

## What makes information useful?

*Exploring factors which make a piece of information useful or meaningful for a particular individual or context.*

### WHY?

Information cannot solve the problems of poverty unless it is accompanied by the skills, confidence and knowledge to seek and use it. Furthermore, the meaning and value of any piece of information varies depending on the context in which it is received, the source, format, language etc. People will attach value to particular sources, although their perceived trustworthiness may not reflect reality. It is important for participants to be aware of the factors affecting how useful a piece of information can be to them, in order to develop capacity to source and analyse information that is of potential use to them.

### WHEN?

This is an important step to undertake after an initial exploration of the value of information (see separate sheet).

### HOW?

In previous discussions the group will have explored the value of information, and in particular by using an ‘information tree’ they will have looked at the roots and fruits of good information. There are many types and levels of information, and in any context information resources will be complex and multi-directional. However, not all information is reliable or useful, and accessibility involves many factors, including physical location, costs, language and format. These can be explored through general facilitated discussion and visual tools.

Some examples of tools are given here – but more should be developed to cover different aspects covered in the box (right): for example role plays or games might be developed to illustrate the problems of misinformation/propaganda and hidden agendas; or participants could be given the same information in different formats (taped radio item, written, word of mouth etc) to evaluate the differential impact the different sources, formats or languages might have.

#### **Box 1 - how meaningful?**

Factors affecting the usefulness of information may include any or some of the following:

- *The source*: the same piece of information will have a different impact depending on where it comes from;
- *The format/ medium*: the same piece of information may have more credibility if written than spoken, or vice versa;
- *Relevance*: people will not use information that is not relevant to them, although the relevance can change from day to day;
- *Capacity*: People need to be able to find and decipher the information in order for it to have meaning and value to them. This may mean language skills, literacy or computer literacy, or simply mean having the necessary equipment, such as a video or radio;
- *Confidence*: Perhaps most importantly, a piece of information will only be useful if the recipient has the confidence to demand it, and even more importantly, use it. This requires someone to have confidence in his or her own knowledge.

**This is summarised from the induction pack, ‘information’ section, where further examples and clarification is available.**

**Mapping types of information:** The group might develop a matrix to illustrate and explore the sources of information which people find useful for different aspects of their lives. The first step would be for the group to discuss and agree the categories – across the top might be areas of their lives to which the information is applied, and along the side the sources of such information. For example: information relevant to their income, social lives, education, and health; whether from their cultural background, friends, newspapers, agricultural extension workers etc.

Once the matrix has been filled in, the group can analyse the findings and look at how useful and relevant they find information from each source in each area of life. A ranking exercise, looking at which sources are most important for which areas of life, could be used to bring about a deeper exploration of how information is valued in the local context, and what makes it trustworthy, useful or meaningful.

	Income	Social	Parenting	Health	Learning
Background + family	Skills + values	social skills confidence +	experience of childhood values +	Diet + habits -	encourage study
Work	Experience, networking +	Social events with colleagues	Not related.	Not related.	Reading + Meeting for work +
Study	School, internet directly related +	negative effect!	Not related.	Some small information	In the past, not now, some formal study
Friends	Tell me of opportunities	Main source of information +	Some friends with children shared +	link on diet + exercise of +	Small relation -
Public/media	Job opportunities relevant articles	Use to find out what is on and what is good!	A lot of information often contradictory	A lot of info not great quality	Lead water + interesting, important articles +

Sample matrix for mapping types of information by Henrich B.

**Mapping your own information network:** A chapatti diagram could be used for participants to explore their own information and communication habits and resources. Using a topic of relevance and interest to the group, participants map out the different sources of information relating to that subject, adjusting the size and distance of the circle representing each source, and the strength and direction of its links, to represent its relevance, importance and accessibility. For example, looking at information relating to HIV, sources such as the Government might be considered important (big) and reliable (strong links) but far away, and partly obscured by peers who are close, big but not so reliable. Health professionals may not be so big if they are not abundant or available in the local setting.

This exercise should be followed by a discussion of the different people and institutions that serve as information sources and the strengths and weaknesses of each. This will lead into an action plan for strengthening links with different information sources, or improving the quality of information received.

**Who do we trust?** What do you do if you receive a piece of information which contradicts what somebody else told you, or your existing belief? Do you disregard the new information as incorrect, or re-examine what you already believed? Is there a subconscious process by which we evaluate the two sources and disregard the information coming from the ‘weaker’ source? For example, if you believed that bananas were good food for babies, but then read in a newspaper that they were linked to digestive disorders, would you change your behaviour? Would it depend who had recommended them in the first place? Or the general perception of the newspaper reporting the findings, or of science in general?

It may be interesting to facilitate a general discussion on this issue of prioritising information, and tools can be developed to explore further. For example participants could rank different information sources, taking them two by two and deciding in each case who would have more influence on their beliefs.