

Section 4

After Action Reviews



People-driven solutions:

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

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CLARISSA team members in Nepal.

CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA

This learning and reflection brief outlines using After Action Reviews as a key collaborative learning, reflection and review process within an adaptive management programme. Teams will be able to identify if and how their programme may benefit from holding regular After Action Reviews to support adaptations; the extent to which their programme may already undertake or use similar processes; how After Action Reviews or similar programme processes could be introduced or strengthened; and if there are any possible actions which teams could take. The After Action Review process could be used by any team which is open and able to change, and that would like to strengthen its learning and action-taking process.

Specifically, this brief will help teams:

- Learn about how to be a reflective practitioner within a reflexive programme – a key programme approach and practitioner skill for adaptive management and for any programme.
- Learn about some of the key methods and tools used by CLARISSA for After Action Reviews such as Rivers of Life, as well as how practitioners can use reflective journaling.
- Reflect on their own programme(s) and ways of working, and identify actions which could potentially enhance, or help strengthen a programme's learning and action-taking process.



1 VIDEO

Watch the video '[After Action Reviews](#)' where CLARISSA team members from Bangladesh and Nepal discuss their experiences and perspectives. After you've watched the video, note down two questions which you'd like the learning and reflection brief, or team, to help you answer.

2 AFTER ACTION REVIEWS

Holding periodic After Action Reviews with country and consortium partners played a central role in CLARISSA's intentional and systematic approach to using learning and evidence to adapt how it was working at different levels.

After Action Reviews: An After Action Review is a structured, yet simple, facilitated learning process. It is used by groups, such as implementation teams, or broader partner or stakeholder groups, in order to capture the outcomes and lessons from past programme successes and failures and to build an ongoing evidence base of how a programme is working. The aim is to learn and improve future programme performance. After Action Reviews offer a valuable opportunity for groups to pause and reflect on projects, activities, events, or tasks, and to transform learning into actionable strategies for improvement.

After Action Reviews are useful processes because they enable teams to step back from day-to-day tasks and take time to assess their achievements. It is a versatile tool that can be used for various contexts, ranging from brief post-activity reflections, for example a half-hour session following a day of fieldwork – a 'mini'-After Action Review – to more extensive reviews, for example, a three-day workshop for an implementation team evaluating a year's worth of programme activities.

The process typically begins with a set of generic questions that guide reflection:

- What was expected to happen?
- What actually happened, and why were there deviations?

A CLARISSA team member reflects with colleagues.

CREDIT: FROM THE CLARISSA VIDEO '[AFTER ACTION REVIEWS](#)'

“Another thing I want to emphasise is that the management of this project was adaptive. Even a community mobiliser could communicate with the project director easily. Thus, the project director was able to know what is happening at field level, what decisions should be made, and the community mobiliser felt good that the project director was aware of their contribution.”

CLARISSA partner team member, Bangladesh

- What aspects worked well, which didn't, and what are the reasons for each?
- How can we improve for next time, and what specific steps should be taken?

These questions form the basis of group discussions, analysis and lessons, which facilitate a collective understanding and strategy for enhanced performance in real time and as the programme moves forward.

3 AFTER ACTION REVIEWS: PRACTICAL LEARNING FROM CLARISSA

Learning how to run an After Action Review. While each After Action Review was designed to respond to the specific point in time the programme found itself in, there was a general structure which guided all the reviews. At the beginning, the After Action Review process was modelled by the global monitoring, evaluation and learning team who designed and facilitated the first few sessions, and then worked with the country level partners to co-design subsequent After Action Review sessions.

AN EXAMPLE OF A CLARISSA COUNTRY-LEVEL AFTER ACTION REVIEW MEETING IN BANGLADESH

Day 1 – Looking back

Step 1: Reconstructing a timeline of activities, identifying big moments and collective achievements and challenges (for instance, by using Rivers of Life)

Step 2: Zooming into individual high and low points, to tap into personal motivations and experiences – this way the process is grounded by the lived experience and the value of everyone's contribution.

Step 3: Reflect on outcomes achieved and explore personal/team contributions to them.

Step 4: Reflect on any deviation from plans – what learning were we responding to?

Day 2 – Deepening reflections

Step 1: Team building activities

Step 2: Facilitated reflections on learning areas such as being child-centred, capacity development, and partnership working.

Step 3: Deepening reflections on specific relevant issues (e.g. power in the Participatory Action Research process, trust building, thematic research topics).

Day 3 – Looking forward

Step 1: Apply the partnership self-assessment 'partnership rubric'. See Brief 5: [*Working with partners.*](#)

Step 2: Develop critical and actionable learning

Step 3: Plan next phase of work by building on learning

A final step always involves feedback and reflections on the After Action Review process by participants and facilitators.

“So, when we started working, we saw that if we did a reflection after finishing a small process rather than meeting every six months, it will help us learn in a more systematic way. We started doing mini-After Action Reviews ourselves. The facilitators and those of us in management sit together and reflect after finishing a small process. This is how we took small adaptations which we have seen from the evidence which helped our work.”

CLARISSA partner team member, Bangladesh



CLARISSA team members in Nepal.
CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA

Mini-After Action Reviews. Implementing teams also experimented with a scaled-down version called mini-After Action Reviews, because they saw the value of the bigger After Action Reviews in promoting reflection and learning. Mini versions were applied to specific programme implementation activities such as the Life Story collection and analysis process, capacity development, and the social protection community mobilising work. These meetings, which took place either tri-monthly or linked to project milestones, such as the piloting of a new approach or activity, were facilitated by the monitoring, evaluation and learning focal person in each country.

Mini-After Action Reviews were also valuable opportunities for interaction and team building, given that team members frequently worked in different places and did not always have the opportunity to interact as colleagues, or in a less formal way. Importantly, the mini-After Action Reviews were also documented, and this documentation fed into the six-monthly programme ‘big’ After Action Reviews.

After Action Reviews were adapted to fit team contexts. The inclusive, collaborative and empowering approach of CLARISSA overall towards its partners meant that partners had the flexibility to organise their After Action Reviews in different ways. For instance, After Action Reviews took place between partners in-country, and not just at international meetings; and by holding their own mini-After Action Reviews. After Action Reviews eventually became an established organisational practice for many partners. This is discussed in more detail in Brief 3. [Using evidence and learning to adapt programmes in real time.](#)

Reflective journalling: Some practitioners started using reflective journalling as a way to build their own reflection skills and to feed in effectively to the After Action Reviews.

“Journalling helped me to connect the dots as part of the reflective event. We had one session when we had to describe the Action Research groups and what are the key points or milestones that they have achieved and how they have achieved them. Thanks to the reflective journalling I could connect the dots and indicate how things happened, why it happened, what kind of changes occurred, or what were our learnings during that process.”

CLARISSA country partner team member.



4 SKILLS, METHODS AND TOOLS FOR AFTER ACTION REVIEWS

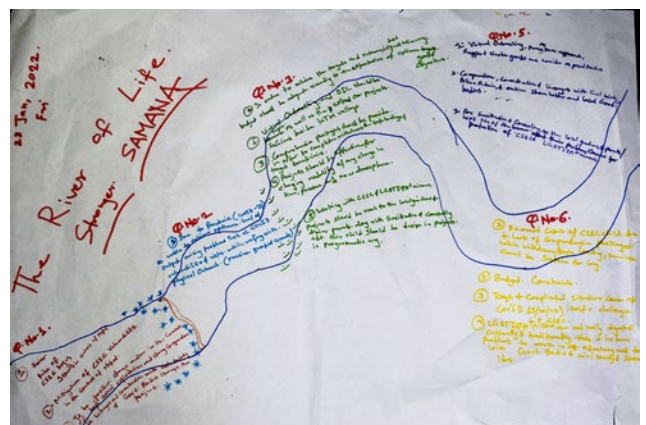
Team members presenting their River of Life, Bangladesh.
CREDIT: ROJU GIRI

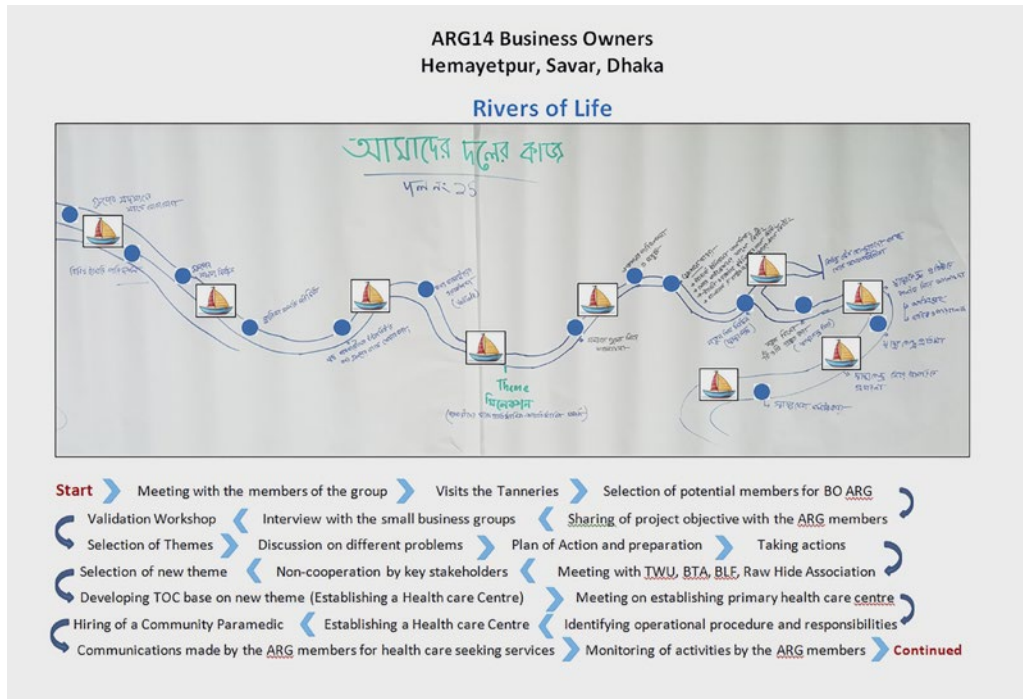
Rivers of Life: CLARISSA adapted the ‘Rivers of Life’ method to help team members document and reflect on their collective experience and perspectives of the programme process during After Action Reviews. Rivers of Life helped team members tell the CLARISSA ‘story’ at regular intervals, and start to identify how, for whom and under what conditions the approach was contributing to innovative solutions to tackle the drivers of the worst forms of child labour. It also revealed details about the process which the whole programme team was not always aware of and helped them explore ‘hidden’ aspects of the programme.

The Rivers of Life method is a visual storytelling method that helps people reflect on and share their stories about the past and present and visualise futures. Individuals can also use this method to tell a personal story. A group can use it to understand and reflect on the past and imagine the future of a project. In addition, it can also be used to build a shared view of a process over time while acknowledging different and sometimes contradictory perspectives. Rivers of Life can be very useful for anyone who wants to:

A River of Life drawn by a local implementing partner in Nepal.
CREDIT: CLARISSA

- generate reflection on experiences, enablers, influences and barriers or challenges
- appreciate personal experiences
- generate dialogue
- identify and discuss the reasons behind the enablers and challenges
- identify strategies for change





A River of Life developed by business owners in Bangladesh. CREDIT: CLARISSA

“The facilitators are using reflective journals. They write on it after every meeting that they facilitate. These are not uploaded anywhere. They then provide input, in the After Action Reviews that we do, from those diaries. What went well, what didn't go well [...] If they would not keep a diary, they would miss a point [...] Once I've done with the meeting I go back to the diary and write what happened to the meeting from my point of view. This is not for anyone else to read. And I could have criticised myself, on things I could have done differently, or things the children could have done differently.”

CLARISSA country partner team member

The method uses drawings, making it useful in groups that do not share a common language, or in settings with low literacy. Arts-based and visual methods are also powerful because they can help people unlock their thinking, and to explain complex or detailed experiences, processes or feelings. Metaphors from a river are used to explore aspects of a story, for instance, whirlpools can depict challenges or lakes can suggest a sense of calm. When used in a group, it is an active method, which engages people in the process of storytelling and of listening to each other.

Becoming a reflective practitioner and reflective journalling. Because practitioners are often so busy with the day-to-day demands of a programme, it is easy to forget about or deprioritise important learning moments. By regularly keeping a reflective journal, practitioners will be able to record, be reminded of, and reflect upon issues which have arisen in their work. Additionally, a reflective journal documents decisions and actions over an extended time period and can help show what has been achieved in terms of real changes to one's practice over time. An example of the reflective journal used by CLARISSA team members is shown below.

Becoming more reflexive is as much a discipline as a skill, but it doesn't have to be complicated or burdensome. Practitioners should be realistic about how often they will reflect. Being over-ambitious could make reflection practice feel overwhelming and hard to maintain – potentially making it a source of stress. Rather, choose a feasible, regular time to reflect, ideally by leveraging regular programme events, such as weekly meetings or After Action Reviews, to create time to write in journals. Teams could even factor this activity into regular meeting agendas, if it seems appropriate.

Practitioners might also choose to use the journal to help improve their own skills for facilitating Action Research groups. For personal reflection, it is recommended that practitioners 'start small' if seeking to improve personal practice, and to identify one or two key aspects to reflect on. For instance, many practitioners might find it helpful to focus on the core skills described in this series. Perhaps identify one skill to improve, or a challenging issue which keeps coming up at work.

Keeping a reflective journal can help practitioners to:

- focus one’s thoughts and develop one’s ideas
- experiment with ideas and ask questions
- organise one’s thinking through exploring and mapping complex issues
- develop one’s conceptual and analytical skills
- become aware of one’s actions and strategies and reflect upon and make sense of experiences and the processes behind them
- express and reflect on one’s feelings and emotional responses
- develop one’s voice and gain confidence
- develop a conversation with others

FACILITATOR REFLECTIVE JOURNALLING DIARY

General information

Name of the facilitator	
Designation of the facilitator	
Workshop number	
Group ID	
Day number	
Date	
Location	

Notes

- Facilitators to complete at the end of each workshop day
- To help ongoing reflection

Changes in the children
Factors/methods that contributed to these changes
Open reflection about facilitation

.....
Example of facilitator’s reflective journal used by CLARISSA.

GUIDANCE AND TOOLKITS FOR SUPPORTING PERSONAL REFLECTION AND AFTER ACTION REVIEW REFLECTION

Rivers of Life: More detailed ‘how to’ guidance on participatorymethods.org

Participatory Visual Methods: A case study. An example of how visual storytelling can open up new spaces to reflect on participatorymethods.org

Participatory Approaches Using Creative Methods to Strengthen Community Engagement and Ownership – Resource pack: Guidance on using a broad range of participatory, creative methods for facilitation and many links to different tools.

Brief guidance on **Reflective practice** on participatorymethods.org

Developing a reflective practice. From Child Resilience Alliance’s *Supporting Community-led Child Protection: an online guide and toolkit*.

CLARISSA Learning Note 4: *Applying the River of Life method to support reflection and learning in Terre des hommes, Nepal.* DOI: [10.19088/CLARISSA.2023.005](https://doi.org/10.19088/CLARISSA.2023.005)

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

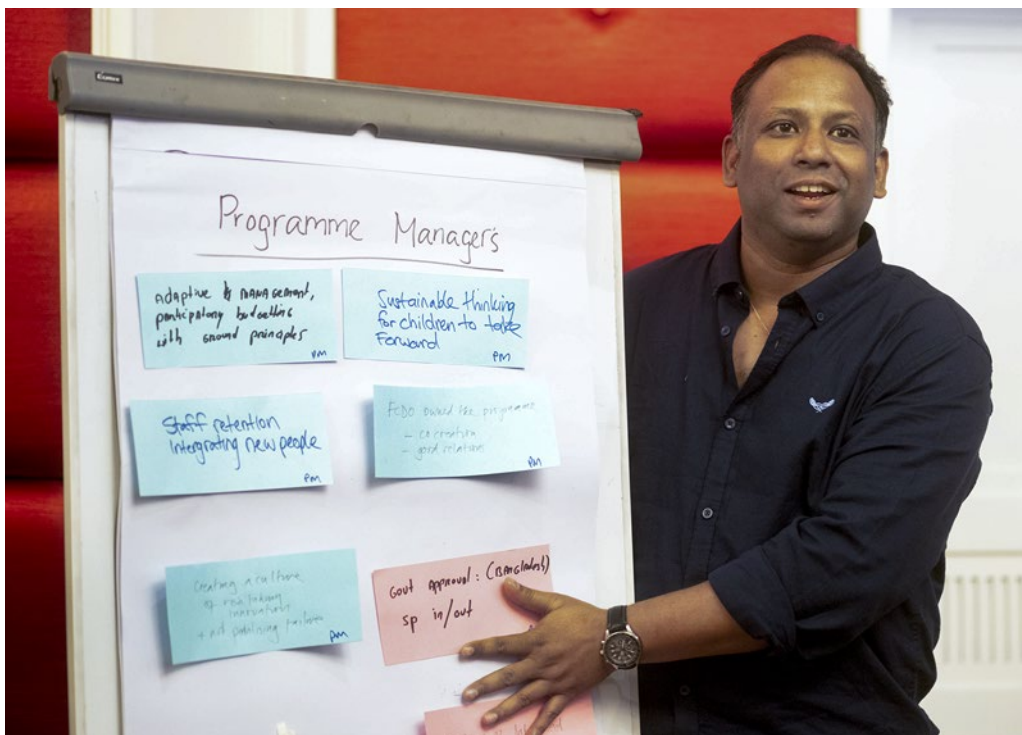
Key skill: *Being a reflective practitioner (individual)*

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*



International partner team member at a CLARISSA cross country reflection and learning meeting.
CREDIT: ANIS BASTOLA



5 TIPS ON PLANNING AND BUDGETING FOR AFTER ACTION REVIEWS

Planning and budgeting for After Action Reviews does not necessarily have to affect the typical planning and budgeting of many development and humanitarian programmes. However, because After Action Reviews should be inclusive and participatory, there may also be additional costs involved in bringing everyone together in different ways, some of which may only be identified as the programme moves forward.

If a team is planning to hold After Action Reviews of any kind, it should also consider the wider organisational culture of learning and change, and the extent to which its current culture can support open and frank discussions about what is working and what is not in a programme, and use actionable learning to commit to how work is being done at all levels. It may be that additional resources and activities could be earmarked to help build trust and strengthen working relationships and teams. This might include team building retreats or workshops, hiring venues or facilitators, or any other activities which can support team building.

Encouraging practitioners within a programme to become more reflexive in terms of their own professional skills is an activity which is usually very low cost. What tends to be more challenging for practitioners is finding the time and motivation to regularly write in their reflective journals. It is advised that programme planning takes this into account and that it allocates time within existing or planned activities such as meetings, workshops or trainings to give time for reflective journaling. As with After Action Reviews, practitioners will appreciate being acknowledged by their organisation or team, and being shown that it values their efforts to actively try to work in a more reflexive way. Consider planning specific activities/events in order to co-learn with practitioners about what is supportive and what is not supportive for their professional reflection and learning.

Nepal partner team member speaking at a CLARISSA cross country reflection and learning meeting.

CREDIT: CLARISSA

“To commit to learning means committing to changing. And if you learn but you don’t change, you’re constrained in some way.”

IDS CLARISSA team member

6 TEAM REFLECTION

This reflection session is designed to be undertaken as a team. Allow about two hours. Use your notebooks to record your answers and main points. You'll need to refer back to these later.

Skills building (1 hr):

This reflection session focuses on being a reflexive team within a reflexive programme. To practice the skills and tools in this learning and reflection brief, teams could try using the Rivers of Life method. Your team will also practice running a mini-After Action Review later on in this series, as part of *Final Tasks: Team action setting and mini-After Action Review*.

Suggested method: Depending on the size of your group and whether you work in the same or different programmes, work together on either a single, or several different programme 'rivers'. Use large pieces of paper, and as a team, collectively draw the 'story' of a programme you are working on. Show important milestones and events, challenges, what went well and what went not so well, where changes were made, and where the programme is heading next. Importantly, your team should include any significant learning events or moments on the river.

Action brainstorming (30 mins)

Use your team's River of Life to help you collectively identify any opportunities for actions which could enhance how your programme actively reflects, identifies actionable learning and adapts, and anywhere where it might be possible to shift closer to this way of working. Add these ideas to your River of Life (in the 'future' part of the river) and keep the river drawing somewhere safe and/or each take a photo of the drawing. You will need to refer back to it later.

Team reflection (30 mins)

Spend some time at the end reflecting on this session.

- How did the River of Life activity feel? Did you find it helpful? Were there any challenges?
- Did the brief and the session help answer the questions you identified from the video?
- Is there anything else you want to raise or discuss with the team?



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