

Documenting local knowledge

Ways for people to recognise the value of their existing knowledge, and think about why and how to document this.

WHY?

Often information and communication programmes present poor and marginalised people as passive recipients of information. However, communication is a two-way process and exploration of issues related to documentation of local knowledge is an essential element of any such project. Furthermore, recognition of the extent and value of your own knowledge can give you the confidence and the basis for further learning, analysis and demands.

WHEN:

It is important that the role of participants as information sources and communicators is constantly recognised and reflected in this process. The exercises related here could be run alongside or in between the other resource pages covering the receipt of/ access to information.

HOW:

There are several aspects to an exploration of local knowledge, some of which are highlighted in the box (right). People need to be aware of their own knowledge, and their value as a source of information. Only then can they think strategically about how and why they might document and disseminate local information and knowledge. Below are some suggestions of exercises and tools to explore some of these issues.

What do I know? In most cases people do not recognise most of what they know. This might be because it was learned informally or because it is something that everybody locally knows. It is important for people to recognise what they know both in order to think through what other people might be able to use, and to build more confidence in dealing with outsiders. A role-play could be developed in small groups or pairs where participants pretend to be a foreigner or city dweller trying to live their lives in the local/ village context. This should be followed with discussion to bring out the different areas of knowledge we each have in order to live our lives.

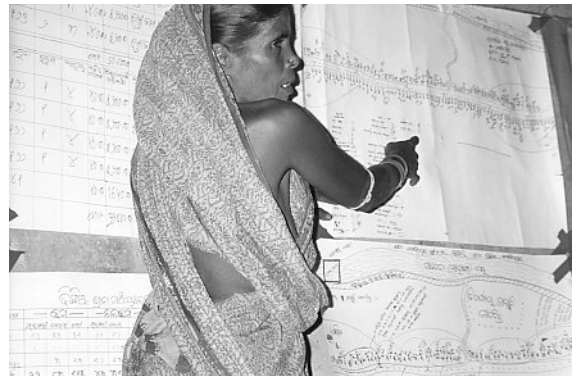
This exercise should be followed up, or substituted, with a gender/ age role swap as appropriate for the particular Reflect group. Men and women, or parents and teenagers, role play each others' lives to explore the different things each has to know for their lives. Finally, a group discussion can identify some of the important pieces of local information identified in the role-plays and small group work.

Box: Exploring local knowledge

- What are the strengths in local information and knowledge;
- What is the scope and reach of this knowledge? How is it captured and shared;
- What are the advantages and dangers in documenting and disseminating local knowledge?
- Does a piece of information coming from a poor person have the same impact as from a powerful person?
- How do we strengthen traditional or existing ways of sharing knowledge?

When am I a useful information source? To build on the exercise from the ‘*What makes information useful*’ sheet regarding the value of different sources of information, participants could spend some time looking at themselves as sources of information. With a spider diagram, participants could show themselves at the centre and illustrate the different people or institutions who use them for information, the types of information they provide and the strength of links (in particular to show their usefulness/ trustworthiness to each user). This exercise should be followed by group discussion to broaden participants’ thinking around information users.

Who wants to know that? Recognising what we know is an important step to thinking through whether we want to document local knowledge. Next is to think through who else might be able to use such information, how they could access it, and whether we want them to have it...



Woman presenting social audit - Orissa

Two main reasons to document knowledge is for it to be available to people in another place (ie another village with similar problems, or for national or regional level campaigning and advocacy) or another time (ie future generations.) The group could discuss how they got to know some of the things they need for their lives, and identify some of the things they know which people in another space or time would benefit from.

- A river could be used to look at the types of information which have been useful in the past and future. This could focus on a particular type of activity, and how new information or experimentation has changed the way of doing it.
- Discuss the types of information we want our children and grandchildren to know – how information from our ancestors was captured and passed down, and is this the best way of continuing. E.g. oral history is alive, once written it is static and perhaps less relevant, although in other cases communications technologies might make information capture more reliable? Establishing and resurrecting social spaces for the transfer and sharing of knowledge.
- It is important to explore the dangers of documenting local knowledge – which may include issues such as exploitation, control, copyright, and ownership.