A Two-Day Workshop
Bringing Depth and Vitality to M&E in Social Change Practice

Towards More Effective Practice and Collaboration for Social Change

Tamarind Tree Associates
Cultivating effective human organisation

How can social change practitioners strengthen the way they reflect on their experience and practice so that they continuously learn and navigate their way through complex and uncertain contexts of change? How can M&E systems be enlivened for both learning and accountability moving beyond simplistic impact measurement?

We offer an approach that supports practitioner teams or collaborating partners to develop their own engaging 'learning rhythms' of regular reflection on work experiences.

Objectives

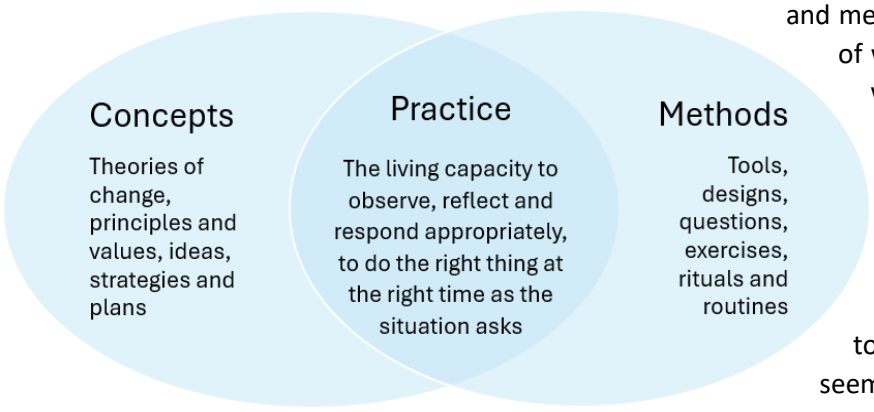
A. **Practitioners learn how to write reflective stories of practice** that reveal both the "outside and inside stories", surfacing the deeper unfolding dynamics of social change and change practice;

B. **Using these reflective stories, practitioners learn how to design, facilitate and participate in reflective learning dialogues**. These dialogues enable practitioner teams or partners to go beyond the obvious lessons thoughtfully and collectively develop deeper learnings and implications for practice, while cultivating significantly improved collaborative relationships;

C. **The outcomes of the writing and dialogues (the learning and implications for the future) become the basis for a deeper accountability** to stakeholders (e.g. communities, boards and donors) in the reports and presentations they produce and enable a wider sharing through publishing written case studies and articles.

Developing a conscious and collective practice

On the one hand practitioners have conscious **concepts**, like their theories of change, principles, values, leading ideas and programmes or project plans, all of which help to define and focus their work. On the other hand, they have **methods**, like their tools, process/project designs and exercises etc. which they use to put their plans into action.



But social change work, which must meet unique, unpredictable and complex contexts and dynamics, requires a **practice.** Practice is *the living capacity to observe, reflect and respond appropriately, to do the right thing at the right time, as the situation asks.*

Practice is usually the least conscious but the most vital aspect of social change work. Having only plans and methods without a practice runs the risk of working blindly, according to a recipe, without nuance or respect for the uniqueness of the people and their situation.

Many practitioners do have an intuitive practice, guiding responsive actions but this intuition can also lead to formulaic responses when faced with seemingly familiar challenges, and

complicating their ability to articulate successes, failures, or lessons learned. This is also likely to hinder sharing valuable insights with peers, obstructing vital collaborative learning and practice development.

It is through surfacing, sharing and making sense of stories or accounts of practice that it can best be understood and deepened and developed. This can either be done verbally or in writing, giving an honest account of real experience from which to learn.

Surfacing, improving and enlivening practice

Shared stories of practice can be reflected on through collegial dialogues, using the action learning cycle, where collective learning is drawn, thinking and theory deepened and implications for future practice, strategies and methodologies considered, adapted and planned for. These dialogues give practitioners a chance to relive their experiences and ask, with the support of colleagues, questions like *what was really happening, what helped and hindered the process, where was power located and how did it shift or become entrenched, what was my real work and what else could I have done?*

Facing the the questions that matter through real stories of practice can be a process of enlivening their sense of their practice and the worth of their work.

The skills of writing reflective stories and engaging in learning dialogues

Written reflective stories of practice makes practice more visible and helps for a more deliberate and disciplined learning dialogue process. But most practitioners struggle to put pen to paper, some through fear or self-doubt and others because they are uncertain where to begin or how to proceed.

Using the Barefoot Guide Writeshop methodologies, we help participants to get through their writer's block and to produce not only the visible 'outside story' but also to surface the less visible 'inside story' of what was happening inside and between people e.g. their inner dialogues and evolving assumptions, emotional responses, fears, doubts, motivations, triggers, resiliences and resistances etc. This is where the real dynamics of change are at play.

Reflective stories then provide the basis for collective learning dialogues from which deep learning and implications for future practice and strategy can be drawn. Practitioners are taught to facilitate several dialogue designs for themselves. Not only can individual practices grow this way, but so can an organisational practice evolve that has a more consistent and continuously improving quality, held between collaborating practitioners.

Practitioners also gain skills and confidence for writing reports, case studies and articles. The dialogues produce qualitative evidence and insights that can be used for evaluative processes, accountability reports, published writings and for innovations and strategic thinking.

Different kinds of reflective stories of practice

Different kinds of reflective stories for different times can be designated by the team, depending on the need or season. Here are five types we have successfully worked with:

a) A past story of a challenging experience of practice from which to harvest valuable learning;

b) A 'hot' or current story where the teller is seeking guidance for what to do next;

c) A thematic story for all practitioners to draw on their experiences. These different accounts on the same theme can provide a rich picture to feed practice and strategy;

d) Practice scans, where the practitioners survey their whole practices over the past period and look for patterns and issues that give helpful perspectives on their developmental challenges as well as strategic issues for the team to consider;

e) Future stories, like designs of coming interventions, to elicit advice and support from peers.

The Process: a Two-day Workshop

Day One:

- **A conceptual session:** A two-hour session to see where people's shared thinking about change and change practice is (and is not) and to introduce some ideas about change, as a foundation for the process going forward.
- **Reflective Story writing:** a five-hour session to write a reflective story of practice. This would include individual writing and peer-feedback processes.

Day Two:

- **Learning some core skills:** deep listening, feedback, questioning, action-learning design, facilitation and participation.
- **Experiencing and practising collegial learning dialogues**: using their reflective stories to develop the key skills required.

A comprehensive Reflective Story-writing and Learning Dialogue Guide will be provided.

The Facilitator: Doug Reeler

I have worked as an organisation development practitioner for 27 years, 22 of those for the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) before joining with colleagues to form Tamarind Tree Associates. I have accompanied NGOs and social movements across Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

The essence of our work is to design and facilitate organisational and collaborative social processes with a wide range of actors towards developing more effective change practices and co-creative organisational forms. My interests are horizontal and action learning processes combined with experimental innovation and whole organisation culture change and strategic reviews.

I co-pioneered the Barefoot Guide Connection, which supports the publishing of the experienced voices and wisdom of grassroots leadership and practitioners, through Barefoot Guides.