



# Introduction

*A business owners' Action Research group in Dhaka.*

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## How can this resource enhance programming?

CLARISSA evidence builds upon an existing body of evidence (Burns, 2014; Howard et al., 2021) around deeply participatory processes, where children and adults are given significant decision-making power, and supported to collect data, analyse, and take action in order to shift system dynamics to improve their lives. Critical factors within a process of whole systems change are facilitating child- and people-driven evidence generation; participatory learning and action processes around underlying system dynamics and how they drive a problem; and a high level of collective ownership by participants. These critical factors can be enabled through a facilitation approach, inclusive participation, collective problem-solving, and by giving more decision-making power to children and adult stakeholders by considering them as agents of change. With this in mind, this resource can support any organisation or team which is seeking to:

- Strengthen meaningful, deep participation
- Deepen levels of ownership among participants and groups
- Shift power to local people, children and marginalised groups
- Strengthen people- and child-driven or -led programming
- Work effectively as a diverse, equitable and collectively-minded partnership
- Find new, sustainable ways to address longstanding development and humanitarian challenges
- Find ways to reduce dependency on external development and humanitarian actors
- Build team capacity around the fundamental practitioner and team skills underpinning most deep participatory, people-driven, power-sharing approaches
- Use participatory forms of adaptive management to enable learning that supports effectiveness

While CLARISSA used a child- and people-driven systemic approach within the child protection sector, the approach is not limited to any one sector, and has also been used in diverse settings including [engaging communities in sustainable peacebuilding](#); improving toilet provision in a local market; working with bonded labourers to improve their situation; or reducing the incidence of HIV within an island community (Burns, 2014).

### **The purpose of this resource**

The purpose of this resource is to introduce development and humanitarian organisations and their teams to a programme approach and methodology which can enable deeply participatory, learning- and action-oriented, whole systems change. It is written with the understanding that while most development and humanitarian organisations and programmes are not set up to 'do research', this does not mean that they cannot start to use the principles of a Systemic Action Research approach to enhance their work. This resource can help demystify the perception that robust, participatory, child- and people-led Action Research is more difficult or not possible; only relevant for monitoring, evaluation and learning teams; or that the methods are too technical for most practitioners or local participants.

The resource provides key information and learning through video and written briefs, which supports a process of team reflection and co-learning around each topic, including how the approach might be relevant or could be adapted to teams' own working contexts and programmes. It also encourages teams to set themselves some actions to start shifting how they work. Within the briefs, guidance and additional resources are provided on some of the critical skills and tools required to implement a participatory, learning- and action-oriented, whole systems programme, including further evidence and learning from CLARISSA.

### **What this resource is, and what it is not**

This resource has been designed to be a practical, accessible introduction for practitioners and teams to participatory, learning- and action-oriented, whole systems change. It is not a step-by-step guide on how to implement a Systemic Action Research programme. Rather, it is designed to introduce the approach, spark interest and encourage teams to start trying out and practicing some of the methods, skills and tools highlighted by the videos and each brief. Importantly, it supports a

collaborative reflection and learning process around if and how the approach may be relevant for their own organisation or programme. The reflective process can help orient teams and organisations wanting to revise, update or enhance their own programme guidance.

### Who should use this reflection series?

This resource has the potential to support **any** team, currently using **any** approach, working in **any** sector. What is required, however, is that teams have a level of curiosity and a commitment to changing how they currently approach and carry out their work. In particular, this resource will be useful for organisations, programme teams or groups (hereafter referred to collectively as 'teams')

looking for inspiration, approaches and skills which can help shift their programmes towards deep participation, collective ownership and systems change. It can be used by teams working with adults or children. It is particularly relevant for international NGOs and agencies, as well as national NGOs, and potentially some sub-national NGOs working in development and humanitarian settings. In the case where an organisation is small or has limited capacity, this resource might be suitable if they are working alongside partners with the required capacities.

Additionally, the resource is designed to be used in a programme team setting – it is not designed solely for individual professional development or for training. Importantly, senior management teams; monitoring, evaluation and learning teams; and donor/partner relations teams should undertake this learning and reflection series alongside implementation teams. This is important because the approaches, methods and skills require an enabling environment, which is dependent upon commitment and support from the wider organisation and its various supporting teams.

### Using this resource

- **When to use** – This resource can be used at any time during a programme's implementation, as well as before a programme is designed or implemented. In cases where a programme is already being implemented, teams are encouraged to identify potential 'spaces' where they may be able to integrate aspects of the approach or skills into existing plans and commitments.
- **How to use** – This resource is designed to support a collective learning journey and therefore emphasises co-learning and action setting by teams, as opposed to solely individual learning. Generally, all team members will need to read through the learning and reflection briefs in their own time in preparation for the team reflection session featured at the end of each brief. Teams will need a way to come together, either physically (ideal) or virtually, for the reflection sessions.



*Children and business owners in Nepal share their ideas during a gallery walk.*

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Teams might also want to experiment with other ways of delivering this resource, perhaps by adapting it to fit an existing method or mechanism already used within their organisation to support practitioner and team learning. Teams can adapt the suggestions to suit their own context, preferences and needs, and are encouraged to find a way of undertaking this learning and reflection series which suits them.

- **Time requirements** – Team members will need about 10 minutes to watch each video and about 30 minutes to read each learning and reflection brief, in their own time. Teams will then need to plan for about two hours of team reflection time for each brief's reflection session. Because many of the skills and tools can also be 'learned by doing' teams will find that they can incorporate the practice of many key approaches and skills into their everyday work. It is recommended that teams go through the series week by week, or at another regular time, perhaps by attaching it to an existing ongoing weekly team meeting or regular organisational event. As the learning itself is a process, it is suggested that going through the series is not rushed. For instance, it would be suitable to work on a different learning and reflection brief weekly, or even monthly.
- **Facilitation suggestions** – The resource can be facilitated or non-facilitated. It is possible, and also encouraged, for team members to take turns to practice facilitating the team discussions for the different reflection sessions. The discussions are about reflecting and listening to one another, they are not about 'teaching' or learning from trainers, so facilitators do not need to be experts in Systemic Action Research.
- **Keeping track of what the team has discussed and your own reflections** – Team members will find it helpful to use a simple dedicated notebook to record discussions and reflections. If individuals have another preferred method, they could use this instead. Recording discussions and reflections in notebooks is very important for tracking and reviewing a learning process and will also help team members decide on key actions at the very end of this resource.
- **Materials required** – The resource does not need to be delivered in a conventional workshop setting and can be delivered in a less formal space. The learning and reflection video and briefs can be watched and read alone, but teams will need to come together for reflection sessions. These sessions require very few materials: a notebook and the usual workshop materials such as a suitable place to meet, whiteboards, large-sized paper, and coloured pens should suffice. For remote delivery, an accessible conferencing platform, internet connection, and digital tools such as a digital whiteboard will be sufficient, in addition to personal notebooks.

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## References

- Burns, D. (2014) [Assessing Impact in Dynamic and Complex Environments: Systemic Action Research and Participatory Systemic Inquiry](#), CDI Practice Paper 8, Brighton: IDS. ISSN: 2053-0536
- Howard, Jo & Burns, Danny & Ospina, Sonia. (2021). [SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry](#). 10.4135/9781529769432.



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### Credits

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