



Applying the River of Life method to support reflection and learning in Terre des hommes Nepal

CLARISSA LEARNING NOTE 4

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Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA)

is a consortium of organisations committed to building a participatory evidence base and generating innovative solutions to the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh and Nepal.

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Background

Terre des hommes (Tdh) Nepal is one of the consortium partners of the CLARISSA (Child Labour Action Research in South and South-eastern Asia) programme. The main role of Tdh Nepal is to support the MEL functions of the programme in country.

Initially, the CLARISSA programme used the River of Life (RoL) method in two evaluation analysis workshops¹ which were facilitated by the fourth author. The Tdh MEL Manager, the first author, gained knowledge and skills of this method through engagement in the CLARISSA workshops. Subsequently, this learning was applied in project reviews and lesson learned events of three different projects of Tdh Nepal. The method was adapted in each application to meet the objectives of the workshop, while maintaining the core steps in each.

In this CLARISSA learning note, we reflect on our experiences of adopting and adapting the method in the different projects, and we share our practice learning for others who might be inspired to use this reflection method.

CLARISSA programme brief

CLARISSA is a consortium programme funded by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and is led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in collaboration with Terre des hommes, Child Hope (CH) and the Consortium for Street Children (CSC). The in-country partners in Nepal are Voice of Children (VOC) part of the CH family, Children-Women in Social Service and Human Rights (CWISH) part of the CSC network, and Tdh Nepal.

In Nepal, the target groups are children and young people, children engaged in or affected by the worst forms of child labour (WFCL), particularly in the adult entertainment sector (AES), which includes children working in dohoris (restaurants playing folk music), dance bars, spa massage parlours, khaja ghars (tea/snack shops), and guest houses. With these children, CLARISSA facilitation and documentation teams undertake systemic Action Research to identify the systemic factors that drive children into WFCL and for children to develop and implement their own innovative actions to tackle these drivers.

¹ Collective analysis workshop is an integral part of CLARISSA programme, it aims to create a moment for collective data analysis process involving all team members who have been involved in the implementation of the work.

List of abbreviations

AES	Adult Entertainment Sector
ANMs	Auxiliary Nurse Midwives
CDWN	Center for Dalit Women Nepal
CH	Child Hope
CLARISSA	Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia
CSC	Consortium for Street Children
CSEC	Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children
CWISH	Children-Women in Social Service and Human Rights
DDS	Dalit Development Society
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GERUWA	Geruwa Rural Awareness Association
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
MEL	Monitoring Evaluation and Learning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PAR	Participatory Action Research
RoL	River of Life
SIMESON	Simulation on Essential Obstetrical and Neonatal care
SS	Sahakarmi Samaj
Tdh	Terre des hommes
VOC	Voice of Children
WFCL	Worst Forms of Child Labour

What is the RoL method?

The RoL method is a visual narrative method² that helps people tell stories of the past, present, and future. Individuals can use this method to introduce themselves in a fun and descriptive way. A group can use it to understand and reflect on the past and imagine the future of a project. Besides, it can also be used to build a shared view of a process over time while acknowledging different and perhaps contradictory perspectives. The method uses drawings rather than text, making it useful in groups that do not share a common language. Metaphors from a river are used to explore aspects of a story – such as whirlpools depicting challenges or lakes suggesting a sense of calm etc. When used in a group, it is an active method, engaging people in the process of storytelling and listening through visualising their experiences and using metaphors to explore in depth.

In CLARISSA, we adapted the RoL method to document our collective understanding of the story of implementation of the programme as part of the programme's monitoring, evaluation and learning component. The purpose was to surface the details of our process of the systemic Action Research that we are undertaking with children in the worst forms of child labour and business owners. We used the same river metaphors as is often applied when the method is used with individuals.

The table below provides an overview of how the RoL method was applied in different projects.

Table 1: Overview table

Project name	Name of activity where the RoL method was used	Workshop modality	Brief summary of the process
CLARISSA	Evaluation Analysis workshop (2 times)	Hybrid (online and in person)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applied with the CLARISSA Nepal programme team from three consortium partners VoC, CWISH and Tdh. In total, there were 12 participants including the Country Coordinator, Participatory Action Research Facilitators, Documenters and MEL. The workshop was facilitated by the IDS MEL team. Preparations were completed on an online Miro board where all the activities and related information was mapped on a river diagram sourcing data from existing data collected through the participatory processes. During the workshop, participants (project implementers) collectively reflected on each activity. Questions asked during this process were answered using the data collected thus far while being careful not to reinterpret children's experiences
SIMESON	Lessons learned workshop	In person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applied with the project stakeholders and implementation staff, facilitated by MEL Manager Tdh. Used to enable individual and group reflections on the project activities, challenges faced and to respond to learning questions. The river drawing and mapping activities were done in groups during the workshop with pen and paper. Groups presented the river diagram and responses to their learning questions, and discussion in plenary deepened across groups.

²Knowledge Sharing Tools and Methods Toolkit - RoL (kstoolkit.org)

Sashkta SAMANA	Lessons learned workshop	Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applied with the project team including Tdh, Sath Sath and Biswas Nepal, with a total of 13 participants. Mapped project activities and critically reflected on challenges and learning from the project.
Enhancing Citizens' Participation in Sub-National Good Governance (Local and Provincial Level) in the Context of the New Federal System in Nepal programme.	Review and planning workshop	In person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relatively diverse and larger group of participants including field supervisors and programme coordinators from the three districts where the project was implemented. The concerned members from the executive board from all the five consortium partners (Tdh, Shakarmisamaj, Dalit Bikas Samaj, Iam Swedish, Center for Dalit Women Nepal (CDWN) also participated. The total number of participants was 30. Group work drawing river with pen and paper. The river diagram was also used to visualise how different activities contributed to specific outcome indicators. The activities and evidence supporting each indicator were listed and grouped whereas the progress and gaps in achievement of other indicators were also identified. Based on the identified gaps, the remaining activities were planned by the team for their respective districts.

Common steps in the RoL method as applied in the three TdH projects

Drawing on the learning from CLARISSA, Tdh adopted this method in three of its projects, including, Simulation of Essential Skills in Neonatal Care (SIMESON), Sashakta SAMANA and Enhancing Citizen's Participation in Sub-National Good Governance (Local and Provincial Level) in the Context of the New Federal System in Nepal. Across all three applications, four common steps were adapted and contextualised to each case, described in detail in the next section.

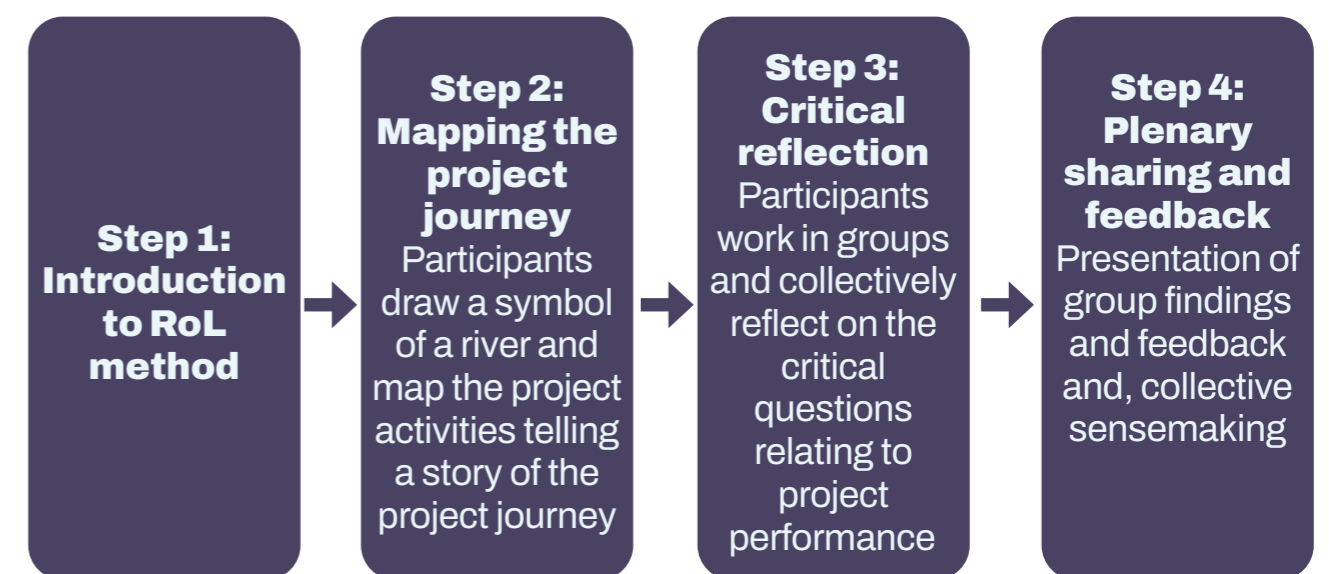


Figure 1: Common steps for applying the RoL method in Tdh projects

How was the RoL method used in each project?

Learning from the RoL method through the CLARISSA programme

Workshop context and design

CLARISSA adopted the method in analysis workshops that were part of the evaluation research that aims to understand how, for whom and under what conditions Participatory Action Research (PAR) contributes to the development of innovative solutions to tackle the drivers of WFCL. The analysis workshops with the PAR facilitation and documentation teams aimed to analyse the data that were gathered throughout the PAR processes. Both workshops were organised in a virtual setting. The purpose was to create a moment to stop and collectively tell the journey of the 'life story collection and analysis' part of the Action Research process that the teams had implemented over 2020-2021 (Learning note) as well as the first few months of the PAR group processes with the children. As information already existed on the overall process, the use of RoL mainly focused on documenting in a narrative form

and exploring the why and how of the activities that had taken place. For the evaluation research, this process helped us to:

- Identify the intervention that the evaluation is focused on.
- Uncover hidden (implicit) programme theories (assumptions about why we work the way we do) held by members of the implementation team.

Process and steps

The steps of using the RoL method were:

Step one: Preparation

The MEL team set up a virtual Miro board in which a draft river and the river metaphor symbols (e.g., whirlpools, rapids, bridges, boats) were already drawn. A holder of the story was assigned (usually a documenter) with the responsibility of gathering data from the multiple process data sources generated from CLARISSA programme activities and mapping the information on the Miro board using the river metaphors. They were also tasked with providing a descriptive analysis (socioeconomic information, gender etc.) of the children that were part of the participatory processes at different points.

Step two: Presentation

During the virtual workshop, the story holder presented different sections of the prepared river journey of the CLARISSA activities. For each of the sections of the river, the facilitator and other participants asked why and how questions about the activities. These were answered by the story holder or other participants (e.g., why did the team initiate this activity? Why were those particular people involved in the activity? How exactly did the team undertake this activity?) It was essential that the answers always aimed to refer to the evidence that was gathered in the documentation.

Step three: Descriptive analysis

Once the complete river was presented, the CLARISSA team went back to the start of the river and the story holder presented the descriptive analysis of the age, gender, type of work, and involvement of the children in CLARISSA. We also investigated what we know about children who were not able to engage. We added to the river where children joined and left the programme, using the data that was available.

Simulation of Essential Skills in Neonatal care (SIMESON) project

Project in brief

Tdh in partnership with Geruwa Rural Awareness Association (GERUWA) implemented the Simulation on Essential Obstetrical and Neonatal care (SIMESON) in Bardiya district. Through the SIMESON intervention entitled ‘Strengthening community and health system readiness for improved Perinatal health outcomes’ aimed to contribute to the Government of Nepal mission towards reducing maternal and neonatal mortality rates by strengthening health care facility readiness with upgrading the evidence-based knowledge and skills training to the Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs). The SIMESON is a training model that uses a mobile unit with two health workers specifically trained in medical simulation. They make regular visits to each rural primary health care facilities to provide practical training in essential care procedures that save the lives of mothers and their babies at birth.

Context of workshop and design

A lessons-learned workshop was organised in a face-to-face setting. In total, there were 24 participants including the project staff and stakeholders. The participants were heterogeneous in terms of the level of engagement with the project, which included relevant persons from Tdh and the project implementing NGO, health facilities, and concerned municipalities. As this workshop was focused on critical reflection, we thought using this method would be effective to encourage participants to visualise the project journey collectively and share their experiences and deepen their reflections. Due to the novelty of this method among the Tdh facilitation team, the lead facilitator for this session made sure to brief them on the process and their expected support during the group work. The session was facilitated by the first author, with the second and third author facilitating the group exercises.

Process and steps:

The steps of using the RoL method were:

Step one: Orientation on the method to the participants

To ensure everyone had a common understanding of the method and purpose of its application in the workshop, a presentation of the RoL method was done at the beginning of the event. We found that none of the participants had heard about this method before and they showed keen interest to learn.

Step two: Mapping the project journey

Participants were divided into three groups. They drew the river and mapped the project activities sequentially along the river. Participants were free to draw a river of any shape and size. We wanted them to be creative and enjoy the session. We also provided colour markers and charts to each group. Given the diversity of the participants and inherent power dynamics between them, the small groups were formed by role and engagement in the project to enable their river to be drawn from similar experiences and to ensure they feel comfortable with their peers and fully included in the process. The groups were divided as follows:

- Group one: NGO (project implementing partner)
- Group two: Health care workers trained through the project
- Group three: Municipality and health care facility

One facilitator was assigned to each group to encourage participation and to respond to queries from participants in the group.

Step three: Critical reflection

Each group reflected on the questions i) what worked well and contributing factors, ii) what did not work well and limiting factors, iii) challenges and learning faced during the implementation period, and iv) recommendations for the future. To manage the group dynamics, the facilitator encouraged full participation and prompted questions to individuals, allowing them to speak up.

Step four: Sharing in plenary for feedback

All groups shared their group findings in plenary and other participants asked questions for clarification and feedback.

Shashakta SAMANA project

Project in brief

The project focuses on fighting trafficking, sexual exploitation, and risky migration of children and young people at the source district and the destination in Kathmandu. The target groups for the project are school children, and children working in the AES venues. The project was implemented in Kathmandu Metropolitan City, Budhanilkantha Municipality, Tokha Municipality, Tarkeshwor Municipality, Chandragiri Municipality, Mahalaxmi Municipality.

The main goal of the project is to create a protective environment with improved systems in place for children and young people to prevent and respond to risky migration, trafficking, abuse, and exploitation of children and young people in the project area.

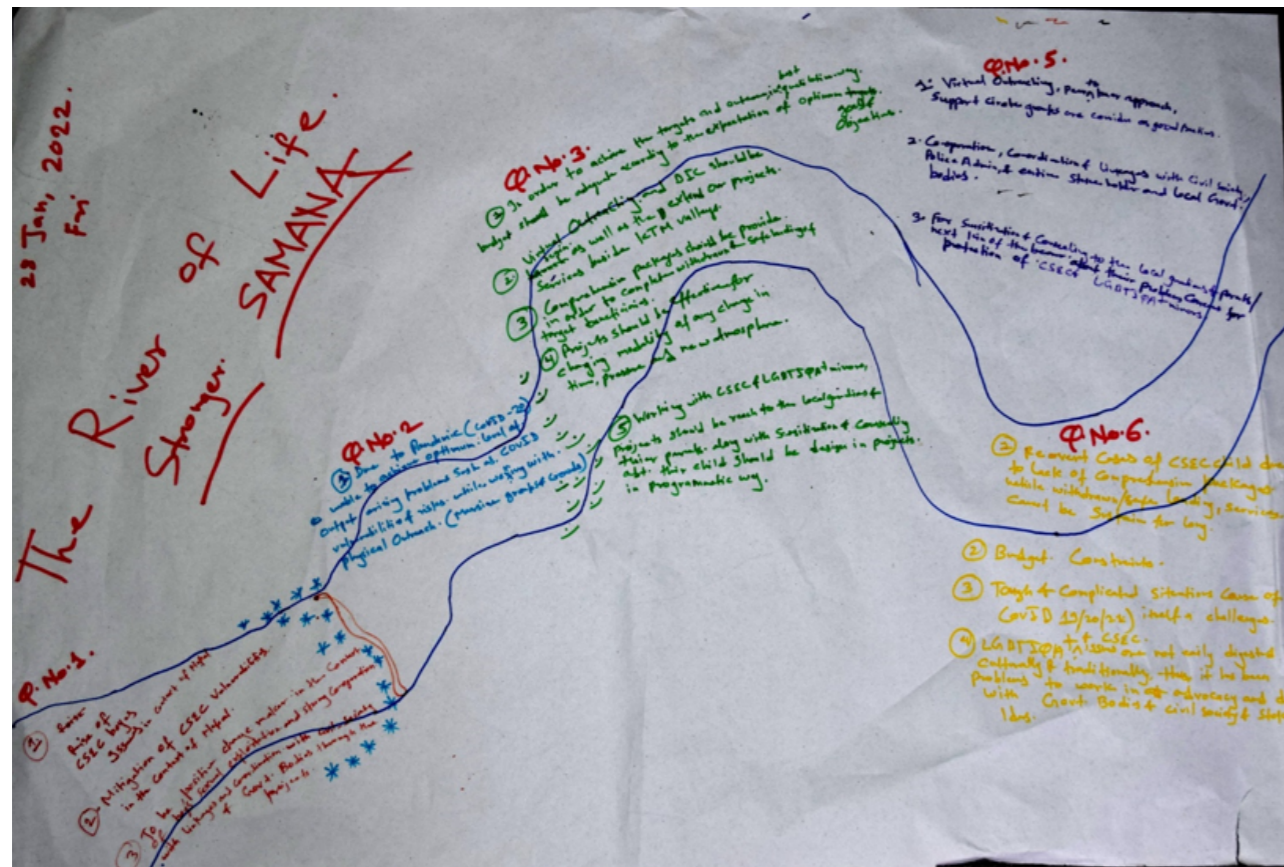


Image 1: A picture of RoL of SAMANA drawn by NGO partner Biswas Nepal.

Context of workshop and design

The project review workshop was organised in a virtual setting because it was during the Covid-19 restrictions. The purpose of the workshop was to conduct the final project review. The project staff from the implementing partners participated in the workshop. The workshop was facilitated by the first author.

Step one: Orientation on the method to the participants

A presentation on the RoL method and application process was shared. Some of the participants from implementing partners shared that they had used this visual narrative method while working with Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC). The method was applied by the facilitator on a one-to-one basis with the child to help them tell their stories of past and present, to understand their issues, and to support them following a case management approach.

Step two: Mapping the project journey

While the workshop was taking place online, Tdh facilitated the session and the two NGO partners worked separately with their respective team in groups to develop their river. They had 45 minutes to discuss, draw and map their activities on the river diagram using resources they had to hand, such as plain paper or flipchart paper, pencils, or markers. Tdh team members joined each group in breakout sessions to provide guidance during the group work and responding to queries from the group during the group exercise.

Step three: Critical reflection

Each group reflected on the questions i) what worked well and contributing factors, ii) what did not work well and limiting factors, iii) challenges and learning faced during the implementation period, and iv) recommendations for the future. They wrote their findings on a separate paper. One hour was allotted for this step.

Step four: Sharing in plenary for feedback and to generate collective understanding

Both groups shared their findings online by taking a photo and sharing their screens in plenary. Other participants asked further clarifying questions. The presenting team and Tdh responded accordingly, building a collective understanding among the participants.

Enhancing Citizens' Participation in Sub-National Good Governance (Local and Provincial Level) in the Context of the New Federal System in Nepal programme

Project in brief

A consortium project with five partners including NGOs Sahakarmi Samaj (SS), Dalit Development Society (DDS), Center for Dalit Women Nepal and two INGOs: IM Swedish and Terre des hommes (Tdh) mainly leading the MEL functions. The objective of the project is to ensure enhanced participation among citizens in sub-national (local and provincial) good governance in the new federal system in Nepal. It aims to enhance participatory and cooperative relationships between citizens and local governments, and to establish cooperation and dialogue among local governments, between local and provincial governments and ministries to improve overall local service delivery and ensure reflection of local needs in programmes and policies. The project was implemented in three districts, and 12 municipalities of Karnali Province of Nepal.

Context of workshop and design

The RoL method was applied during the final review and planning workshop. The participants in the workshop were staff and representatives from the executive board from all the five consortium partners who play a crucial role in steering and monitoring the project. The second author facilitated the workshop that was held in-person.

Step one: Introductory session of the RoL method

A presentation on the RoL method and process was shared as it was a new method for all the participants.



Image 2: A participants explaining the RoL of the project. Image by Roju Giri, MEAL Officer, Tdh

Step two: Drawing the river and mapping activity and details

District-wide groups were formed with project staff and executive board members from each district, to encourage smooth discussion because of better connectedness. Each group drew a river of the project from the beginning to the present, and showed the activity they implemented, the challenges they had faced and lessons they had learned.

Step three: Sharing in plenary

Each district shared its project river journey in plenary and answered questions from other participants.

Step four: Linking to outcome level indicators and listing activities and results

The outcome level indicators of the project were added to the river at the points where they had linked to the specific activities. For example, we divided the participants into three groups according to the project implementation district.

Each group were asked to trace the project journey on paper, recalling all activities completed, and their experiences

relating to each activity. The visual river with maps of activities was shared in plenary by each group. Other participants were allowed to raise questions in plenary and responded accordingly.

To generate a common understanding on the links between activities and indicators, the facilitator wrote all the outcomes on the meta card and pasted them on the wall. Participants were organised into groups according to their organisation. Each group organised the activities and achievements (qualitative) contributing to the specific indicator, referencing the river diagram. All the group work was displayed on the wall, and participants were invited for a gallery walk where they could visually assess the completed and remaining activities under the corresponding indicators. Thus, the remaining activities were noted by individual groups.

Step five: Development of action plan

Building on of step four, each consortium partner worked in groups to develop their detailed implementation plan for the remaining project period.

Overall impressions and learning across the four projects

The method is effective in deepening both individual and group reflection. As opposed to a simple timeline exercise, it allowed for the messiness of the projects to be embraced, whilst still providing a clear and shared story of the process. The initial step of the river drawing and mapping created a visual image of the activities allowing participants to feel connected to the project journey. To encourage effective reflection, groups were set up based on the organisation, location, or stakeholder type, depending on the nature of the participating groups. The presentation on the RoL process was shared before the group exercise, generating knowledge among the participants, and preparing them to apply the method e.g., participating in the group reflections. Some participants might have felt uncomfortable to share due to fear of judgement or shyness, and the facilitator was mindful of this. The exercise allowed participants to be focused and engaged, and fostered creativity using symbols and metaphors. For example, participants used symbols such as boats, smiles, sunshine, rain etc. to express their emotions related to the project. Multiple members of the group could work on the drawing and demonstrate their creativity, generating a sense of motivation and teamwork. By engaging in physically drawing the river together, it provided an opportunity for team building and connectivity with other participants, allowing for the exchange of ideas and fostering collective sharing in a learning environment.

Whilst we found that the participants of the workshops were sometimes hesitant to participate in a drawing activity, we found that: encouragement from the facilitator, indicating that there was no right or wrong way to do this; provision of the right tools (paper, coloured markers, stickie notes) and clearly explaining the metaphor of the river can be some ways to motivate them to get started with the drawing. We found that it helped to have participants who had used the method before or who were excited to use the method. These individuals could start the drawing and lead the small group in the process. Once people began to engage with the process, they reflected that they enjoyed the method and thought it was interesting to see the project journey laid out in such a visual way.

Not only is the RoL method effective for developing the activity timeline, but it can also draw out different experiences and perspectives of a process. In the workshop where groups drew their own rivers, interesting reflections on how different team members experienced the flow of the programme surfaced. As each of the activities were discussed and mapped, all participants got to share their experiences based on the nature of their involvement in the project journey. While mapping activities in a river diagram, it was realised how different team members build their perception

and experience of the same activity because of the influence of certain contextual factors in the field. It was also observed that all the team members could not connect with the overall project journey beyond their scope of work. All these experiences were included in the diagram to share in plenary for questions and clarifications. Through this, the method was an effective way to draw different experiences of the process that people had depending upon their roles, responsibilities, and engagement in the project. For instance, it allowed stakeholders such as the municipality and health care facilities to confront the issues raised by the project implementers and beneficiaries and to provide clarifications. However, in all the RoL sessions, there were no disagreements expressed.

From our observations and responses from participants during the workshop evaluation sessions, we can say that participants found it easy and interesting to relate to a visual diagram/method rather than narrative methods. We used this method not only to map a timeline but to also link other levels of learning, and to visualise the progress on the outcomes. This method is not limited to generating, it could also be tailored to generate the desired information about the outcome, challenges, and learning by linking the project (river journey) with the deepening questions in the next steps.

The RoL method is applicable in both in-person and virtual settings, with the right kind of facilitation methods and tools based on the participants' background. Some very practical learning relating to capturing the rivers emerged as well. For face-to-face workshops, it is necessary to assign a dedicated person to take photos of river images of each group, the hard copies may be lost or torn while transporting. In virtual workshops where online tools such as Miro might be used, the participants should be oriented on the use of the online tool to ensure that everyone can participate equally. The choice of using Miro should be done only if i) the internet access is sound, ii) All the participants are familiar with the method by orienting them on basic Miro skills and sound internet connectivity. As the Miro board only allows information to be in the stickies (important steps, points), we should be mindful of assigning dedicated persons for detailed explanations and discussions beforehand for preparing the evaluation analysis report.

Considering the diverse nature of the participants, we found the application of the RoL method to be most effective by starting with a proper orientation on the method and the process of application in the workshop. This knowledge enhanced the confidence of the participants, promoting their engagement in the group exercise and discussions.

Overall, the RoL method served as a good basis to map out the journey of a project collectively and set a tone for deepening reflections. From the participants' feedback, they found the method interesting and engaging. The method proved to be an effective way for Tdh to capture learning and gain a pragmatic overview of the different milestones in the life of projects, creating an enabling environment for participatory processes. Tdh will continue to use this method, especially in project reviews and reflections workshops, adapting to the context and learning from successive applications.



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CLARISSA works by co-developing with stakeholders practical options for children to avoid engagement in the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal.

The participatory processes which underpin the programme are designed to generate innovation from the ground which can sustainably improve the lives of children and their families.

The programme's outputs are similarly co-designed and collaboratively produced to enhance local ownership of the knowledge, and to ensure that our research uptake and engagement strategy is rooted in the direct experience of the people most affected on the ground.