status and the prestige of “modern” practices. For example, making lists of action points (or “problems” in Bangladesh) was very popular because it conformed to women’s ideals of how educated people conduct “structured” public speech. Maps, calendars and matrices, as well as diagrams and charts historically played a vital role in shaping modern thought in Western culture, and PRA now allows poor people to also represent their realities through lines and grids. This can be a very attractive proposition, particularly to those who felt that their realities were somehow “beneath” such sophisticated representation. From this perspective, it is perhaps also understandable that few women in Bangladesh and Uganda placed particular value on working with local materials. On the contrary, flipcharts and markers as opposed to sticks, stones and sand were the materials women preferred to mark their progress.

Being the direct point of contact between the community and the powerful development agency was also a very important source of influence and status for individual women in Netrokona. SUS provided many other services to the communities where the women lived. This was undoubtedly an added attraction for keeping in close contact with the NGO.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ In the three other projects, for various reasons, the implementing organisations offered far fewer services outside of the *Reflect* projects.

The fact that this contact was mediated through literacy classes – widely seen as a virtuous and non-threatening activity for women – probably helped women to avoid getting into difficulties about it. There are very few reports from *Reflect* circles of participants facing beatings or abuse from male relatives for wanting to take part in the activity.

Moreover women in literacy programmes can trade on the immense, almost mystificatory value given to formal schooling (and command of English or of “standard” Bangla). This is not least reinforced by the bureaucratic practices of NGOs, where activities such as signing, filling in records, writing constitutions for group activities or drawing up action plans are a highly valued part of the routine (Uganda review). However, while many women undoubtedly valued literacy, this was rarely because they regarded it as a practical necessity. Our study confirms that the practical uses of literacy for poor women on the fringes of the “modern” economy are few.

The hopes and aspirations of participants are one thing, but whether they are able to convince others to credit or validate their claim to status is quite another. We found that some women are able to “bargain with literacy” to gain greater respect from husbands or neighbours. The end result was another degree or two of freedom for those individuals, within the limits of existing gender and class relationships. This is not surprising, given that most participants used *Reflect* as an aid not to reject dominant ideologies and power relations, but rather to learn to emulate more convincingly the customs, rituals and symbols that validate those structures.

6.3 Mapping the constraints

Despite ActionAid’s best intentions, it proved to have little influence over the methods actually used in the circles or the content of lessons and discussions. More and better training and ongoing supervision might have increased ActionAid’s ability to influence classroom practice, and this is perhaps one sense in which it might be fair to say that the projects we studied were weak compared to *Reflect* programmes elsewhere. However, even with flawless application of *Reflect* methods in every circle, the meaning and hence the “impact” of literacy programmes would still have been beyond ActionAid’s control. Literacy classes have to be actively invented and negotiated by those involved, within a particular institutional and cultural context. Literacy programmes are shaped by the “modernising” ideologies and ambitions of frontline development staff, by the interests of local authorities and elites who influence the selection of facilitators and help to determine the status of the circles, and by the state that defines the operating space for NGOs as providers of adult education services and that expects its own development messages to be communicated through literacy classes. But most powerfully of all, literacy programmes are shaped by the social aspirations and cultural meanings that learners and facilitators attach to them.

In both countries, involvement in the *Reflect* programme, and the claim to “educated” status this allowed women to stake, was only one small part of the complex bargaining strategies that they engineered to better negotiate their position within gender and class hierarchies. Interestingly, these strategies often play on both “traditional” and “modern” social roles and exploit the ambiguities or contradictions within both. Women narrate their literacy learning as an active process of self-transformation, and so do international NGO staff. But international NGOs tell a story of self-making or self-realisation built around implicit (Western) metaphors of autonomy, individuality and “empowerment”, while women themselves tell a story of self-improvement, achieving more “respectable” standards of housewifely decorum, cleanliness and competence. NGO fieldworkers tend to amalgamate these two visions, while retaining a clear sense of the NGO being the actor and the poor the recipients. And male relatives “domesticate” and downgrade literacy learning as something virtuous but insignificant “for women”, often rejecting the idea that it should “count” as a form of schooling or qualification.

The strong relationship that women perceive – and actively seek to create – between literacy programmes, the power of the sponsoring NGO, and the prestige of formal schooling and official knowledge sets up powerful contradictions for methodologies that seek to use participation to create a “counter-cultural” space and to promote “questioning” of hegemonic ideologies and power relationships.

6.3.1 The power of orthodoxy

None of the *Reflect* programmes studied was promoting the “reevaluation” or even the systematic dissection of local knowledge and traditional culture (let alone *women’s* knowledge and culture) that features so centrally in debates about *Reflect* at international level. Instead, scientific, “modern” improvements on traditional practice were enthusiastically explained, discussed and endlessly made into action points, even when their benefits would seem to be dubious. In the Uganda circles, the facilitator might ask participants what they usually do when there is food in plenty, and the participants, knowing full well where this question will lead, will report how it all goes to waste in feasting and generous giving away. Much laughter about one’s own and other participants’ “backward ways” is then followed by the solemn resolution to stop wasting food and to work harder. To call such analysis superficial is to put it mildly, but that is beside the point. It gives participants the opportunity to make a public pledge to “better their ways”, to show that one is a person who acts rationally and “has a plan”, no longer “just a village rat”.

In fairness, PRA was not originally designed to help people resist or question dominant knowledge, but rather to help representatives of the dominant paradigm (such as agricultural scientists) to understand local knowledge by objectifying, classifying and systematising it. And where PRA was being used in the *Reflect* circles we studied, its paraphernalia of

scientific-looking maps, matrices, and Venn diagrams almost seemed to function the other way round – as a translation device for the mysteries of official doctrine (things that people “already knew” but came to “really know” through *Reflect*).

Evaluations of *Reflect* worldwide suggest that this is not unusual. Our study makes it clear what an enormous task it would be for a *Reflect* circle to challenge the orthodoxies of “development”, unless the organisation sponsoring it was engaged in a much wider “counter-cultural” project and had already found alternative sources of legitimacy (and funds!).

6.4 Implications for *Reflect* in practice

Many of the findings presented in this report do not easily lend themselves to the formulating of recommendations to *Reflect* practitioners. On voicing the criticisms made here, we have often been asked, if not pressured, to come up with alternatives. We feel that any criticism accepted as valid is also constructive, posing no onus on its authors to present alternative models of “doing things” as a pre-condition to its acceptability. Much of this report has been less a criticism of the actual “doing” of learners, facilitators and staff, and more about how this “doing” is thought of and reported. As much as we would like this report to provide food for thought to practitioners, we are wary that aspects of it could be turned into a new set of prescriptions for “best practice”. There is nothing to be said against the practice of exchanging ideas and experiences that some *Reflect* practitioners engage in. It is also positive if this contributes to the approach evolving in new directions. What is problematic, however, is if a very elusive, constantly changing standard of “best practice” puts actual programmes at the whim of fashion, where it is possible to be courted one day and dismissed as “behind the times” the next. This tendency exerts pressure on programmes to be “fashionable” and may be the greatest deterrent to sensitive, undogmatic adaptation of the approach in a given locality.

The following recommendations thus come with a clear warning that they may not simply be used as additional ingredients to refine “the” recipe for empowerment that *Reflect*, despite all the changes and innovations, so clearly still strives to be.

6.4.1 Avoiding exaggeration of the power of methodology

Our findings suggest that programme makers have limited means to endorse specific practices in literacy classes. We found that even relatively “undistorted” *Reflect* practice was by no means a guaranteed avenue to the anticipated empowerment gains. On the other hand, we also found that methodological practices that were at odds with the *Reflect* ethos (syllable chanting, lectures, strict formality) were not experienced as disempowering by many participants. In this light, we recommend less emphasis on methodological purity and a deeper acknowledgement of the fact that methods are context-specific. While we found many instances where participatory tools were genuinely useful, there were just as many times

when other means of achieving a task were more useful. Constant pressure to be “more participatory” is not necessarily helpful in identifying and assisting such situations.

6.4.2 Accepting routinisation

All the projects we looked at were “second generation” *Reflect* projects that operated in the same countries as two of the three earlier pilot projects but were not directly linked to them. The appeal of pilot projects is that they test a method that can then be replicated many times over, or so goes the theory. In practice, pilot projects often have a dynamic of their own, receiving unusual levels of attention and support. Particularly if things are seen to go well, staff are usually highly motivated, not least through opportunities to travel to international conferences, write publications, or enhance their career prospects. Perhaps inevitably, this causes friction with those working in “second generation” projects, who are expected to live up to the very high expectations generated in the pilots without getting the same incentives and support. If they fail to repeat the success story it is often the staff themselves who are blamed for their inadequate understanding or commitment to the method, since the pilot project is taken to have proven that the method is sound. In the case of *Reflect*, the international attention and acclaim that followed the publication of the pilot evaluation has perhaps exacerbated these very common problems. The idealistic response to this dilemma would be to declare every project experimental, and to some degree the projects we researched did retain experimental elements (the management structure in Madudu, for example, or the introduction of English in Banda). In as far as this might help to demystify the status of pilot projects it would be useful. However, in practice, a certain degree of routinisation seems impossible to avoid, and we therefore suggest that it is better to work on this premise than to inflate expectations.

One of the overriding themes of this research has been about women trying to get ahead by achieving greater conformity with dominant norms, and only rarely by overtly challenging them. To the majority of women in our study, literacy skills held more symbolic than practical value. This finding does not necessarily suggest a down-scaling of literacy instruction, since the symbolic value of “having become educated” can be just as important as any gains from the practical use of literacy skills. At the same time, there were other skills, such as achieving some mastery of the dominant language, which were strongly demanded by learners and may be equally or more useful to learners than literacy per se. We recommend that, where such demands exist, they are taken seriously and not dismissed on ideological grounds. Sometimes, the status ambitions of women are swept under the carpet due to an overly confident interpretation of how emancipation occurs. If it is agreed that there is no privileged mechanism (be it literacy or any other form) that whisks women through a process of rational self-transformation, then we might find less need to denigrate women’s status ambitions in the way so often done now.

6.4.3 Contemplating rights-based approaches

As has just been pointed out, there is a legitimate place for *Reflect* as a means for participants to align themselves more closely with dominant norms. This, it should be emphasised, is not a “lower” form of *Reflect*. In fact it is likely to remain the main use of *Reflect*. However, at the end of our fieldwork period, both ActionAid Uganda and ActionAid Bangladesh had started moving towards a “rights-based approach”, defined within ActionAid as a more overtly political stance in which NGOs try to encourage and support social movements of the oppressed in order to enable the poor to “demand their rights”. It was widely hoped that *Reflect* could play a part in this, with *Reflect* circles providing a “space” for conscientisation and incipient forms of political organisation.

In the hands of a committed organisation with a radical vision for change, and in a context of wider social upheavals and cultural struggles, we have no doubt that *Reflect* could indeed provide valuable tools to assist in mobilising popular action. On the other hand, in a similar context, Christian evangelism, Islamic fundamentalism, Marxist doctrine or even ethnic nationalism could presumably be used to similar effect. The point is not to compare *Reflect* to any of these sectarian dogmas but to suggest that perhaps the intrinsic features of a “methodology” are far less important than the ability to provide a story, a teleology, that links individual effort to visionary social and moral transformation.

On the other hand, our findings here suggest that like any methodology, participatory or not, *Reflect* is unlikely to spark sustained social movements outside of the rather unusual and specific context just described. In the more ordinary circumstances in which this study was conducted, the participatory possibilities opened up by *Reflect* were constrained by the overwhelming imperative felt by poor people to show public conformity to the messages promoted by NGOs as well as by other powerful outside actors be they religious or governmental. It would certainly be salutary, in these circumstances, for development agencies to drop pretensions of being neutral – beginning with a self-critical appreciation of how political a force they already are.

But we have argued in this study that contradictions buried deep in the “participatory” approach to development make it difficult, perhaps almost impossible, for NGOs espousing such approaches to come to terms with their own power. These contradictions are both philosophical and pragmatic. It is crucial to *Reflect* and other participatory methodologies that the change process is initiated and controlled by poor people themselves. Whenever the undeniable influence of the development agency is admitted, it is only as an aberration – an example of bad practice, inadequate training or wrong attitudes. Yet most development organisations still want to be able to guarantee that this organic and spontaneous process will generate the “right” outcomes, outcomes that fit with the development organisation’s own views of what is modern, rational, healthy and prudent. This is not just a temporary muddle

or unfortunate confusion that participatory development practitioners have got themselves into. Instead, the notion of participation itself is caught up in this contradiction, for the process of “structured”, “systematic” analysis by which individuals assert intellectual and moral control over their circumstances is the crucial mechanism linking participation to (what the development organisation defines as) the adoption of “rational” solutions to poverty.

Debates about the implications of a rights-based approach are on-going within ActionAid. Recently, for example, ActionAid India warned against the temptation to turn “rights” into the subject of a technical, legal discourse, as happens when NGOs are too quick to seek shelter in the universal validity of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. ActionAid India argues that a “rights-based” approach must rather be grounded, far more contentiously, in poor people’s own understandings of natural justice, which will necessarily be informed by the history of local struggles. Unless this warning is carefully heeded, there is an evident risk that the shift to “rights-based approaches” will only further embed NGO prescriptiveness as to what constitute valid, authentic and productive “voices” or means of resistance by the poor. In Bangladesh, the campaign against dowry payments is a case in point. Only one stance on the issue tends to be recognised as women’s “voice”, i.e. that dowry is harmful, illegal, and must be stopped. Most poor women we interviewed agreed with this stand; but also agreed that women can equally be the benefactors and proponents of dowry. This latter stand is rarely reported by women to development workers, neither is it asked for, and consequently it is not recorded as “women’s voice”. Thus, when NGOs start facilitating women’s access to legal proceedings against dowry (as some did in our field sites during the course of the study), this is of great help to the few women who, for one reason or other, are ready to be martyrs for a cause. However, by making dowry a defining issue in their analysis of women’s oppression, the same NGOs risked missing out on other, less visible gender struggles and other, more complex strategies of resistance to patriarchy – ones that may not necessarily be easily described through the language of “rights”, but may provide more fertile ground for building genuine cross-class and cross-caste alliances among women.

All projects we researched actively engaged in shaping women’s “voice” without admitting to the significant influence they exercised over defining what is and what is not in the best interests of women. The effects of false claims that “women are doing it for themselves” may be relatively harmless as long as the women concerned are under no obligation to act on what NGOs claim to be good for them. This changes significantly when an emerging rights-based approach requires poor women to be seen as proactive in the public sphere, working on the interests and views ascribed to them.¹¹² The worst case scenario is one where the rights-based

¹¹² A group of 20 facilitators in a different Bangladeshi project discussed how they sought to address dowry payments in their villages. Public exposure was felt to be too extreme and not very helpful. They also felt that women per se were not the natural constituency against dowry since mothers of sons were often seen to be more fervent in campaigning for high dowries than their husbands. They reported trying to convince rich people not to stop or reduce dowry but merely to be discreet in paying it out, not putting too much wealth on display, so that poorer people don’t feel under pressure to match up. The women felt that this quiet and discreet strategy was the only one they deemed appropriate. They further explained that dramatic results could not be expected, since when high dowries are paid, it is often not least so as to prove wealth.

approach which aims to enable poor people to have more control over development ends up obliging poor people to sing along with the tune of the professional middle classes to an even greater extent than has previously been the case. It must be underlined that no malicious intent by development workers is necessary for this to happen. Too great a sense of certainty about “what women want” (which is often shorthand for our opinions about what women *would* want if they were empowered and could rationally reflect on their situation) is entirely sufficient.

Reflect and other participatory approaches may have potential to contribute to a rights-based approach, but the analysis here has shown that choice of method or approach is secondary to other, more crucial questions that agencies need to consider before going down this path. For example, how far are agencies willing to go to ensure that it is indeed poor people’s opinions which are being heard, not merely poor people presenting agency concerns. While there can never be one, authentic “voice of the poor”, a much greater degree of sensitivity to the selective hearing still widely employed by agencies today will be crucial. There are also tough questions to be asked about how far agencies are willing to go in their support for poor people’s concerns, once they know them. Questions of taking an openly political stand will inevitably arise, as could questions about illegal or violent action. It is salutary that ActionAid has initiated a widespread debate amongst its staff on some of these issues, for if anything, these questions are most pertinent at district or village level, where development professionals – and their intended beneficiaries – are least able to escape political pressure and even persecution. Unless development agencies make very clear both to constituencies of poor people and to their own staff just how far the backing of the agency goes, there is little point in discussing the methodologies used to implement a rights-based approach.¹¹³

¹¹³ It should be noted that many of these questions about the rights-based approach were being asked both in ActionAid Uganda and in ActionAid Bangladesh, and our discussion here does not seek to imply otherwise.

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Appendix 1: Reactions to this report from Reflect practitioners

David Archer - January 2003

David Archer, Head of International Education at ActionAid, proposed the initial fusion of Freire's work with PRA that led to the development of Reflect. He has observed the Reflect approach in practice across 20 diverse countries over the past 9 years as well as being in ongoing contact with practitioners from a further 40 countries. However, he has never had the same richness and depth of contact with any particular experience that was possible for the researchers of this report. This short reaction incorporates comments received from a few experienced Reflect practitioners who have read the full report (from Nepal, Uganda, Ghana and Bangladesh) as well as comments from practitioners who were able to discuss key issues arising from the report at the International Reflect Circle meeting in Recife, Brazil (June 2002).

Introduction

This research has taken place over a five-year period within which the *Reflect* approach has spread and evolved rapidly. Learning generated from the research has continually informed ongoing practice as *Reflect* practitioners have digested it, assimilated it and amalgamated it with other ideas and insights arising from their diverse practice. This has not always been an easy process as the research has involved some very fundamental challenges to the work of practitioners. However, thanks to the openness of *Reflect* practitioners and the researchers, and through ongoing contact and exchanges, many critical observations from the research have been transformed into positive innovations. These exchanges have helped shape some of the interpretations and arguments of the researchers as well as shaping evolving *Reflect* practice. To a significant extent the research has been part of a *Reflect* process itself – encouraging dialogue and critical *Reflection*, enabling people to challenge past assumptions, to see their experience in a new light and act strategically.

As the researchers state clearly, this is not an evaluation of *Reflect*. Rather it has a much wider scope in providing insights into the work of any organisation that is promoting “participation” or “empowerment” whether through literacy programmes or others means. Indeed *Reflect* practitioners find much to welcome in the report, agreeing with the fundamental critique of concepts that have come to underpin much development practice. But there are also some concerns about the limitations of the research and the dangers of people mis-reading it. This short reaction is therefore divided into two sections. The first section captures areas of congruence between the evolution of *Reflect* and some of the issues raised by the researchers. The second section looks at the limitations of the research. All comments here are offered in the spirit of maintaining the dialogue built up between practitioners and researchers over the past five years.

Convergence between the research and evolving practice

“I do agree with a lot of the issues the researchers raise... Many are issues that we were aware of and constantly brought up during workshops and informal discussions, seeking to find practical ways to deal with them.” Keshav Gautam, Nepal

There are many different areas in which insights from this research converge with insights from *Reflect* practice around the world. These insights have contributed to the continuing evolution of the *Reflect* approach so that much practice today is quite different to the practice portrayed in this report. We do not, however, seek to claim that all *Reflect* practice is immune to the critical insights of this report.

Power

This research shows the naïvety with which the concept of “empowerment” is often used and reinforces the need for a much more serious understanding of power dynamics. Whereas at one point there was a tendency for some practitioners to see themselves as “neutral”, there is now a widespread acceptance that individuals and organisations need to recognise their power and work to transform it.

It is not always easy to talk explicitly about power, especially about **our own power**, but it is now a central focus of most *Reflect* processes, whether in facilitator education, training workshops, national networks or international exchanges. We use the same visualisations and participatory approaches that are used in local *Reflect* practice to do this – applying the principles of *Reflect* to ourselves. The aim is to ensure that people involved in a *Reflect* process at every level analyse their own power in different spheres of their lives, the power of their organisation (and other organisations) and the power dynamics that can be anticipated in the work of local circles. This means developing a sensitivity to many different types of power – being able to see through many different lenses.

This cannot be achieved in a one off workshop but is part of an ongoing process in which everyone is encouraged to find time and space to reflect and act within their own institutions and even within their own families. Unlike in the early years, no-one engaged in a *Reflect* process today is likely to regard themselves as neutral or invisible. Rather than denying their power, practitioners are likely to recognise that they are engaged in an explicitly **political process** (though not party-political) and be more conscious of their role within that process (which involves recognising and working to positively transform power relations).

The researchers are right to expose the limitations of **participatory tools and techniques** – which all too often are used as if they have some magical power in themselves to create a process of transformation. There is a growing recognition from *Reflect* practitioners that all participatory methods are open to manipulation or distortion; that they can be used in extractive or exploitative ways. In order for tools and techniques to be used to change power relations they need to be used with an explicit awareness of, and sensitivity to, those relationships.

The researchers provide some powerful insights into the internal dynamics of *Reflect* circles, particularly in Uganda, revealing the tensions and hierarchies that exist in each case. It seems

embarrassing now to consider the implicit view in early *Reflect* literature that circles would be relatively homogenous and harmonious, and would thus easily reach consensus. In line with the greater sensitivity to power there is now an awareness of the **stratification** present in all communities, along diverse lines – including gender, class, age, language, social status, hierarchy etc. There have been various responses to this. For example, a common topic for discussion in facilitator training now is “how to deal with conflict” within a circle; as is “who might oppose change and how might they react?”. More and more organisations using *Reflect* also talk directly about the need to “take sides” when starting work in a community – so that there is an explicit alignment with the poorest groups from the start.

Given these significant changes in *Reflect* it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the most widely quoted examples of practice is now the role that the *Reflect* approach played in the development of the Dalit movement in Nepal. This is never presented in a neutral way. The example emphasises the importance of organisation and strategic political action. The movement encountered very direct opposition and a strong backlash from local elite. How Dalits responded to that backlash is a central part of the story.

Status and roles

There are many ways in which the insights from this research concerning **social status** and roles have contributed to changing *Reflect* practice in recent years. There is a recognition by many that a *Reflect* circle is a kind of rehearsal space. Participants assume a new role by coming to join the circle. How this role develops and what it is used for is influenced by the experience of the process.

Practitioners now place much attention on creating a **democratic space**, where each person’s voice is valued. This is recognised in many respects as counter-cultural (in no other space is everyone’s voice regarded equally), but by working to create such a space (which is never easy and is probably never perfectly achieved), the new roles that people have assumed can be encouraged to evolve in exciting directions. **Role play** and **drama** support this process and enable participants to temporarily assume a new voice, test out an opinion, see how it feels to break certain norms – in a non-threatening environment.

Understanding literacy

One of the huge benefits of this research is that it has helped practitioners to better understand the historical baggage that comes with the concept of literacy. We are often blind to this “dubious history”, but it still continues to frame expectations in many contexts. *Reflect* practice has evolved in many ways:

- There is much more **critical analysis of literacy** within training workshops – encouraging participants to explore the prejudices and assumptions that come with the term.

- In some cases the focus of *Reflect* has shifted radically from the teaching of literacy towards the **practical uses of literacy**. Enabling people to deal with the power relationships in situations where literacy is used – to overcome fear and intimidation can in itself be of crucial importance.
- There has been a spread of **more effective approaches** to the acquisition of literacy, for example, moving away from a focus on micro-language (generative words, syllabic families etc) towards using whole texts generated by participants themselves and more real materials.
- In other cases the focus has moved to **communication and power**. This does not involve abandoning literacy but rather re-situating it in a wider context where the focus is on strengthening people's capacity to communicate by whatever means are most appropriate. This has led to more systematic work on, for example, oral communication (eg learning the dominant language, using new discourses, speaking out in new contexts, using radio), as well as visual and audio-visual communication (eg enabling people to access and use different media such as photography, video etc.).

Framing the process

In the light of this more critical and diverse approach to literacy there is much more awareness now about the importance of the **entry point** and **initial mobilisation** in *Reflect* programmes. It is increasingly common to work with pre-existing community groups or social movements (where people have an existing sense of group identity and will not feel they are part of a “classroom”), rather than set up new groups. Where new groups are formed there is a greater sensitivity to how the process is presented – for example avoiding a simplistic focus on literacy (which frames expectations too narrowly) and talking instead about learning, communication, local democracy, community planning or local action etc.

A key element in this new framing of the *Reflect* process is the importance of **naming the approach locally**. Names now exist for *Reflect* in over 40 languages. These are not translations in any respect but re-conceptualisations in order to ensure greater local ownership. By naming their own process participants can actively construct it for themselves and play with social signifiers, status and identity. Many organisations are now conscious of these social signifiers at every stage of the process, for example, being careful to give participants clipboards or folders (stationery associated with business people or professionals) rather than exercise books.

Modesty in our claims

The researchers are absolutely right in exposing the disturbing tendency of development organisations to pretend that they live in an “eternal present” and that their projects are cocooned from other influences. In most interactions between *Reflect* practitioners and in recent publications on *Reflect* there is a growing acceptance that **“we are only part of the process”**, and that social change processes with complex roots and dynamics are going on

all the time around us. We cannot and should not claim to be the centre of change processes. However, it is legitimate to seek to be a positive part of a wider process.

Furthermore, we would fully agree with the researchers that social and political change takes a long time. There is no **quick fix**. As was shown in a recent global survey (which confirmed that most circles meet for at least two years – and some indefinitely), *Reflect* does not presume to be one.

The points made by the researchers about **gender relations** resonated strongly, particularly with some *Reflect* practitioners in Latin America. As the researchers suggest, you cannot hope to over-turn centuries of patriarchy in a few months or years. Indeed open conflict might be dangerous. Giving women space, dignity and confidence - and the subtle skills to sweet talk or manipulate men and play with their roles - are still important initial steps.

In the light of this learning efforts are being made to ensure a more critical approach is taken in reports and **evaluations** on *Reflect* programmes – scaling down “claims” and contextualising work more fully. In all evaluations we must explore how much participants are feeding back to evaluators the myths with which they were “sold” the programme at first. However, institutional dynamics and the need for funding are always in tension with encouraging such modesty or honesty.

Facilitators

Unlike most other “development” processes, *Reflect* is intended to be fundamentally internal to a community. There are tensions here and this research report brings these out usefully. The research highlights how in both Bangladesh and Uganda the facilitators were caught up in a complex web of social relations themselves, and were keen to maintain their own status. Thus, they had more interest in promoting simple solutions for individual self-improvement than in promoting deeper analysis and radical change.

The researchers suggest that having a greater social distance between facilitators and participants might sometimes enhance dialogue – but on this question the trend in *Reflect* practice is in the opposite direction. **Facilitator selection** and training are widely seen as the most critical factors in influencing the outcomes of a *Reflect* process. The criteria that should be used for selection are part of an ongoing debate amongst *Reflect* practitioners, but in most cases emphasis is placed on the facilitator coming from within the same community as participants and from the same socio-economic condition. This is not easy where the facilitator needs to have good basic literacy skills themselves. Where facilitators come from outside the local community the focus still tends to be on ensuring that the social distance is not too great. Other key criteria tend to be characteristics that are not easily measured such as: creativity, open-mindedness, a critical perspective, commitment, analytical skills, listening skills, respect for others etc. The entirely ideal facilitator may never exist but looking for these qualities remains important.

Once people are selected, the **training and support** they received is crucial. In some *Reflect* programmes the word “training” has been abolished and in most contexts it has been reconceptualised. The key in initial “training” is not to teach people how to use *Reflect* or transfer a set of tools (as it was once seen). Now the focus is on enabling facilitators to go through their own process of critical reflection and analysis, using the same methods that they will later use with others. The focus is on taking facilitators through a *Reflect* process, not teaching them about it. This requires not just an initial workshop but an ongoing process – with facilitators coming together with other facilitators frequently throughout the period in which they are facilitating a local circle.

Conceptions of knowledge

Another key issue highlighted by this work is around conceptions of knowledge. The *Reflect* approach is based on giving people space and time to *Reflect* on their own experience, synthesising their existing knowledge and developing their own analysis. However, as noted in the research, it is important not to romanticise local knowledge, or be limited by it. We need a better balance. Many *Reflect* practitioners now interweave systematising local knowledge with giving people access to new information - introduced when participants are ready to use it to extend their analysis. A new cross-country initiative (in Uganda, Burundi and India) aims to offer new insights in this area – looking at how *Reflect* circles can be linked to the use of information and communication technology.

From reflection to action

The research report offers some interesting insights into the **actions** that are taken up by *Reflect* participants in Uganda and Bangladesh – and how much these are either small individual acts or ones framed by modernisation discourse. This has been a concern for many practitioners and there has been particular criticism of the idea of “action points” being defined at the end of each discussion. It has been acknowledged that facilitators, who are monitored by how many action points are defined in their circle, can end up driving discussion to the definition of simple, but largely meaningless, action points.

Many practitioners now avoid this by using several different participatory tools to analyse issues from different angles, allowing analysis, rather than action points, to accumulate. This enables participants to define more strategic action that will help to achieve change. In Andhra Pradesh, India, this approach led tribal communities to reverse ten years of dependency on cotton and tobacco, by planting 50% of their land with traditional food crops – as a means to reduce indebtedness, address local health problems, and re-assert cultural identity.

Limitations of the Research

Reflect's strength is in its **diversity**. It is adapted (not adopted) by diverse organisations with different objectives and discourses, working in many different contexts. As such it is hard to gain overall insights from detailed research in two sites in two countries which share certain core characteristics. The comments offered here are not intended to criticise either ActionAid-Uganda or Bangladesh, who have both undergone various changes in the past two years, but to set these project experiences in context.

Both Uganda and Bangladesh were sites of the **Reflect pilot programmes** (1993-5). In these countries, rather than innovate and adapt *Reflect* to a new context, the temptation was to recreate the pilot. Thus these projects did not undergo the same creative evolution of *Reflect* that we have seen elsewhere. Even as early as 1998 practitioners elsewhere in South Asia were challenging the conservative tendencies of *Reflect* in Bangladesh (for example the use of “units” with little change from the *Reflect* Mother Manual). In this case it would seem that being in the same country as original pilot projects had negative rather than positive effects.

Both Uganda and Bangladesh are also countries where **ActionAid's involvement** in *Reflect* is prominent – an influential and wealthy British NGO (which only in the last few years moved from a service-delivery to a rights-based approach) working in ex-British colonies. ActionAid is only one of 350 organisations using *Reflect* in 60 countries, and much of the most exciting *Reflect* practice (until recently) has been outside of ActionAid. This research shows the influence of organisational profile, status and power in any development process – so we should not be surprised that the *Reflect* programmes in these two countries were profoundly affected by the active engagement of ActionAid. It would be wrong to generalise too much from these to the use of *Reflect* by other organisations, especially where these are organisations of a completely different type (such as community-based organisations, smaller NGOs, social movements or local governments).

Some of the most powerful insights of this research concern the incredible baggage of **development discourse** in Uganda and Bangladesh – its roots in colonial administration and the concept of modernisation. We are reminded by all this of the size of the challenge that we face in trying to pursue an approach to learning and action that is committed to social justice. However, it would be wrong to give the impression that all *Reflect* practice is framed by the same discourse. Many elements of *Reflect* emerged from the work of the Brazilian educator **Paulo Freire** and the Latin American popular education movement. This places *Reflect* strongly in a more explicitly **political discourse around justice and equity**. This more politicised discourse is one that many *Reflect* practitioners share. It does of course bring its own limitations (see Betts work in El Salvador), but they are different than those imposed by the discourse of modernisation. Perhaps the important learning for practitioners here is that whatever discourses are used, it helps to be **critically aware** of them – of their power, origins and their likely baggage – of their constraints as well as possibilities.

There are certainly some **frustrations** in reading this report. It is difficult to read without seeing it as a critique of *Reflect* – even though its targets are much broader. Had other programmes using other approaches been subjected to this level of analysis few would have lived up to their ideals or expectations. Had a traditional primer-based literacy programme been the focus then we suspect that the outcome would have been devastating. *Reflect* is at least attempting to break some of the past moulds. This research shows clearly how difficult it is to escape the baggage of the past.

It is also frustrating at times for those familiar with the **projects** concerned in Uganda and Bangladesh, as the report does not fully capture the extent of the particular difficulties faced by three out of four of the projects studied. There were fundamental problems with funding and management in the two Ugandan projects and one of the Bangladeshi projects and these had a serious impact on the development of the *Reflect* programmes in each case. Such problems, though certainly not unknown in other contexts, are not the norm and closer documentation of them might have been helpful.

There is also some frustration around the **imbalance** within the report between Uganda and Bangladesh. The information base in Uganda is much more comprehensive than that in Bangladesh and there are some powerful elements in the Bangladeshi experience which are not fully explored (eg equal pay for tea workers; legal action on dowry). The analysis tends to be driven from the Ugandan experience and does not always fit as comfortably to the experience in Bangladesh. The undeniable power of this analysis also leads to some situations where words or beliefs are implicitly put into the mouths of *Reflect* practitioners which they would not agree with. (eg when it is suggested that practitioners believe that prior to joining *Reflect* circles, participants suffer from “unquestioning subservience”).

One final frustration concerns the lack of sustained reflection on the **researcher’s own role/** influence, especially in Uganda. There is little reflection on the bias that may have been introduced by the fact that the researcher was a white European male. His own role is not scrutinised with the same critical lenses as the programmes he studies. This is a significant gap given the importance of the researchers’ own arguments around the capacity of participants to skilfully present back to development professionals the things they wish to hear. Perhaps some of the perspectives offered in the researcher’s presence will have been influenced by this same process?

Conclusion

This research is devastating for anyone working in an organisation that claims to be a neutral facilitator using participatory approaches as some form of technical solution, whilst retaining simplistic concepts of empowerment and literacy. Hopefully this research will accelerate *Reflect* practitioners along a path that is already being laid - of being more explicitly political,

placing power relationships at the centre of our discourse and challenging “neutralisation” across the development field. So long as we are aware of these elements, we firmly believe that participatory approaches still have an essential role to play, giving people at the grassroots time and space to do their own analysis, construct their own texts and become active negotiators of their own development. Certainly we also need interventions at national and international level, challenging policies that perpetuate inequality and injustice, but without this grassroots engagement by poor people themselves we will never achieve sustainable change.

More detailed information on *Reflect* practice today can be found on the website:

www.Reflect-action.org

and in the new resource materials for *Reflect* practitioners: ‘Communication and Power’ (published by the International *Reflect* Circle, CIRAC 2003). Further material can also be found in the *Reflect* Global Survey (CIRAC 2001) and in the report of the Participatory Methodologies Forum “Transforming Power” (ActionAid 2001).

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