Section 2

Mapping systems and taking action

People-driven solutions:
An introduction to facilitating deep participation for systemic change through Systemic Action Research programming

Contents

This learning and reflection brief focuses on how 'whole systems' can be mapped and analysed in a deeply participatory way to uncover additional, nuanced and contextual evidence and learning about a problem, which can then lead to innovative, people-led interventions. The term 'system' here is used to describe a system created by the interplay between various interpersonal and socio-economic factors in different sectors and levels. These factors can combine to drive complex development or humanitarian problems. This brief is designed to help teams decide if and how a whole systems approach may be relevant to their programme; start thinking about programmes using a systemic perspective; and to identify any potential actions which could shift their programme towards a whole systems approach. More generally, the learning, skills and tools highlighted here are also useful for any team interested in exploring how they might further contextualise programmes and deepen participant engagement and ownership.

Specifically, this learning and reflection brief will help teams:

- Learn what a Systemic Action Research approach is about, including what is meant by a complex problem, a systems map, and what innovative solutions can look like.

- Learn about why and how a systemic approach could strengthen programmes tackling longstanding challenges.

- Learn about some of the practical skills required to implement this approach, such as being a facilitator and asking good questions.

- Learn about some of the key methods and tools used by CLARISSA, such as collecting Life Stories and causal analysis.

- Reflect on their own programme and identify aspects and actions to shift it towards a systemic way of working.

Children working in threes to highlight causal factors and pathways on a big system map, Kathmandu.
CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA

1 VIDEO

This learning and reflection brief includes two videos. First watch the CLARISSA video '*Causal analysis and working children*'. Then watch '*Mapping systems and taking action*' where CLARISSA team members, local stakeholders, and children from Bangladesh and Nepal discuss how they mapped and took actions to address the system which drives and keeps children in the worst forms of child labour. Before you watch the videos, note down three reasons why you think children might engage in the worst forms of child labour. Then, watch the videos and note down all the causal factors mentioned in the videos. How are the factors different or the same from the ones you identified? Is there anything which you did not expect?

Children discussing different issues and themes emerging from the Life Stories and Action Research group findings, Nepal.
SOURCE: FROM THE CLARISSA VIDEO '*MAPPING SYSTEMS AND TAKING ACTION*'

2 ABOUT SYSTEMIC ACTION RESEARCH

A development or humanitarian programme using Systemic Action Research is designed to work in a deeply participatory, people-led way in order to collaboratively map the different elements of a 'system' in relation to a problem and learn how these elements play a part in driving the problem. A Systemic Action Research process will engage multiple actors across a system of complex causal relationships, because changing a system requires changes in the actions and behaviours of different people that play a role in the system. As part of the process, participants generate and implement different ideas for action based on their understanding of the various roles different elements of the system play in creating a challenge. Because diverse 'insider' perspectives drive the understanding of the system and what could be done to disrupt it and address root causes, a programme may move in a very different direction compared to one typically developed by external experts and actors.

CLARISSA showed how Systemic Action Research can lead to diverse, innovative actions by children engaged in the worst forms of child labour – as well as actions by some of the business owners who employed children – and how these could target different causal dynamics on different levels, with the potential to disrupt a harmful and complex system.

> **"***It is actually very difficult to find a solution. That's why we worked with the system actors in the CLARISSA programme.***"**
> **CLARISSA partner team member, Bangladesh**

> *At first, even I didn't know how they would do it. What they are being taught, what they would do with the learning, even I was scared thinking of all this at first. In CLARISSA, we left the whole Action Research part to the children so that they can tell their stories in their own way.*
>
> **Local motivator, Nepal**

A SYSTEMS APPROACH IS ESPECIALLY RELEVANT FOR ANY TEAM SEEKING TO ADDRESS A 'COMPLEX' PROBLEM

'Complex' problems are those where we are required to first learn deeply about what the causes are; how these causes relate to each other; or how the problem should be addressed. Complex development problems are mostly made up of many different elements – for example, different peoples and groups, culture, beliefs, social rules, power, competencies, governance, and various adversities – all of which relate to each other in multiple and different ways to create a particular problem. One organisation alone is unlikely to be able to address all these different elements. Even after learning about what drives a complex problem, it is still not always clear exactly how intervening in this complex web of causal factors will bring about a positive change. There are many possible unintended consequences, effects and other dynamics which can impact upon the outcomes of any given set of actions. For instance, what seems an effective programme in one context may not work so well when used in another. An example of this might be where a sensitisation campaign is successfully used in one community but is not successful when the same strategy is used in another.

This **short video** explains the difference between a 'simple', a 'complicated' and a 'complex' problem by using the analogy of making a cake (simple), sending a rocket to the moon (complicated), and raising a child (complex). Often, complex development problems are persistent and longstanding, where real, long-term change is hard to achieve. Complex problems can arise in any sector and include many common development 'issues' such as early marriage, gender-based violence, worst forms of child labour, ongoing conflict, food insecurity, poor sanitation, and poverty. Most development practitioners acknowledge the need for deep, contextual learning to guide responses to these types of challenges. Using a 'systemic' or 'whole systems' lens to approach a complex challenge, by mapping the multiple causes and dynamics in a participatory way, can help generate deeply contextualised, collective understandings, new pathways and innovative actions to change a system.

The CLARISSA Systemic Action Research process. Following an extensive set up phase which included establishing strong relationships with partners, communities and children, around 800 children's Life Stories were collected by adult facilitators and some children. The collection process was followed by child-led participatory causal analysis in each country, where they first created a mini-systems map for each story, and then combined these into one big systems map. The CLARISSA video '*Casual analysis and working children*' provides more detail on this process.

Through a collaborative process of linking different Life Stories together, children started to see how the different causal factors within the emerging system were connected, and how these combined to drive children into the worst forms of child labour. This level of participant-led insight into the complex problem of child labour revealed a number of diverse themes which were the starting point of Action Research groups with children. CLARISSA also undertook thematic research into supply chain and neighbourhood dynamics that drive children into worst forms of child labour, using participatory and qualitative research approaches such as workplace shadowing and GIS (Geographic Information System) mapping, and interviews with business owners. Themes resulting from the thematic research were also the starting points of additional

> *They don't feel safe at home, then work is safer than this [...] We saw they do not have any leisure (activities) which is also a reason for the worst form of child labour. Because parents were thinking children will mix in bad company or take drugs – they better go to work.*
>
> **CLARISSA partner team member, Bangladesh**

Action Research groups with children and business owners. The issues or themes which children and business owners researched as Action Research groups included:

- Why children re-entered the worst forms of child labour even after receiving livelihoods training from NGOs
- How children were forced to discontinue their studies as a result of poor economic conditions due to family spending on alcohol and other addictions
- Poor financial management and debt
- Child marriage and the causal relationship to child labour
- Lack of awareness around child labour, and family conflict, leading to abuse and exploitation at workplaces
- Lack of access to education
- Clean environments in communities
- Children's journeys to work and the hazards they face
- Dangerous and unhealthy environments at work
- Social norms and perceptions that encourage child labour. For instance, that children are not safe at home alone and are safer at work.

The Action Research groups then further reflected on their own lived experiences, and also used various methods to collect additional evidence on the issue in their direct environment, for example, through observation, talking with other peers and with family and community stakeholders. Action Research groups then used all these pieces of evidence to help them decide on the kinds of actions which could bring about a change to the specific issue they were focused on. Importantly, Action Research group members (children and business owners) developed their own Theories of Change, which clarified what change they expected to happen around a certain issue, and what kinds of action(s) could bring about this change. Theory of Change is discussed in detail in the Learning and Reflection Brief 3. *Using evidence and learning to adapt programmes in real time*.

Children first created mini-system maps (top row) based on individuals' Life Stories (from Bangladesh). Children later integrated the mini-maps into one big systems map (bottom, from Nepal) which was organised around the themes which emerged from the mini-maps.
CREDITS: CLARISSA IN BANGLADESH (TOP ROW); ANIS BASTOLA (BOTTOM)
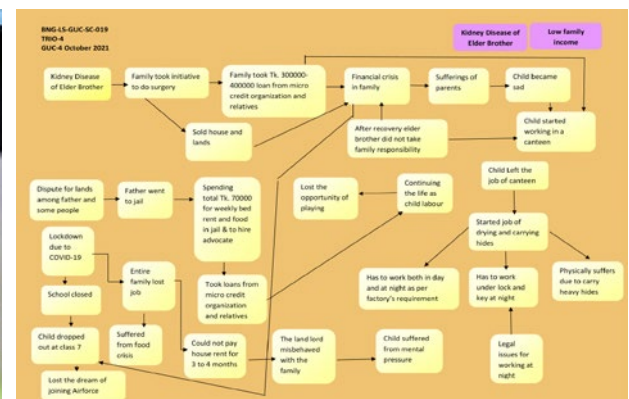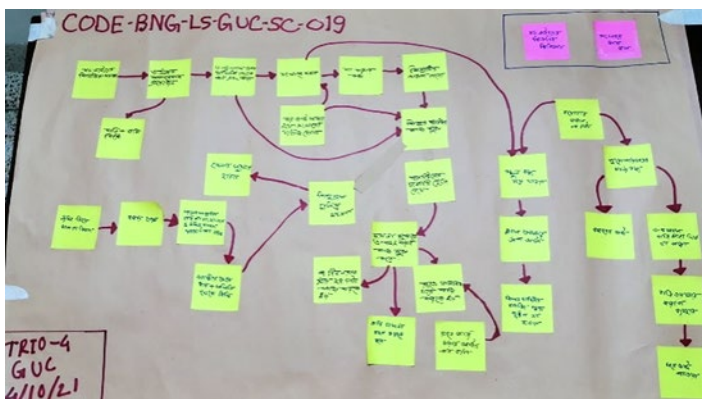
CLARISSA RESOURCES ON MAPPING SYSTEMS AND TAKING ACTION

CLARISSA Blog: *A single story does not tell us what we need to know about child labour.*

Read a **CLARISSA Blog post** on how children's and business owners' Action Research groups took part in a 'gallery walk' event in Kathmandu to highlight their learning and ideas and to come together to share experiences.

CLARISSA Blog: *A children's Action Research group in Nepal.*

CLARISSA short post on Action Research groups This post will link you to a number of examples of Action Research Groups described here.

CLARISSA Learning Note 1: *Learning from Life Story Collection and Analysis With Children Who Work in the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Bangladesh.* DOI: **10.19088/CLARISSA.2022.006**.

CLARISSA Learning Note 2: *Learning from Life Story Collection and Analysis With Children Who Work in the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Nepal.* DOI: **10.19088/CLARISSA.2022.007**.

CLARISSA Research and Evidence Paper 5: *Life stories from children working in Bangladesh's leather sector and its neighbourhoods: told and analysed by children.* This describes in detail the process of building systems maps. DOI: **10.19088/CLARISSA.2021.005**

CLARISSA Research and Evidence Paper 8: *Informal economy perspectives on the prevalence of worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh's leather industry.* DOI: **10.19088/CLARISSA.2024.005**

CLARISSA Blog: *Child-centred approach reveals the dynamics driving child labour in Nepal's Adult Entertainment Sector.*

Many of the children's Life Stories have been shared anonymously on the CLARISSA website: **Pavel**, **Shuvashish**, **Sunil**, **Anita**.

CLARISSA videos: **Explanation of research methods**; **Using maps in research**; **A day in the life of working child in Nepal**.

> ❝*Laying out the causal connections within the system, and giving people a view of that system, helps them (participants) to see things that they see as normal or as everyday experiences within a bigger picture, and how it contributes to some of the challenges that they experience.*❞
> **IDS CLARISSA team member**

③ SYSTEMIC ACTION RESEARCH: PRACTICAL LEARNING FROM CLARISSA

Children and adults can undertake complex evidence generation and analysis for systems mapping. Mapping complex systems with children or untrained adults might seem like a daunting, and perhaps even an impossible task. However, CLARISSA was developed with the mindset that children and other adults are capable individuals with important expertise based on their lived experience, who can generate and analyse robust and rich evidence with the right support from facilitators. At the outset, there were team members within partner organisations who had reservations and doubts regarding the feasibility of this approach. This was especially so given the scale that CLARISSA proposed to work at, with hundreds of Life Stories being collected in each country (approximately 350 stories in each country were collected by adult facilitators and about 50 in each country were collected by children). However, as the causal analysis process moved forward, partner team members began to see for themselves the level at which children (and business owners) could collectively gather and analyse Life Stories, identify causal dynamics, and build complex systems maps. Indeed, the facilitated child-centred and -led process enabled the insider perspectives of children to provide additional and important collective insights based on the lived experiences of hundreds of children engaging in the worst forms of child labour. This process shed light on unexpected or overlooked causes and dynamics which contribute to the worst forms of child labour.

> ❝*In the beginning, some facilitators were a bit hesitant, they weren't convinced that children could do this. And then as they went through the process, they really noticed their own mindset changing and shifting, especially after the children did the massive collective analysis of the hundreds of Life Stories.*❞
> **IDS CLARISSA team member**

BOX 2 | ACTION RESEARCH GROUP EXAMPLE

POOR FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND DEBT – ACTION RESEARCH GROUP OF CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH

Method: The children interviewed family and community members and collected perspectives around financial management and debt.

What was learned: The group learned that being in debt and the worst forms of child labour were caused by: job loss, dowry debt, inability to work due to illness, and lack of financial support from fathers.

Actions and outcomes: The children developed a Theory of Change:
1) Alternative income generating activities through capacity building,
2) Discussion within families around repayment of debts and impact of loans,
3) Increasing family literacy to track income and expenses and make savings. Children were trained in jewellery making as an alternative source of income and were linked to buyers in an exhibition. Some members also managed to persuade their parents to continue paying for their schooling.

> *There was a neighbour who used to engage her daughter more in household chores but after watching the drama they told the daughter to focus on studying rather than helping at home. They sometimes ask the child to help but it has reduced compared to before.*

Children's comments regarding child-led action taken with parents in CLARISSA

Children and adults can develop their own Theories of Change based on participatory systems mapping and other evidence. Significantly, children in CLARISSA developed Theories of Change after the Action Research groups had undertaken extensive evidence gathering and personal reflection on the issue. The systemic 'big picture' view helped children identify which causal factors they wanted to focus on, or change, and what actions they could try in order to achieve this. Very importantly, using a Theory of Change helped children to bring together the various pieces of evidence and gave them clarity on what they were going to do, why, and what they expected to happen. It also helped group members work as a collective towards a shared goal. For example, in one instance, children in Nepal identified a causal dynamic within the system, saying they felt they were not listened to, and that some parents chose to send their children to work without taking into account what the child in question wanted or needed. Based on this, children agreed that

"*Parents/family give time to their children and listen to the children, understand them, and resolve their issues*" should be the goal of their Theory of Change. The children then identified a number of actions: a workshop on positive parenting; sensitisation and awareness through street drama; informing parents about counselling services; and interaction among parents and religious leaders. The group also discussed the outcome, timeline and possible indicators of the action points. Children reported back positive changes, such as their parents talking to them in a kinder way, and a neighbour who allowed their daughter to go back to school.

Children in Kathmandu performing a drama for parents and community members.
CREDIT: KAPIL SHRESTHA

BOX 3 | ACTION RESEARCH GROUP EXAMPLE

CHILDREN RE-ENTERING THE WORST FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR AFTER RECEIVING LIVELIHOODS TRAINING FROM NGOS.

ACTION RESEARCH GROUP OF CHILDREN IN NEPAL

Method: Peer-to-peer interviews with children working in the adult entertainment sector and interviews with NGOs supporting children in the sector.

What was learned: There is a lack of follow up from NGOs after training, limited training options, and a focus on training for low paid sectors such as beauty, tailoring and handicraft making. Therefore, skills-based interventions are inappropriate as they don't enable children to earn enough to meet their basic needs, and they aren't based on what the children want to do, nor on market demands. As a result, children return to the adult entertainment sector where they can earn more.

Actions and outcomes: The group developed an action plan focused on sensitising children through schools to the risks of the adult entertainment sector; and sharing their evidence with local government and advocating for alternative skills trainings. The children formed a group in a community school comprising students and teachers which reviews the attendance of students, identifies the challenges faced by the children whose attendance is irregular, and provides school-based support to children experiencing challenges. The group also advocated for alternative skills training by using their research findings to target local government. The group identified apprenticeships, IT skills, barista skills, and cooking as desirable skills, with some starting training or apprenticeships in these skills.

> *Even though the outcome of the actual action that they take might be similar (to one proposed by an external organisation or actor), the process of getting there and building that ownership over it, I believe, might then lead to stronger, preventative measures or interventions.*
> **IDS CLARISSA team member**

The children's research brought a new level of understanding to children of some issues which had been normalised. Some of the Action Research groups worked on social norms that were deeply embedded and seen as 'everyday experiences' by the children, but which are causal factors contributing to worst forms of child labour. Through the participatory process of mapping the system, doing their own research and reflecting on their personal experiences, children themselves made the connection between these social norms and worst forms of child labour, which changed the way they thought about their issues and how they themselves could take action. This new understanding was not the process of a sensitisation campaign by an organisation or agency, but was internally generated, and considered meaningful by the children. For example, one group of children started out with the attitude that child marriage is very common in their community and that it's not really a problem – it's "just something that happens". However, there was also a girl in this group who had married young, and she shared her experiences about how her life had changed after marriage. The children also did more of their own evidence gathering by talking with neighbours and reflecting on their own experiences. This additional learning, combined with the big system map, showed how early marriage is linked to the worst forms of child labour, and the children began to see early marriage in a new light. They saw how a child who marries in their early teens will then have the responsibility of looking after their own family, which leads to dropping out of education to find work at a young age – work which often ends up being exploitative or harmful.

BOX 4

AN EXAMPLE OF CHILDREN WORKING IN THE LEATHER INDUSTRY IN DHAKA, BANGLADESH OWNING THEIR THEORY OF CHANGE

With the support of a facilitator, one Action Research group discussed at length the many issues their research had highlighted and debated what they wanted to tackle. The children eventually agreed that they wanted to address hazards in the workplace and they identified the kinds of outcomes they would like to see, which focused on children working less hours and reducing injuries in the workplace. They then reflected on which actions could lead to these outcomes. At first, they decided to prioritise raising awareness of work safety with their work colleagues (other children and adults) and promote the wearing of protective gear when working with leather chemicals. However, this strategy didn't work out as planned, because their colleagues were uninterested in what the children had to say, didn't believe them, and didn't feel it was important. The children then tried another strategy – to model the changes they were seeking, and to start wearing their own protective gear. CLARISSA helped the children buy protective gear which they wore when undertaking hazardous tasks at work. The children wearing the gear started to notice that their skin problems were improving,

A young person's hand who works in the leather industry, Dhaka.
CREDIT: SALMA SULTANA

and their health was better. After a few weeks, the children's colleagues started to show interest, and were asking about the protective gear. This opened a new dialogue between the children and their colleagues about protective gear for hazardous work tasks, and how it was benefitting them. Eventually some of their colleagues also started to wear protective gear. One of the employers also decided to buy protective gear for their employees as result.

What did we learn?

1 The children's ownership of their own Theory of Change helped motivate them to try different approaches to reach their desired outcomes, even when their first strategy failed. Their shared identity also helped them to stay motivated and try different solutions. Additionally, as children were working in a context where unionising is not tolerated, supporting each other in a less visible way was important.

2 The children decided to make changes to their working environment, i.e. protecting themselves from work hazards, because they were given the space and support to research, reflect on, and decide their own priorities, and because they later experienced real benefits from wearing the gear. In the same way that other colleagues were uninterested in the children's first attempts to raise awareness around wearing protective gear, it is likely that the children themselves may also have been resistant if this idea had been introduced by external actors.

3 The modified strategy the children later decided upon of 'showing by doing' facilitated a dialogue between the children and their colleagues which they couldn't achieve using their first plan of awareness raising.

4 While this process didn't remove the children from the workplace altogether, it was a positive step towards reducing the hazardous nature of their work, with the potential to spread to other peers, colleagues and businesses.

Children in Kathmandu working together to identify different themes on a small systems map.
CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA

Systemic Action Research can help build ownership of a problem and how it is addressed. CLARISSA highlighted how a people-centred process of Systemic Action Research, which included their own Theories of Change, helped build a sense of ownership of the problem; created a common platform to discuss issues; established a shared identity around issues; and helped children and business owners come up with solutions (See Box 4. above).

BOX 5 | ACTION RESEARCH GROUP EXAMPLE

'MY ENVIRONMENT, MY WORK' ACTION RESEARCH GROUP OF CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH

Method: Peer-to-peer interviews, buildings visits / observations

What was learned: Community residents prioritise low rent – even if the living conditions are substandard. Building owners and managers take advantage of residents' lack of awareness and unity. Sanitation is a critical concern, particularly for girls. Issues such as a lack of toilets, gaps in walls and doors, toilets shared by both males and females, and a lack of toilets in workplaces cause huge problems. Buildings pose significant safety risks to the many young children who live in them (steep stairs, no railings, open rooftops). Buildings house mostly transient populations of residents.

Actions and outcomes: The work of this group led to physical improvements in infrastructure (e.g. building toilets, installing lights and fixing toilet doors) and residents of these buildings became more aware of their living conditions. Some building residents undertook building improvement initiatives. Unity among residents also increased. One building resident started a successful campaign to persuade a building owner to renovate the unusable cooking place after getting guidance and motivation from the children. Children collectively decided to continue to raise awareness among their peers, neighbours, and relatives about the benefits of a safe and clean living space. Their interactions with the factory owner altered their perception of factory management and resulted in the factory owner installing toilets in the factory.

CLARISSA found that Systemic Action Research brought benefits at different levels. A core aspect of CLARISSA was the intentional creation of space, namely, regular meet ups over an extended time frame whereby adults and children were brought together to learn, reflect, and plan. Most of the working children and business owners had extremely busy lives with limited time and space for them to meet with other children, for instance, to chat with their friends about their problems or connect with each other in other ways. At work, children were also wary of interacting too much, lest they were suspected of unionising, amongst other things. In their neighbourhood, there was also a lack of appropriate spaces where they could socialise with their peers in an informal environment.

Children benefitted as individuals as they reported feeling less alone – they had the support of their peers – and some were also experiencing less health issues as a result of wearing protective work gear in Bangladesh. Children also benefited in a collective way, for instance, in Bangladesh, children improved the working environment for themselves as a group and were also acknowledged by other colleagues as bringing something of value to the workplace. On a societal level in Nepal, the process of tackling social norms was observed, such as adults' expectations of children and how they should behave, as a result of child-generated and -led actions around 'family relations'.

The Systemic Action Research process intentionally created space where children could share stories and reflect. There were explicit relationship building activities within the formal group meetings such as playing games and sharing stories, also informal outings and trips, as well as evidence gathering and action taking. Children realised that they shared many similar challenges as a group, and that the problem was not "just my problem". In this way, the process helped build a sense of the collective and, very importantly, that they could problem-solve together.

Additionally, because CLARISSA also worked with business owners who were employing children, and took them through a similar process, these business owners also began to see themselves of part of a group – as opposed to being in competition with each other – and collectively tried to solve some of challenges relating to the worst forms of child labour. For instance, business owners decided to set up a health care centre (Bangladesh); develop better documentation systems for their business to check the age of workers (Nepal); and contract employees more formally (Nepal).

Children developing a small systems map in Kathmandu.
CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA

BOX 6 | ACTION RESEARCH GROUP EXAMPLE

WORKER DOCUMENTATION IN THE ADULT ENTERTAINMENT SECTOR – ACTION RESEARCH GROUP OF BUSINESS OWNERS IN NEPAL

Method: Business owners were presented with findings from CLARISSA's interviews with business owners, undertook monitoring visits to dohoris and dance bars, and reflected together on their own practices.

What was learned: Business owners don't systematically request documentation from their workers or include any reference to age in contracts. Business owners are not always aware that some of their workers are under 18.

Actions and outcomes: The group developed an action plan to change how their workers were contracted and hired. This included taking copies of workers' identity documents to prove their age. The changes triggered some other business owners to do the same. The group's actions also resulted in improved practices for some of the businesses, including businesses choosing to register with the authorities. *"We had knowledge of child labour, but after training […] we learnt that the business should be registered and renewed. We have to be updated about legal aspects. Based on the information received there, we also revised our contract. We included information like employers must be above 18 and must submit a copy of their ID, and they should be Nepali citizens in the contract document"*. Read the **full blog**.

Individualism and everyone struggling in their own silos was really preventing a lot of the problem solving from happening. […] With the business owners, there was a super interesting process, as when they started, everyone was in competition with each other. And then starting to work together and seeing "actually we are all struggling in the same way with the same things, and if we work together, we can actually solve our own problems together".

IDS CLARISSA team member

There are important roles for facilitators when facilitating a deeply participatory, child-centred and -led Action Research process. CLARISSA highlighted the key linking or bridging role that skilled facilitators can play when facilitating Systemic Action Research. Facilitators had to strike a balance between supporting the children when needed, but also allowing the process to be led by the children. For instance, the children from the 'family relations' Action Research group decided to organise workshops with their family members to initiate a dialogue between themselves and various key family members. The children wanted their family members to reflect on some of the ways they parented and to make some changes. However, the children also realised that they needed the help of the facilitators as they felt that their parents "did not take us seriously". The children enlisted the facilitators to help the children to structure some of the sessions, negotiate the coming together of the parents and children, and invite the family members. Likewise, the informal business owners enlisted the support of CLARISSA facilitators to help them link with bigger formal factories.

A children's Action Research group (Nepal) Theory of Change about 'Family Relations'.
CREDIT: KAPIL SHRESTHA
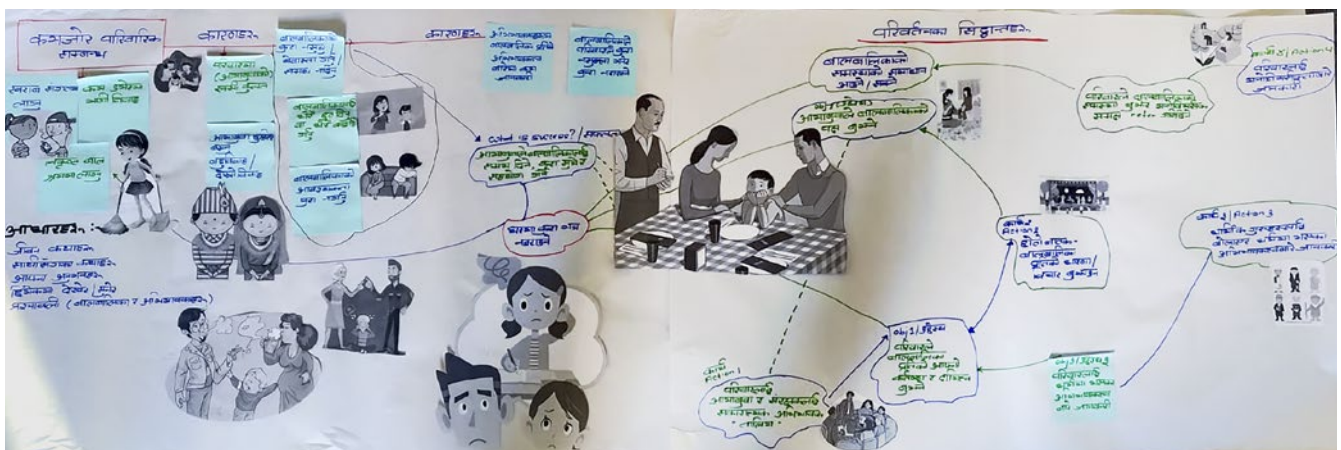
BOX 7 | EXAMPLE

LINKING FORMAL AND INFORMAL BUSINESS ACTORS IN THE LEATHER INDUSTRY – ACTION RESEARCH GROUP OF BUSINESS OWNERS IN BANGLADESH

Method: Peer-to-peer reflection and discussion over a 20-month period. Various discussions with the Bangladesh Tanners Association, Bangladesh Labour Foundation, Bangladesh Institute of Leather Technology, and others.

What was learned: Small businesses are precarious because they can't compete with larger, formal businesses. They often have no contract, they take out expensive loans to cover costs, buy the cheapest quality chemicals and operate for long hours for minimal profit. Formal tanneries enable workers to join a union and access levels of protection and health care. Most informal tanneries don't have adequate first aid kits. An on-site health centre for informal workers would encourage workers to access healthcare.

Actions and outcomes: The group developed an action plan to increase export of their products; to supply their products to formal businesses with contracts; to use the same quality tanning chemicals as the bigger tanneries. The group also explored with NGOs how they could provide better access to health care for tannery workers in informal businesses. The group identified and set up a local, staffed health centre with the support of an NGO and a tannery association.

④ SKILLS, METHODS AND TOOLS FOR MAPPING SYSTEMS AND TAKING ACTION

A children's Action Research group display (Nepal) developed for the children and business owners' gallery walk.
CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA

CLARISSA facilitation guidance

Facilitation goals	Facilitation activities	Facilitation skills
• Analysis of the causal factors of the local and personal situations of group members. • Supporting the group to undertake their own analyses to identify possible solutions. • Encouraging ownership of group members' situations and possible solutions.	The facilitator should use a joint learning approach in which they collbaoratively work with the group to analyse their situations. For instance, facilitators might train the group to use research methods and tools, and ensure that data collection and analysis is completed by the group. A facilitator guides critical group dialogue so members can use the evidence they've generated to analyse the causal factors that drive a particular issue.	• Be familiar with participatory methods and tools for people-led research. • To listen and synthesise discussions. • Ask critical questions that allow group members to deepen their reflection and establish causal links (through asking good questions, such as 'how' and 'why'). The guidance by ADAPT peacebuilding provides detailed guidance, tips and examples of **how to ask good questions** to collect a Life Story. The "**Asking probing questions**" section of the online guide and toolkit **Supporting community-led child protection**, also provides useful examples of probing questions, and some exercises to develop this skill. • Keep personal opinions, perspectives, experience and training around an issue in the background. • Abandon preconceptions or assumptions.
• Create space for group members to access and express their authentic selves in order to address the themes of their research and learning. • Guide non-violent conflict and friction towards constructive dialogue and transformation. • Create space for group members to bond with each other.	The facilitator creates an environment where group members can bring their full selves to the Action Research process; where they can be open and express themselves; and where they can share their personal experiences and ideas on how to address an issue. Facilitators use approaches and tools that encourage different kinds of self-expression and openness, for example, creative and playful activities, discussions and roleplaying. This creates a sense of safety for participants, who will be able to bond with each other as they learn about each other's shared experiences. The facilitator also encourages group members' curiosity regarding each other's ideas, and provides an open, non-judgemental space for brainstorming. Facilitators allow space for conflicting ideas to emerge, and then facilitate a constructive process of building new ideas based on diverse perspectives.	• Familiarity with tools and methods that enable relationship building and bonding in the group. • Show respect. • Establish rapport. • Be power-aware in relation to a facilitator's own power, as well as power dynamics in the group. • Ability to navigate power dynamics and positively guide non-violent conflict.
• Facilitate a process of reflection, learning and evaluating.	The facilitator guides the group to be reflexive in relation to their actions, what worked, and what did not. The facilitator also creates an environment in which failure is understood as an opportunity to learn. The facilitator also helps the group reflect on what their actions have achieved.	• Models learning from mistakes. • Ability to create a safe space where group members can reflect on successes and failures. • Familiarity with tools and methods for reflexivity and evaluation of actions.

GUIDANCE AND TOOLKITS FOR SYSTEMIC ACTION RESEARCH

ADAPT Peacebuilding have developed some detailed and very useful online practical guidance for anyone planning to use Systems Action Research:

- **How to do participatory Action Research for systems mapping**
- **How to collect a Life Story for Systemic Action Research**
- **How to do participatory Life Story analysis** (systems mapping)
- **How to conduct a participatory mapping process**.

Additional **Guidance on facilitation** in **participatorymethods.org** – Guidance and links to facilitation tools and examples.

YouCreate toolkit – Participatory arts-based Action Research for well-being and social change, by Terre des hommes. Designed to train youth leaders, with the support of adult allies. Includes tips on note-taking, facilitation and asking good questions.

Further guidance on the facilitator skills can be found online here as part of the *Online guide and toolkit*: *Supporting community-led child protection, by Child Resilence Alliance:* **FAC 1. Humility**; **FAC 2. What Do I Bring to the Community**; **FAC 3. Deep Listening**; **FAC 4. Empathy**; **FAC 5. Developing a Reflective Practice**; **FAC 6. Asking Probing Questions**; **FAC 7. Enabling Inclusive Dialogue**; **FAC 8. Understanding Power Dynamics in the Community**; **FAC 9. Nonviolent Conflict Management**

Short videos where facilitators from an Action Research programme in Kenya reflect on some of the important skills and qualities of a good facilitator: **Being a facilitator**; **Being humble and respectful**; **Deep listening**.

WarChild Holland's and Save the Children's *Participatory facilitation using creative methods to strengthen community engagement and ownership – Resource pack part 4*: **Two-day training for field-level facilitators**.

Emerging Evidence Report 6: *How does participatory Action Research generate innovation? Findings from a rapid realist review*. For those who would like to read more deeply about CLARISSA evidence around facilitation, see pages 32–34 (5.4: *The importance of good facilitation*). DOI: **10.19088/CLARISSA.2021.009**

Other skills and tools in this series:

1. **Working in a child- and people-centred way**
Key skill: *Communications skills*

2. **Mapping systems and taking action**
Key skill: *Asking good questions*

3. **Using evidence and learning to adapt programmes in real time**
Key skill: *Being a reflexive team*

4. **After Action Reviews**
Key skill: *Being a reflective practitioner (individual)*

5. **Working with partners**
Key skill: *Being inclusive and aware of power dynamics*

6. **Safeguarding for Systemic Action Research**
Key skill: *Building trust and rapport*

> "*It is very important that a facilitator truly mingles [...] We cannot think of ourselves as superiors. It is needed for any facilitation. Be it my sitting style, my manner of speaking, my attire, everything. I have to keep it in mind.*"
>
> **CLARISSA partner team member, Bangladesh**

Tips for using a Systemic Action Research programme approach

Using a Systemic Action Research programme approach	
IS	**ISN'T**
Identifying a complex problem and using a systems lens to try and understand it. Seeking to map the different elements of the system and how they interact and relate to participants' own experiences. This can provide insight into the causes of a particular challenge or issue.	Deciding in advance what is the cause of a challenge or identifying a simple or single chain of causes.
Loosely framing a challenge or issue such as worst forms of child labour but allowing for an open-ended process of learning, exploration, innovation and action-taking.	Framing discussions very tightly, based on a single issue. Not allowing participants to explore other aspects of their lived experiences which might be linked to an issue, or to take decisions.
Facilitation-based: "We don't have all the answers, but we can work together to identify what drives the problem, what is important for you, and what kinds of actions you could take."	Expert-led: "We have specific expertise about this issue and we suggest you/we take the following actions...we have already allocated resources for these specific actions."
Internally driven and innovative solutions.	Externally driven solutions based on best practice or a generic model of intervention.
Participants are experts, and active problem-solvers.	Beneficiaries with little agency.
Learning alongside the people affected by a complex problem. People-centred,-led and -owned.	Participatory research with a group or community where learning is not owned or fed back. Extractive.
Facilitating a problem-solving process.	Consulting with participants.
Facilitators support participants at points in the process where appropriate or requested.	'Anything goes'. Participants undertake the whole process with no support OR facilitators make all the decisions.
Supporting internally driven actions which create change, by disrupting or changing a system.	Enabling an individual or group to get out of an adverse situation, even though others will most likely replace them, or where causes are not addressed.
Participants design their own Theory of Change based on their own research.	Programmers develop a Theory of Change to guide and justify the programme's design.
Inclusive participation of a large proportion of people from diverse groups.	Working with a small number of individuals who represent the views and opinions of their respective groups. Only working with people or groups who hold disproportionate levels of power and influence.
Working in a non-judgemental way and including diverse perspectives in the learning process.	Identifying those at fault, or 'perpetrators' and automatically excluding them from the learning process.
Ethical, safeguarding and do no harm considerations should always guide which groups are included.	
Prioritising learning, a patient approach, not rushing implementation.	Prioritising implementation over learning. Rushing the learning phase.

⑤ TIPS ON PLANNING AND BUDGETING FOR SYSTEMS MAPPING AND TAKING ACTION

Children working on a small system map in Kathmandu.
CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA

Programmes which are built around Systemic Action Research don't necessarily have to cost more than a typical development programme. However, the allocation of resources and timeline will most likely look quite different. For instance,

- Proportionately more resources and time might need to be allocated to research and learning activities and resources, which might include the hiring of relatively large teams of facilitators and documenters, for a reasonably long period of time.

- More time may possibly be spent training and supporting team members for their specific roles within the programme.

- More time and resources may be required for everyone involved to get to know each other, and to develop strong relationships and build trust. The first few months, or even longer, might be spent holding meetings, doing activities together, meeting with key individuals or bodies, working with partners and partnership-building, and learning about the context through observation. Systemic Action Research approaches work in a 'relational' way, so ongoing relationship building activities are a central part of the work and require adequate budget.

- Using a systemic approach requires adequate time and suitable spaces for research groups to reflect and make decisions. This is not a process which can be rushed, and therefore time frames leading to action-taking might be relatively extended compared to a programme where actions have already been decided in advance, or where programme staff make the decisions.

- Flexible budgeting: The nature of Systemic Action Research means programmes can't know beforehand exactly where a programme will go. Budgets can be planned for the process itself, for instance, for a certain number of meetings or staff salaries, but the interventions which will emerge from the programme process are unknown. Therefore, it is advisable to budget for and negotiate an unassigned 'intervention pot' which Action Research groups may use for their intervention. This is discussed in more detail in Learning and Reflection Brief 3. *Using evidence and learning to adapt programmes in real time*.

Although many funders are now showing interest in working differently, including shifting towards a systemic programme approach, the reality of their current funding structures and mechanisms limit the extent to which this always possible. Many current practices are built to support short-term projects with clear, measurable results rather than collaborative, evolving approaches to create lasting change. There may also be certain restrictions and conditions as to how funding can be used. Taking all of this into account, it may seem as if the funder's requirements actively discourage innovative approaches. Despite this, organisations should not be discouraged from looking for ways to use a systemic approach in their programming. Taking small steps one at a time can be more manageable for all involved and doesn't necessarily have to disrupt a funding agreement.

Suggestions on how teams could move towards a systemic approach:

- There might be space within an existing programme to deepen participation by giving more power to participants to undertake their own small pieces of research or activities, and to make their own decisions.

- Perhaps a programme could deepen the collective understanding of a problem by intentionally including new or different groups into its learning processes and giving more space to those processes.

- Consider training staff on how to become skilled facilitators of a 'bottom-up' approach, where the emphasis is on supporting participants to make decisions and drive change, but not 'teaching'.

- Consider how to build more trust with the funder, for instance, by communicating clearly about the importance of using a systems lens, or a specific aspect of the approach. Use the information in this learning and reflection series to guide, but also think about how the approach may link to and support any common goals, commitments and agendas.

- If a programme starts to diverge from the Theory of Change or log frame as a result of evidence generated by the programme, keep the channels of communication with the funder open and provide a clear rationale for why the programme is changing direction. Funders can gain confidence from seeing that the programme is using a robustly tested method to guide its evolution.

Children working in threes to identify links on a big systems map, Kathmandu.
CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA

⑥ TEAM REFLECTION

Answer the questions in this section as a team. Allow two hours to complete this section. Use your notebooks to record your answers and main points. You'll need to refer back to these later.

Skills building (30 mins at end of session)

This reflection brief focuses on being a facilitator and asking good questions. Each participant should aim to practice asking good questions as part of this team reflection.

Work as a team (45 mins)

Discuss the following as a team:

1 Were there any causal dynamics for worst forms of child labour in the videos or this brief which you did not expect? Why do you think this is?

2 Are we dealing with any complex problems in our own programmes? If so, what are they, and how do we think they are complex (or are they simple or complicated)?

3 How is our programme trying to address this complex problem? Are we are using a whole systems ('systemic') approach, or another type of approach? Which aspects seem similar to the approach described here, which parts seem different?

4 Is there any space in our programme to introduce a systemic approach, for instance, by emphasising facilitation over expert-led?

Actions brainstorm (45 mins)

What kinds of actions could we take as a team to move towards a stronger participatory, whole systems programming approach? While remaining realistic, try not to limit your ideas for now, you will come back these ideas later and decide if they are still relevant.

Skills building (30 mins)

Share how it felt to try and ask good questions. What did you notice about yourself? Can you give any constructive feedback to another team member?

NOTES

People-driven solutions: an introduction to facilitating deep participation for systemic change through Systemic Action Research programming

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This is an extract from the learning and reflection resource for practitioners: Lucy Hillier (2024). *People-driven solutions: An introduction to facilitating deep participation for systemic change through Systemic Action Research programming*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. DOI: **10.19088/CLARISSA.2024.040** The full resource can be accessed via the DOI link provided and on **participatorymethods.org** and **Child Hub.**

Suggested citation

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