

Section 1

Working in a child- and people- centred way



People-driven solutions:

An introduction to facilitating deep participation for systemic change through Systemic Action Research programming

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This learning and reflection brief is designed to help teams learn about, reflect on and identify some possible actions to adopt, or to enhance a deeply child- and people-centred way of working. It is useful for any team, no matter what programme approach they are currently using. Specifically, it can help teams:

- Learn about what a child- and people-centred way of working is and why it is so important for participatory, learning- and action-oriented, whole systems programmes,
- Learn about communication skills, a fundamental aspect of a child- and people-centred way of working,
- Access key tools and support for strengthening communications skills,
- Reflect on their own programme(s)'s approach and identify possible actions which could potentially enhance or shift it towards a more strongly child- and people-centred way of working.

A children's advocacy group in Nepal.

SOURCE: FROM THE CLARISSA VIDEO '[WORKING IN A CHILD- AND PEOPLE-CENTRED WAY](#)'

Terms used in this Brief:

Dohori

Places of entertainment where Nepali folk songs are performed.

Lived experience

Personal, actual experiences and related perspectives.



1 VIDEO

Watch the video '[Working in a child- and people-centred way](#)' where CLARISSA team members, community members and children from Bangladesh and Nepal talk about their experiences and learning as part of CLARISSA. After you have watched the video, note down how you think this approach is similar or different to how you currently work.

A children's advocacy group meeting in Nepal.

SOURCE: FROM THE CLARISSA VIDEO '[WORKING IN A CHILD-AND PEOPLE-CENTRED WAY](#)'

2 WORKING IN A CHILD- AND PEOPLE-CENTRED WAY

Working in a child- and people- centred way is building a programme where:

- The lived experiences*, perspectives, knowledge and agency of child and adult stakeholders are valued and prioritised.
- Researchers, facilitators and other programme staff create an enabling, safe and inclusive environment for children and adults to participate deeply and lead their own research, analysis and decision-making around the issues affecting them.
- Children and adult stakeholders own the programme (i.e. learning, decision-making, actions taken) – “this is our project”.
- Child or adult stakeholders’ support networks and environments such as family, friends, community and service providers are seen as important elements of a child- or people-centred strategy – children and adults don’t live alone in a bubble, and their various networks have a strong influence on their lives. For instance, CLARISSA was child-centred but it didn’t only work with children, it was inclusive and also family- and community-focused, while also working with business owners and other key adults to address challenges for children.
- Child and adult stakeholders benefit on different levels, for instance through the specific benefits and impact derived from a programme, as well as by nurturing an individual’s sense of agency, power and confidence in relation to changing other aspects of their life, which will live on beyond the programme.

Working in a child- and people-centred way is important for any programme, but it is critical for Systemic Action Research approaches where there is an emphasis on generating collective learning, taking child- and people-led actions, and adapting a programme as it learns. For example, CLARISSA's participatory, child-centred approach resulted in a deeper and more nuanced understanding of why and how children ended up in the worst forms of child labour, and the impact the work was having on the children, their families and their wider support networks. In turn, the children collectively generated innovative solutions which aligned closely to their life experiences and the challenges they faced. In addition, children expressed how the process had helped them build their confidence more generally.

Working in a child- and people-centred way is sometimes confused with working in a child- and people-focused way. While a programme's focus may be on children or a particular group of vulnerable adults, this does not necessarily mean that the programme values or prioritises these groups' perspectives and agency over the programme's assumptions or staff expertise. Additionally, a child- and people-focused approach won't necessarily ensure broad inclusion, meaningful participation, or foster a sense of ownership by participants.

3 WORKING IN A CHILD- AND PEOPLE-CENTRED WAY: PRACTICAL LEARNING FROM CLARISSA

Children can undertake detailed research and critical analyses. The child- and people-centred approach used by CLARISSA trained children as researchers and supported them to generate and make sense of the data collected by children's Life Stories, by developing systems maps through causal analysis, and by participating in Action Research groups. Initially, some of the children were not clear on what to expect from their new roles as researchers and were reluctant or shy to take part in group discussions and activities. However, as the training, co-learning and mentoring progressed, the same children became actively engaged in group discussions and even gave presentations of the outcomes of group discussions in plenary. The children's research activities also helped boost the overall confidence of many children. The systems maps (See also Learning and Reflection Brief 2).



“To find solutions to those problems, it is not possible for adults to do it alone. For children’s problems, children have to come together, and we should listen to what the children in our homes and families have to say.”

Local motivator, Nepal

A children’s Action Research group in Nepal.

CREDIT: CLARISSA

Mapping systems and taking action) which the children developed, as well as the additional research undertaken by the Action Research groups, provided rich insights into children’s lives. The systems maps also helped children, families, communities and CLARISSA partners gain additional clarity on how certain interrelated situations and conditions combined to drive children into the worst forms of children labour. CLARISSA evidence shows how this new systemic understanding motivated collective action.

Working in a child- and people-centred way is about learning, but also ‘un-learning’.

The child- and people-centred approach of CLARISSA, as well as the reflexive nature of the programme, prompted many of its team members to re-evaluate their own attitudes, assumptions, and expectations in relation to working children. Many partner team members were not convinced at the beginning of the programme that such a deeply child-centred and child-led approach could lead to robust and useful evidence on the worst forms of child labour. However, as the work progressed, team members were at once encouraged to reflect on their own biases as part of the programme, while at the same time experiencing for themselves how, with the right support, the children showed themselves to be capable of undertaking critical, deep analyses of complex data and issues. A key turning point was experienced within CLARISSA, whereby many team members radically shifted their own assumptions and biases by ‘un-learning’ the approaches and perspectives which had been guiding a lot of their previous work, and a new level of trust was established across the whole team – a trust in the agency and ability of children to learn deeply about the issues which affect their lives.

“I saw that many from our own team had a little apprehension at the beginning whether these things were really doable by children, whether they would be able to find a solution by forming an Action Research team.”

CLARISSA partner team member, Bangladesh

Children and young people sketching connecting lines on a big system map, Nepal. CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA





Working in a child- and people-centred way requires skilled facilitators.

CLARISSA trained adult facilitators to undertake story collection (with the help of documenters) and to support the children’s Action Research groups. Before starting any research, facilitators first took several months to build trust – through fun and engaging activities – between themselves and the children, with their families, local stakeholders, and between the children themselves. Once the story collection and research groups started, the facilitators’ approach was not to teach, but to listen, support and encourage. This included addressing power imbalances in group settings, and actively acknowledging each individual’s own abilities, strengths and value. Also, facilitators guided the group towards using critical and reflexive thinking and trusted that the children were capable of these skills. In particular, and linked to ‘un-learning’, CLARISSA also learned that good facilitators don’t necessarily need to have a high-level, formal research skills. In fact, engaging highly qualified researchers at the beginning was found to be a barrier by CLARISSA, as it was hard for these experienced researchers to discard their expertise and established ways of doing research. In the end, less formally qualified facilitators (graduates) with an open mind and genuine curiosity to learn were engaged and were found to be ideally suited for this role. They readily embraced the child- and people-centred principles and approach, and learned new skills to facilitate child-led research. A flexible, child-centred approach to the timing of activities and venue selection also helped children feel safe and made the participatory process effective.

Being non-judgemental and inclusive deepens child- and people-centred approaches. Another important, and innovative, aspect of CLARISSA was that it engaged with the owners of the smaller, informal businesses who employed many of the children. This was a non-judgemental and open-minded strategy which created additional opportunities to learn more deeply and gather broader perspectives.

A facilitator in Nepal works with a children’s Action Research group.

SOURCE: FROM THE CLARISSA VIDEO ‘WORKING IN A CHILD- AND PEOPLE-CENTRED WAY’

“Sometimes things used to come up completely different than what we think. And we need to accept that, because it’s them (the children) who are leading.”

CLARISSA partner team member, Nepal

In fact, dialogue and research with these business owners revealed that many of them employed children because they wanted to help the children, but that they were often unaware of laws prohibiting the employment of children, as well as the ages of the children in their employ. This resulted in some of the business owners taking collective steps to make work safer for children. For example, in Nepal, some members of the 'Night Entertainment Business Association Group of Dohori* and Dance Bar Owners' focused on the lack of identity documentation within business venues. This was identified by their Action Research group as contributing to children engaging in the worst forms of child labour in dohoris and dance bars.

CLARISSA RESOURCES

CLARISSA Blog: *Bringing children into the Life Story collection process (Nepal).*

CLARISSA Blog: *Beyond the Participatory Action Research process – achievement with business owners!*

CLARISSA Learning Note 1: *Learning from Life Story collection and analysis with children who work in the leather sector in Bangladesh, DOI: [10.19088/CLARISSA.2022.006](https://doi.org/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](https://doi.org/10.19088/CLARISSA.2022.007).*

CLARISSA Blog: *Art, craft, and the science of facilitation in a complex partnership programme.*

CLARISSA Blog: *Non-Violent Communication in everyday life.*

“We had knowledge of child labour, but after training, we got even more information on child labour. We learnt that the business should be registered and renewed. We have to be updated about legal aspects. We also revised our contracts. We included information like employers must be above 18 (must submit a copy of their citizenship certificate or passport) and they should be Nepali citizens. The business owners who had not renewed their registration also have done that.”
Business owner, Nepal



Business owners and national CLARISSA team members, Nepal.
CREDIT: CLARISSA

4 SKILLS, METHODS AND TOOLS FOR WORKING IN A CHILD- AND PEOPLE-CENTRED WAY

Skills and tools for practitioners. Team members with facilitation and learning mindsets, a genuine openness and curiosity, coupled with the appropriate practitioner skills and qualities are critical for a strong child- and people-centred approach. Central to this is good communication. Good communication is not one single skill but is made up of a wide array of different skills. This includes, knowing how to actively listen, showing empathy and being non-judgmental, being self-aware (especially in relation to one's relative power), avoiding the reflex to try to frame or fix the problem, and humility. Having a good communicator mindset is also linked to being a reflective practitioner. This is explored more fully in Brief 4. **After Action Reviews.** Good communication skills are also not just what facilitators say, but also how they listen, and how they act in the community. Linked to building trust, facilitators in CLARISSA needed to be able to communicate with many different people, including children, from many different backgrounds. This included speaking with local leaders, parents, employers and other stakeholders, and spending time in the programme neighbourhoods. Communicating in an empathetic way also showed that children felt respected, loved and heard.

Active listening: Listening, not just talking, is key for communicating and developing relationships with other people. However, it can be quite challenging for many people to truly listen when someone speaks. For instance, the 'listener' may already be thinking about what else they want to say, or perhaps they may assume they already know what the other person is going to say, or want to impose their own understanding upon or offer solutions to what someone has said.

Empathy and being non-judgemental: Being able to empathise with someone requires a level of curiosity about another person's perspective, and the desire to try and feel how it might be to experience what they are telling you. Learning to feel and show empathy can help practitioners get a better understanding of another person's position and how they see things, without judgement. It can also help show a person that their experiences and perspectives are valued.

“I think the rapport building with the children themselves is a very necessary one because you don't know them beforehand. They come into this group, and they start sharing their experiences, their lived experiences, their problems. So until unless you have a good rapport with the children, they will not open up with you.”

CLARISSA partner team member, Nepal



CLARISSA country coordinator Nepal working with a children's Action Research group.

SOURCE: CLARISSA (WORKSHOP)

Being self-aware and humble: Working in a child- and people-centred way requires that team members become aware of the many assumptions, beliefs, knowledge, values, expectations, attitudes, and behaviours which they already carry, including their relative power within any context, and how these shape the ways in which they engage with participants and stakeholders, as well as programme partners. By taking the time to reflect in a personal capacity, as well as a team, practitioners can become more self-aware, and conscious of what they are bringing to the people, groups and communities they are working with. This can guide practitioners as to where they may need to ‘un-learn,’ or use strategies to reduce the influence they have on a process. Therefore, humility, *especially* putting one’s own views, opinions and expertise in the background, is the foundation for effective work by ‘outsiders’ who are seeking to enable a child- and people-centred process.



Children participating in fun activities to build rapport and trust in Nepal.

CREDIT: KAPIL SHRESTHA

Non-violent communication. Some members of the CLARISSA team in Bangladesh were trained in ‘non-violent communication’ (NVC), a transformational communication technique that prioritises listening over speaking. It aims to improve communication through a deeper understanding of our emotions and values, and what we observe in the behaviour of others. It can be used to support constructive dialogue and manage non-violent group conflict. Watch a [short video](#) about Non-Violent Communication.

It is possible to practice these skills as an individual and together as a team in order to become excellent communicators in diverse contexts. The resources below provide some further guidance and tools which practitioners can use to develop their communication skills.

Tools to use with children and adult participants. In addition to considerations around how facilitators communicate with children and adult participants, there are also considerations regarding how participants communicate with each other, and how this can enable inclusive dialogue between peers. This is important in building a sense of group; for sharing important information and perspectives; enabling participants to communicate ideas effectively with their peers, facilitators and other stakeholders; avoiding non-violent, destructive conflict; and even helping support psychosocial wellbeing. Activities could include facilitated dialogues, sports, drama, games, music, dance or art, and other creative activities. The resource list below provides many links to relevant guidance and tools.

Creating safe spaces where people feel comfortable. Not only did CLARISSA facilitators ask children where and when they felt most comfortable holding their meetings, but CLARISSA also integrated children’s feedback mechanisms throughout the Life Story collection processes – individual feedback, as well as group reflections – which helped create safe spaces for children to comfortably communicate their thoughts and feelings. The feedback sessions also helped CLARISSA facilitators to get a sense of how children were participating in activities, and to adapt programme methodologies and any logistical plans as needed. Creating safe spaces also includes the idea of ‘relational’ safeguarding, whereby children have strong, trusting relationships with adults. This can enhance communication between children and facilitators, as well as contribute to enhanced safeguarding, whereby children feel safe to share personal information or seek help from an adult. This is discussed in more detail in Learning and Reflection Brief 6.

[Safeguarding for Systemic Action Research.](#)

“As human beings, we prefer to talk more than to listen. Through the NVC training, I’ve learned that many problems can be resolved with empathetic listening, managing emotions, and respectful communication.”

CLARISSA partner team member, Bangladesh

GUIDANCE AND TOOLKITS FOR WORKING IN A CHILD- AND PEOPLE-CENTRED WAY

Guidance and tools for improving communication skills: Child Resilience Alliance's [Supporting community-led child protection: an online guide and toolkit](#) has detailed guidance and activities to help practitioners build communication skills. In particular, [Deep listening](#); [Empathy](#); [What do I bring to the community](#); and [Humility](#). [Enabling inclusive dialogue](#) gives guidance on how to enable participants to communicate as part of an open discussion and exchange different points of view, as opposed to debating in a more hostile manner. The section on [non-violent conflict management](#) also provides practical guidance on how to facilitate constructive dialogue as opposed to destructive conflict.

Videos of facilitator skills used in Participatory Action Research in Kenya : [Being a facilitator](#); [Being humble and respectful](#); [Deep listening](#); [Enabling inclusive dialogue](#); [Managing non-violent conflict](#).

Terre des hommes's toolkit [YouCreate](#) has guidance for young people on facilitation skills for child- and youth-led Participatory Action Research.

The [Activity Catalogue for Child Friendly Spaces in Humanitarian Settings](#) by the Psychosocial Centre and World Vision has a number of child-friendly activities which can help build communication skills in Section 5. *Relating to others*.

There are many resources available on running activities with children, young people, and adults. Section D. (page 28) of Save the Children's and War Child Holland's [Toolkit of Participatory Approaches Using Creative Methods to Strengthen Community Engagement and Ownership](#), which has many links and ideas for energisers, icebreakers and games.

Non-violent communication: The Center for Nonviolent Communication [website](#).

More guidance on [participation](#), [facilitation](#) and [Participatory Action Research](#) from participatorymethods.org

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*

“A 16-year-old boy from Hazaribagh is addicted to drugs. While talking to his mother, the social worker discovered his childhood had been abusive. From an early age, his father would beat him every time he refused to go to work. He started working when he was nine years old. His mother said that often her son sits on the roof of their house for hours at night. She was very worried but did not know how to help her son. Later, the Bangladesh team worked with the boy, including him in the training workshop for child Life Story collectors. He was an active participant, attentive and communicative throughout. The workshop helped him to share his own story, but to also hear others too.”

Extract from *Finally telling their stories* (Bangladesh). CLARISSA Blog.

5 TIPS ON WORKING IN A CHILD- AND PEOPLE-CENTRED WAY

Do's and Don'ts when working in a child- and people-centred way	
DO	DON'T
Plan to spend adequate time building trust with children and adult stakeholders. Try not to start 'from scratch' but rather, leverage other organisations' existing relationships with communities and groups by engaging them in the work or making use of their spaces and services, for example, psychosocial support.	Don't be in a rush to start researching or implementing activities before strong relationships and trust have been built.
Be inclusive, and gently bring quieter or marginalised children or people into discussions. Ask other children to locate the most marginalised and find ways to include them.	Don't work only with the children or adults who are the most vocal, local leaders or influencers, or only those who show up to meetings.
Learn about local customs and social dynamics. Ask groups how and where they would most feel comfortable talking. Take into account that children and others might not want to speak freely in front of adults or authority figures. Make sure local leaders (formal and informal) support the work.	Don't ignore local power dynamics and etiquette. Don't assume everyone is happy speaking together in one group and that they will feel able to voice their opinions or give information freely. Don't assume everyone will welcome your organisation or programme.
Spend a lot of time in the communities and places where you are working, have informal chats with locals, eat locally, spend time getting to know local people and places, and dress and act in a way that 'fits in' and is respectful. Be self-aware.	Don't go to the communities and places only when you have to. Don't display relative wealth or resources. Don't be unaware of how you might be perceived by the children and people from the community you are working with.
Go in with a trusting, humble, and open mind – that children and other stakeholders can learn new skills such as research and analysis, and that programme staff also have much to learn.	Don't assume you are the expert, that you know what the problem is, and what the people, including your organisation, should do about it. Don't assume children and other stakeholders won't be able to learn something new or complex.
Use story-telling, visual methods, and other interesting methods, especially those which resonate with local practices, to help people convey their feelings, experiences, perceptions and knowledge.	Don't introduce complicated tools which local people are not familiar with, or which require a lot of resources.
Ensure the work will do no harm. Agree a safeguarding plan with all the stakeholders. Refer to 6. <u>Safeguarding for Systemic Action Research</u> .	Don't inadvertently do harm. For instance, creating conflict between groups or problems for some individuals, as a result of dialogues.

6 TEAM REFLECTION

This section of the learning and reflection brief is designed to be used in a team reflection session. Answer the questions in this worksheet together. Allow about two hours to complete this worksheet. Use your notebooks to record your answers and main points. You'll need to refer back to these later.

Skills building (25 mins at the end of the session)

Practice using your communication skills while doing this activity. Make notes as you go along of anything which you notice in relation to these skills. Be prepared to provide and receive critical feedback from the group.

Team discussion (25 minutes):

It might be helpful to watch the video once more as a team. Discuss ways in which your team is working in a similar or different way from the video and what is described in this brief.

Team mini self-assessment (40 mins)

Work in as a team to discuss each question. The goal is to reflect, discuss, and learn together, not to finish the task as quickly as possible. Note down your group's answers and ideas in your notebook.

Agree as a group how you will rank each statement from 1–5. (5= strongly agree, 1= strongly disagree). Make a note of the rankings.

1

We trust that children/people are the experts in their own lives. We give them the space and time to lead learning about their situations and make decisions

2

We have many examples from our team/ programme/organisation of working in child- and people-centred way

3

We regularly use some tools and methods which can enable a child- and people-centred approach

4

Our team has skills required to enable a child- and people-centred approach

Reflect on your collective answers and discuss the extent to which you think your team is working in a child- and people-centred way. What is your group strong on, what is it less strong on? Why do you think this is?

Actions brainstorm (30 mins)

Suggest and discuss any actions you could potentially take as a team to make your work more strongly child- and people-centred. While remaining realistic, try not to limit your ideas for now, as you will have the opportunity to come back to them once you have completed the series, and to decide if they are still relevant.

Skills feedback (25 mins)

Discuss with your group how it made you feel to consciously use some of the communications skills during this activity. Also provide group feedback to each participant. As individuals, tell the group about one aspect of communication skills which you would like to improve. Note this down and return to it regularly to remind you to practice. Use the guidance and toolkit links provided in this learning and reflection sheet to help you practice.



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