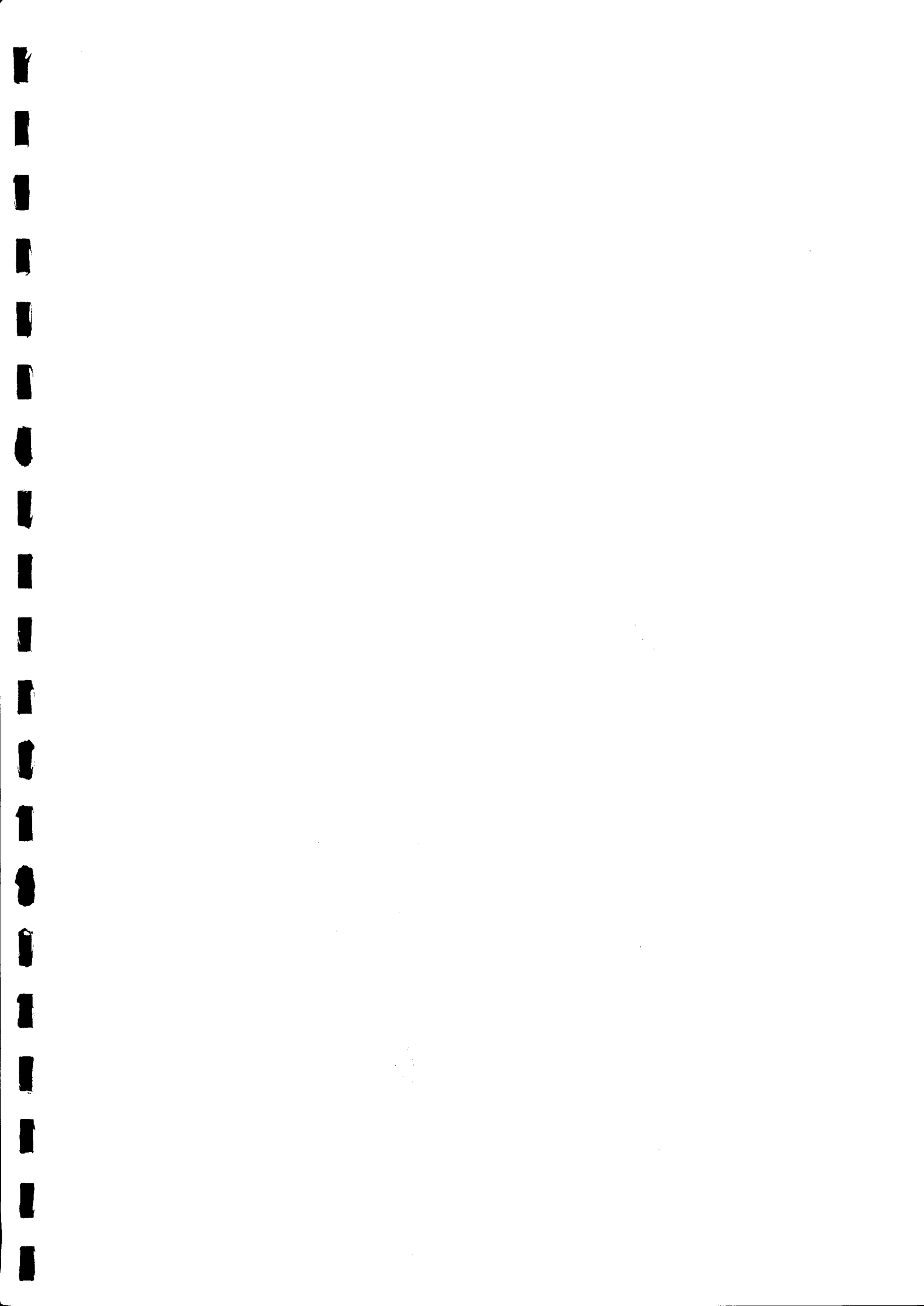


Literacy in Circles?

by Marc Fiedrich

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Working Paper Series

The aim of the Working Paper Series is to promote exchange of information, stimulate debate on programming and policy issues and disseminate ACTIONAID's research and project experience to a wider audience. Comments are very welcome.

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This paper discusses several issues arising out of REFLECT, which was piloted on a small scale in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador and has now been taken up in many countries. The approach is based on the belief that literacy does not yield developmental benefits unless it is linked to a process of (self) empowerment.

Based on research carried out in the area during May - July 1996 this paper explores the potentials and limits of REFLECT and aims to stimulate a broader debate on how the approach can be applied constructively in various contexts.

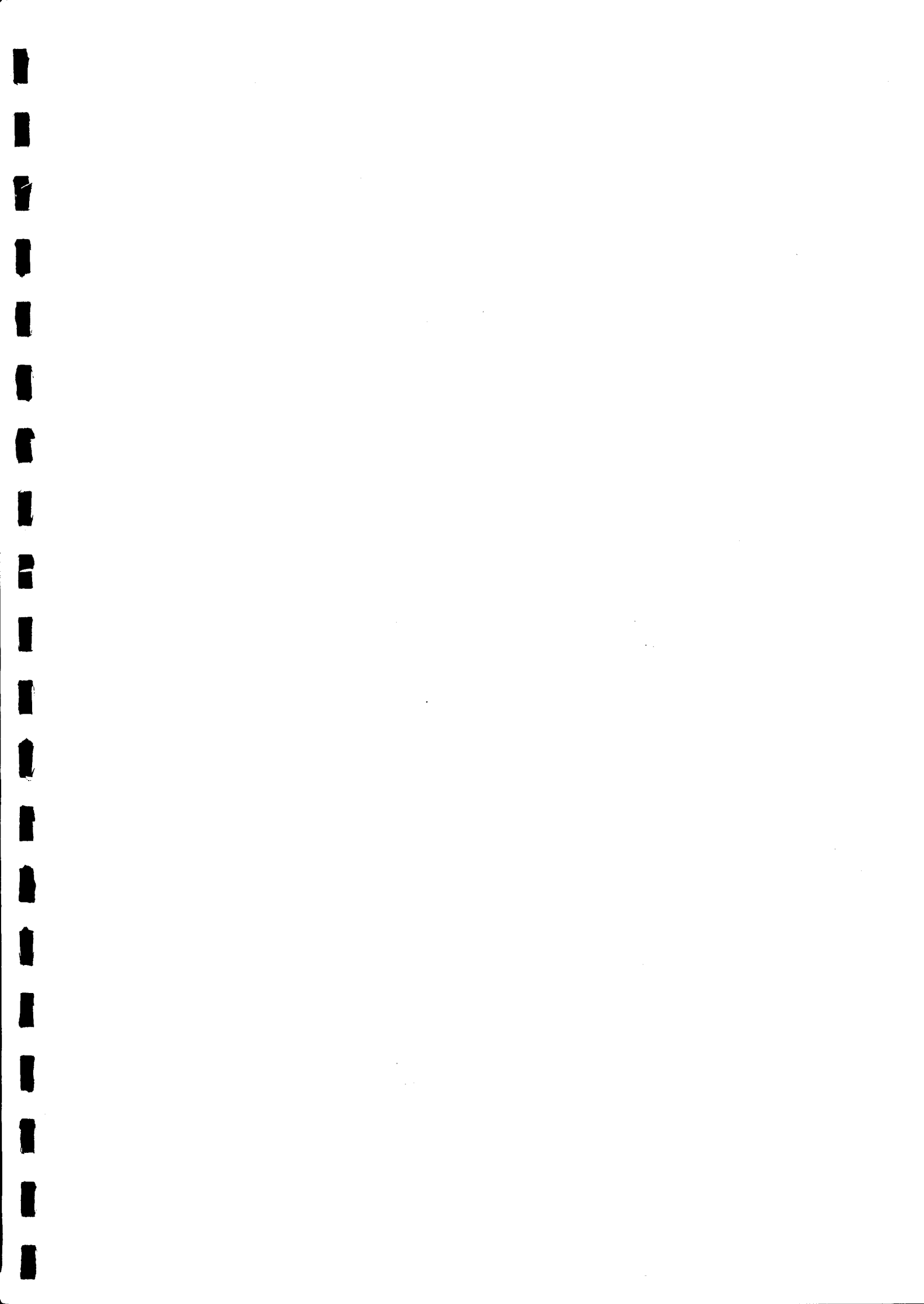
ACTIONAID works in Africa, Asia and Latin America with some of the poorest children, families and communities to enable them to alleviate their poverty, and secure lasting improvements in the quality of their lives.

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PREFACE

REFLECT is a new approach to adult literacy and social change, first developed by ACTIONAID in 1993 through pilot projects, in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador. Fundamentally REFLECT emerged from a fusion of the theoretical analysis of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, with the methodologies developed by practitioners of "Participatory Rural Appraisal".

Following the success of the pilot projects (see Action Research Report on the REFLECT Pilots, ODA, London 1996), ACTIONAID published a "REFLECT Mother Manual" (ACTIONAID London 1996) giving broad guidelines on the new approach and how to adapt it to different settings. This has contributed to the rapid spread of the new approach to over 25 countries. Clearly, with such a rapid replication, there are risks of distortion - as has happened with so many other initiatives in the field of literacy and development (not least Freire's own work).

Distortion seems most likely around issues of participation and empowerment, and the commitment that the implementing agency has to handing the agenda for change over to poor communities. If this commitment is lacking, REFLECT will become sterile. People will fail to bring real creative energy to their reading of the manual to act as a counterbalance to the written word. The authors are aware that this was one of the dangers in publishing such a manual!

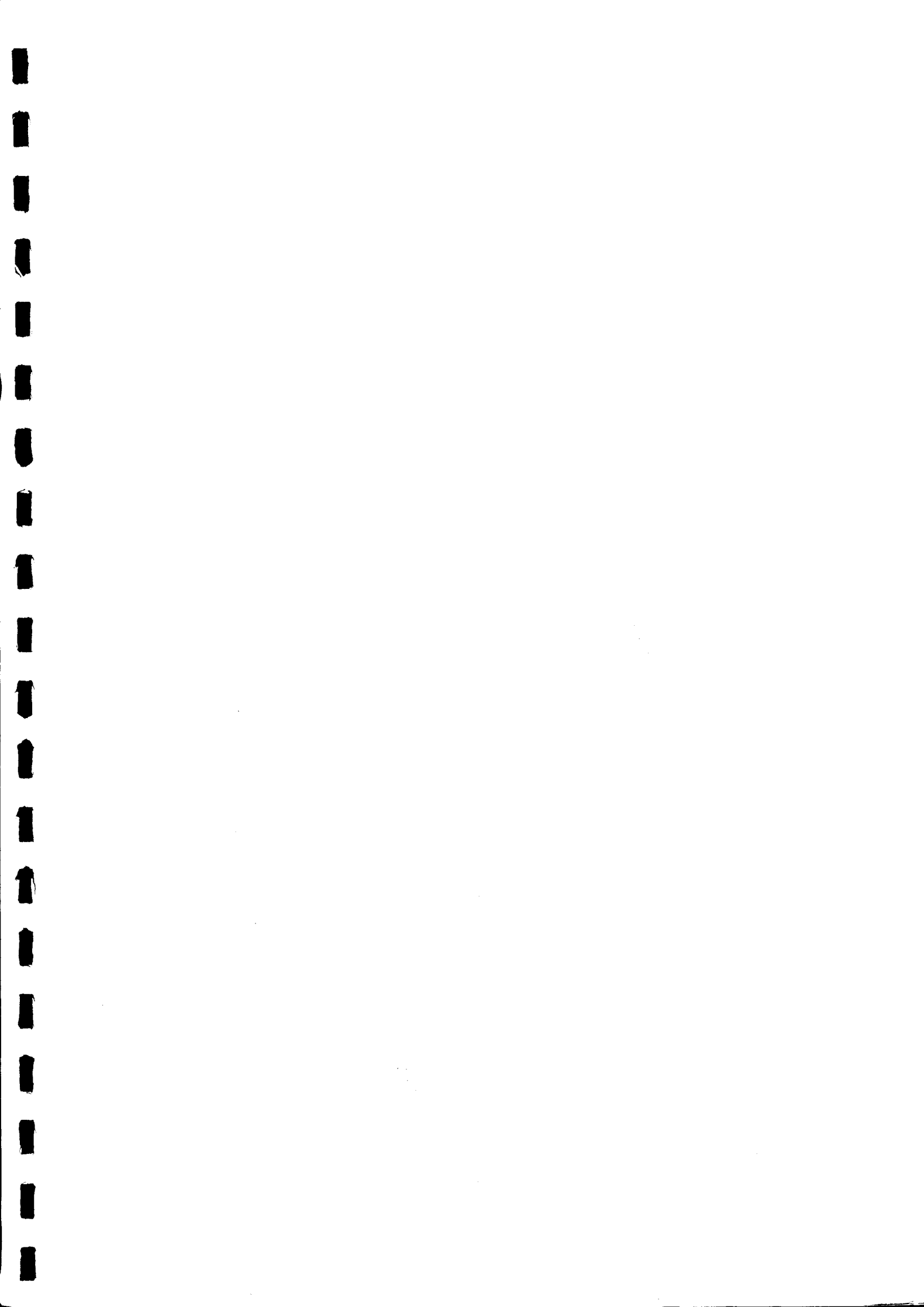
Commitment is one concern: another is clear-sighted analysis of power relations - between the implementing agency and the community, and within the community itself. It is in this context that Marc Fiedrich's paper is so welcome. The best means of preventing distortion is to encourage critical debate, serious evaluation and creative reflection. These play as much of a role in the evolution of REFLECT as innovative action and practice.

This paper focuses on the experiences of one of the original REFLECT pilots: Bundibugyo ACTIONAID programme in Uganda, and poses questions concerning some of the central features of REFLECT. Issues such as the power of an external agency to influence the local agenda, the tension between Freire and Chambers' analysis of knowledge and change, are unpacked in the specific socio-economic context of Bundibugyo a year after the original evaluation took place. Implications for the methodology are also discussed.

This analysis will be of value to REFLECT practitioners in many other countries, and will also inform the long term research on the impact of REFLECT in Bundibugyo currently being designed. It certainly contributes to the evolutionary process which will produce the second edition of the REFLECT Mother Manual.

I hope you enjoy reading this stimulating paper as much as I did.

David Archer
November 1996



Contents

Summary of main findings & recommendations

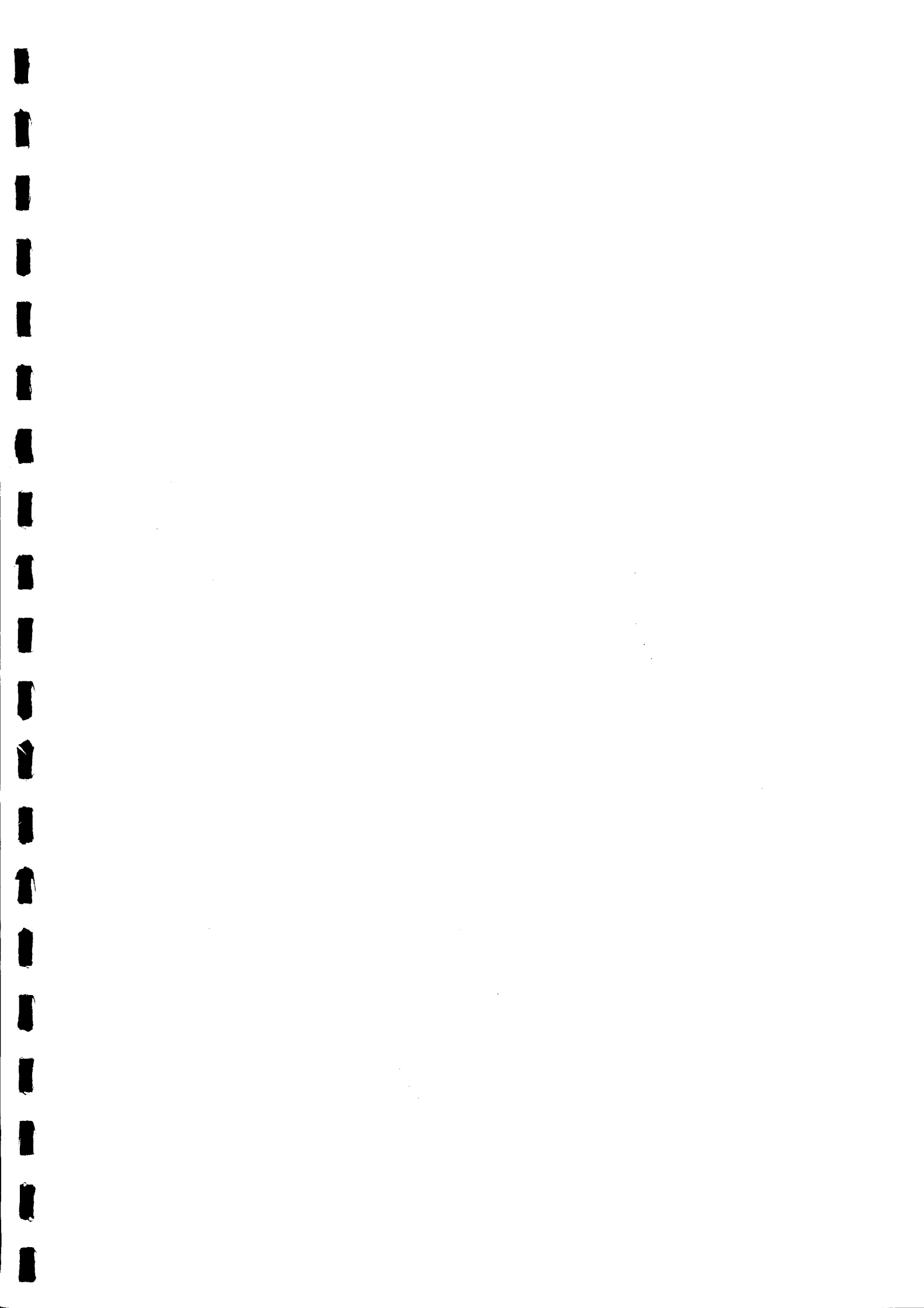
Introduction	1
1. Literacy, Language and People	2
1.1 Literacy and Ideology	2
1.2 Literacy in practice	5
1.3 Post-Literacy: a necessity?	7
1.4 Local languages: central issues	10
2. AID Agencies and Rural Communities: Partners in Development?	17
3. REFLECT and Empowerment	21
3.1 REFLECT and the other half:gender relations	22
3.2 Family Planning	24
3.3 Banking on the purity of poverty? - Lessons learnt	26
3.4 Poverty and change: putting REFLECT in perspective	28
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	35
Abstract	36

Tables

Table 1: Two different theoretical approaches to literacy and their implications for adult literacy programmes	3
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Figures

Figure 1: "Do you think the literacy classes would have been better if they had started in Rutoro or English right away"	11
Figure 2: "For which purpose do you want to learn English?"	14



Summary of main findings & recommendations

Literacy has not remained an abstract notion to participants in the REFLECT programme in Bundibugyo. More than half of all participants in their second year of learning are reading and writing in their every day life. Such initiative is particularly remarkable considering the virtual absence of a written culture in rural Bundibugyo before the start of the programme. Since then ACTIONAID has initiated various ways of supporting the creation of a literate environment (language advocacy, community newsletter, village libraries, etc.), but implementation has been slower than originally anticipated so that the present high level of literacy usage can hardly be attributed to them. While these findings seem to suggest that the importance of post-literacy support is over-rated, it is maintained here that targeted intervention remains an important means of developing and sustaining a useful and enjoyable literate environment. Attempts to boost the use of written words by implementing all the good ideas mentioned in the REFLECT Mother Manual would quickly turn into a logistical nightmare. A more balanced approach can be achieved by asking what use of literacy learners want to make but cannot achieve without institutional support.

Language barriers are found to be a major obstacle for newly-literates in Bundibugyo who want to use literacy to expand their radius of communication. For ACTIONAID to encourage other institutions who are (supposed to be) in touch with the grassroots to use local languages is an important step towards ensuring that literacy really is of added benefit to its users. The importance of language issues is further illustrated by the finding that almost all learners expressed a strong desire to learn English, inspite of the fact that mother-tongue literacy has become very popular among them. This desire sits uneasy with the ethics on which REFLECT is founded and, to make things worse, is difficult to realise in practice. Many of the concerns raised against English teaching resemble those that could have been made against literacy in Bundibugyo three years ago. It is argued here that the study of a dominant language, such as English, must not necessarily conflict with the ideals of REFLECT and that ACTIONAID is partly responsible for the growing demand for language teaching. In spite of the difficulties envisaged, it is recommended that English teaching takes place on a trial basis with a revised methodology which is not limited to the learning of language skills only, but also allows learners to critically investigate their own motives for wanting to learn English.

Part of the framework in which REFLECT is implemented in Bundibugyo is ACTIONAID's ideal to work in partnership with rural communities. The practice of, for example, community based monitoring systems, proves that the realisation of this ideal is often impractical, simply because rural society rarely consists of homogenous village units who pursue common goals. The "trust" that aid agencies invest into imagined communities by handing over, for example, the monitoring of literacy facilitators, can be misplaced. Wherever communities are little else but administrative boundaries individuals cannot be expected to pursue anything but their personal or group interests. It is recommended here that aid agencies should revise their understanding of "community" since the double-standards currently in operation are hindering a more realistic approach to working with the rural poor. However, it is also understood that the "partnership with communities concept" is one of the foundations supporting the supposedly politically neutral status of aid agencies, and that is not easily disposed off.

Following on from the previously made observation that learners are eagerly implementing the practical activities discussed in the circles this research confirms that many of them have a long-lasting positive impact on the livelihoods of learners. A closer look at how they were originally decided upon in the circles reveals that the style of open learning is an important factor in allowing learners to draw their own conclusions. When it comes to such sensitive issues as, for example, gender relations it is of vital importance that learners are encouraged to define their own positions without feeling obliged to conform to the standards of others. The temptation to do so is omnipresent and the discussions on family planning illustrate an example of an issue where some learners have chosen to abandon own positions in favour of conformity. This finding raises doubts about the capacity of methods such as Participatory Rural Appraisal to facilitate the kind of emancipatory learning envisaged by Paulo Freire. Both Freire and PRA form important elements of REFLECT but do not share the same theoretical assumptions. PRA has developed out of development practice and shares many of the ideological perceptions with which aid agencies work. Freire's work grew out of a critique of the wider political system which perpetuates poverty and is therefore far less optimistic in how far poverty can be overcome within the present system than practitioners of PRA. At present the REFLECT programme in Bundibugyo is found to lean more so towards not only the methodology but also the ethics of PRA, thus curtailing the opportunities for Freirean conscientization. It is recommended here that the only way for ACTIONAID to increase the Freirean element within REFLECT is to challenge the ideological perceptions of learners more actively and aggressively.

Introduction

The link between literacy and development is no longer obvious. Not only have mass-literacy campaigns carried out in the 1960s and 70s largely failed to make people literate, it is also doubtful whether literacy as such can generate the beneficial results it is commonly associated with. Literacy, just as education more generally, is still widely portrayed as the entry-ticket to profitable economic activities, better health and - more recently - "good governance" (see World Bank, 1995). Often one searches in vain for the ways in which literacy is supposed to fulfill such tremendous tasks. It appears as if empowering potential is implicit to the technique of reading and writing, while the content of what is expressed, and the context in which literacy is practised and shaped, does not matter significantly. But prescribing literacy programmes as a magical recipe against economic, social and political problems cannot work since literacy is not a universal and neutral tool producing positive development regardless of the circumstances. What matters is how people shape literacy by using it. Outcomes are uncertain and depend on the actors and motives involved.

While literacy researchers are increasingly coming to the conclusion that the impact that literacy has on people is far less important than the impact that people have on literacy, a related approach is also fostered by some practitioners and researchers within the field of development. Here, advocates of participatory development are critical of externally imposed, technological solutions to development and suggest that the local knowledge found in poor communities is a more appropriate starting point for developmental action. Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT) is one recent attempt to create a meaningful link between literacy and development by drawing on the theoretical findings of the "ideological" approach to literacy (Street, 1993) and employing the practical tools of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). REFLECT is based on the belief that literacy does not yield developmental benefits unless it is linked to a process of (self-) empowerment. In this paper I discuss several issues arising out of the practice of one REFLECT pilot project in Bundibugyo District/Uganda which are of wider interest both to practitioners of literacy and participatory development. The idea is to critically investigate the potentials and limits of REFLECT, so as to launch a broad debate on how the approach can be applied constructively in various contexts.

At the time of research for this study (May - July 1996) the first group of learners had already completed the basic literacy cycle and met primarily for the purpose of organising developmental activities. This presented a good opportunity for exploring how learners are using their newly gained literacy skills and what their ambitions for the future are. The expectations that learners have do not always match with the motives that outside agencies pursue in offering literacy programmes. Even in a programme which aims to be learner driven, development organisations hope for specific results and act accordingly. The choice of language for the literacy circles in Bundibugyo is a good case in point. While learners initially expressed doubts about learning in their own languages (which had not been written down before), ACTIONAID staff made considerable efforts to prove that this is the more sensible option. Most learners are now visibly satisfied with the skills they have achieved in their mother-tongue, but at the same time, the desire to gain access to a "powerful" language - such as English - has not diminished but increased throughout the lifetime of the circles. What is

the nature of this strong desire and how should ACTIONAID respond to it, considering that it not only sits uncomfortably with her own objectives and ideals but is also difficult to accommodate in practical terms?.

A second line of enquiry investigates some of the operational difficulties the REFLECT programme is facing in Bundibugyo. The ideal image of a literacy circle is one in which learners and facilitators participate on an equal basis towards achieving goals identified in discussion. In this endeavour they ideally enjoy the support of the whole village community and draw on the assistance of ACTIONAID only in as far as is necessary to reach their proper aims. All too often development projects operate on the assumption that community cohesion exists and that common goals can be identified. In Bundibugyo and elsewhere, this assumption is questionable but the adherence to the community ideal still persists among aid agencies effectively transforming working for the common good into a moral imperative while seeking individual fortune is classified as counter-productive and morally inferior. It is important to not only demonstrate the confusion and double-standards this causes, but also why it is difficult for aid agencies to abandon this ideology.

Ideals and ideology are also an important theme of the third section, where I investigate the discussions and activities which take place in the literacy circles. Two examples of issues taken up in the circles, one on gender relations and one on family planning, serve to illustrate how learners are not only creating knowledge but also reproduce it. The analysis is focused on the diverging understandings of knowledge inherent to two of the theoretical influences of REFLECT - PRA and the Pedagogy of Paulo Freire. The experience of the circles poses the question in how far Freirean ideals can be achieved with the use of PRA, whose understanding of poverty and the position of poor people is fundamentally different from Freire's.

1. Literacy, Language and People

1.1. Literacy and ideology

In the past ten to fifteen years, there has been a significant shift in the interest researchers are taking in literacy. Instead of continuing studies on the impact literacy makes on people, the focus is now on the perceptions that people have of literacy. This new line of study, termed the "ideological" approach, argues against the notion of literacy as a universally positive change agent. The point of departure for this school of thought is a series of studies carried out over the past two decades, which come to the conclusion that literacy practices vary substantially according to cultural settings (see for example Scribner and Cole, 1981; Kulick and Stroud, 1993; Bloch, 1993). Indeed, as long as one assumes that literacy is an autonomous, technical skill that changes peoples' lives by itself, there is little reason for seeking their active involvement in the planning and organisation of the learning process. However, as soon as one realises that literacy means different things to different people, the contribution of learners to the shaping of a literacy programme turns into a decisive factor in determining its success.

Table 1: Two different theoretical approaches to literacy and their implications for adult literacy programmes

Question	"autonomous" approach	"ideological" approach
What is literacy?	A set of technical skills which enhances the capacities of those who own them, both through learning and through using them.	There is no one literacy. Different literacy practices exist and develop within different social contexts. The role that technical skills assume is dependent on their social context and the way people learn and use them.
What does it mean to be illiterate?	To be illiterate is a sign of deprivation. Many view illiteracy as a disease which causes poverty and consequently castigate those who deny illiterate people access to literacy.	Illiteracy can be a problem, but does not necessarily have to be one. It depends on what people need reading and writing skills for, and what alternative means are at their disposition to achieve their goals.
Which academic disciplines are currently shaping the debate? (Notwithstanding overlaps)	Linguistics Pedagogy Psychology Anthropology	Ethnography Social Anthropology Cultural Studies Socio-Linguistics
What are the questions they commonly ask about literacy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of literacy on people? • How is literacy different from orality? • How does literacy operate within modern institutions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do people shape literacies? • How do local literacies function? • How do they relate to local culture and power? • What is the role of language in literacies? • How are literacies embedded in wider structures of communication?
How can the widespread failure of adult literacy programmes be explained?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of funding and commitment from governments and agencies • Lack of learner motivation (due to various reasons) • Poor implementation of teaching concepts • Difficulties in accommodating speakers of minority languages • Failure to create a literate environment (particularly in rural areas) 	All of the reasons stated for the autonomous view are accepted to some extent. Additionally: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many programmes have failed to integrate local literacy perceptions and thus alienated learners by trying to convert them to an imaginary universal literacy • Learners are often regarded as passive recipients, rather than active creators

Question	"autonomous" approach	"ideological" approach
What would need to change to make them more successful?	Much has been tried already, so that there is little methodological innovation forthcoming at present. The emphasis is on raising the profile of literacy among governments and donors.	<p>Raising the profile of literacy is a vital step, but more importantly, common perceptions and assumptions about literacy need to change.</p> <p>Literacy has a potential to change peoples' life, but whether it does so or not depends on how relevant it is to learners.</p> <p>In methodological terms, this warrants a more active involvement of learners, a focus on learner generated materials which are based on their existing knowledge, and a genuine recognition of the local context in all stages of the design and implementation of programmes.</p> <p>Adding to that, measures of success would need to be negotiated in each programme separately.</p>
Who are the main academic proponents?	Ong (1982); Goody (1968; 1977; 1986); Olson (1977; 1988)	Street (1984; 1993; 1995); Baynham (1995); Barton (1994)

The way people view and use literacy can vary substantially, there is variation in the types of texts, participant interaction around texts, social meanings and values attached to texts, ways of producing texts, and ways of socialising individuals through texts (Auerbach, 1992).

What counts as success?

To give a practical example, during the research in Bundibugyo, one old man cited as his motive for joining the literacy circle that he wanted to learn how to sign his name so that he would no longer be embarrassed by having to use his fingerprints. When the learner proudly presented his exercise book, there was little else in it, apart from his name in various shapes and sizes. Is this man to be considered a successful learner or a failure? Fortunately, he did not apply this categorisation to himself, to him the literacy class was a success. However, according to the conventional application of literacy definitions the answer is clear: the man has failed because his efforts have been limited to mere copying and he therefore missed out on the cognitive and other gains which - according to the "autonomous" view of literacy - go along with the learning of reading and writing¹. But the mere fact that this man wanted to

¹ The most widely used definition of literacy is still that of Gray (1956): According to him a person is functionally literate if they are able to "engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in [their] culture or group". The suggestion that literacy is a relative matter is thus nominally included. However, in practice a person is declared literate if they pass a standardised test and the success or failure of literacy programmes is assessed on this basis - see also Barton, 1994)

learn how to sign his name already says something about literacy, not as a tool, but as a social practice. To be able to sign ones name was probably not of much relevance in Bundibugyo 30 or 40 years ago. Today it is one stepping stone towards being regarded an educated person, it is a status symbol.

However, aid agencies will hardly be inclined to finance prolonged literacy programmes if the result can be summed up in two words - those of a proudly presented signature. But even to this old man, literacy was the focal point around which the other activities of the circle were grouped. Even though he has virtually stopped to participate in any of the reading and writing activities of the circle, and admits to finding them boring, he still feels he is profiting from going to the circle. As a result of discussions with fellow learners he built a latrine, planted trees around his garden, and perhaps most importantly, became more involved in community activities. In his case, this initiative was obviously not significantly linked to the learning of advanced reading and writing skills. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that it was the prospect of learning how to sign his name which motivated him to join in the first place. It is unlikely that the promise of discussing the importance of latrines would have caught his attention in the same way.

The attraction that literacy exerts due to its prestigious status is not unproblematic (see section 3), but even if prestige is the initial motivation of many learners, that does not preclude the possibility of some of them finding other practical uses in the process of learning how to read and write. REFLECT not only aims to facilitate the learning of new skills it also encourages learners to determine how to use them. So, how do learners in Bundibugyo apply their ability to read and write?

1.2. Literacy in practice

To find out how literacy is used by REFLECT learners in Bundibugyo a sample of 105 learners (out of an estimated 1000) took part in formal interviews. The quantitative information thus gathered was complemented through more indepth, non-formal interviews with both learners and facilitators. The emphasis was on finding out what learners use their skills for, rather than how well they master them. Nevertheless, the estimations done by ten facilitators provide a rough idea of learners' current abilities:

Table 2: skill retention of learners according to facilitator estimations

Can read words	93%
Can read a short, simple letter (unknown subject)	68%
Can write words	92%
Can write a short, simple letter	61%
Can make a simple budget (using "+" and "-")	71%

Even though such an account of current abilities shows that REFLECT is more successful in making people literate (and numerate) than the average literacy programme (see Abdazi, 1994), it is meaningless without considering how they are used in practice. In rural Bundibugyo reading and writing prior to the literacy programme took mainly place in schools, in contact with district authorities, for recording purposes at the level of the Local Councils (LCs), and sometimes in churches. In short, an average village inhabitant, whether male or female, young or old, poor or better off, did not come in touch with the literate environment to any significant extent. The few school children who actually get to the stage of being able to read and write are seemingly sufficient to fulfill the limited literacy tasks which others are facing. Reading or writing for personal pleasure or development is practically non-existent in rural Bundibugyo. Attempts at doing a survey of written materials in households were stopped when a few trials revealed that there was rarely anything at all, apart from the occasional bible and, of course, the writings learners prepared in and for the classes.

Reading and Writing

What is the point of operating a literacy programme if people get by comfortably without being able to read and write? Are they not simply going to stop reading and writing once the project draws to an end, as has been the case in many other literacy projects? In fact, some of the learners in Bundibugyo have stopped reading and writing already, according to the survey 30 - 40 percent are never reading or writing outside of the classes. But what is more surprising is that more than 60 percent do read and write and have found meaningful ways of applying their skills. By far the most attractive literacy activity is the reading and writing of "letters" which denotes anything from a brief personal message to official correspondence. The intensity to which people engage in this and other activities naturally varies, with some only writing/reading on rare occasions and others corresponding on a regular basis. When asked for what purposes people engage in correspondence, most people stated that a written message is more binding than an oral one and that they can be sure that the message is not distorted on the way. Others pointed out that a written message ensures confidentiality. Some learners also emphasised the use of writing for keeping better control of their economic activities, but this is clearly still a minority.

Apart from correspondence, the opportunities for reading and writing in a meaningful way are still limited. Only those who have knowledge of Rutoro (the language of the neighbouring Batoro who still have a strong influence over the area) can read the Bible, while others are constrained to reading sign posts or practice with their exercise books. Interestingly, while men and women equally use their literacy skills for correspondence, practising with exercise books is an activity in which almost only men engage, probably because women do not have enough time and energy to do so alongside their various other responsibilities.

Numeracy

The question of utility is much less problematic when it comes to numeracy, an area of literacy programmes often neglected. Despite its remote location, Bundibugyo is a highly commercialised area, so that almost all learners see an immediate practical benefit in being able to calculate with confidence. Numeracy was identified as one of the weak spots of the programme in an evaluation which took place in 1995, but despite renewed efforts to

strengthen this component, learners are still not entirely satisfied with the mathematics standards they have achieved. The literacy manual contains several units which are designed for the introduction of more complex mathematics, such as the calculation of profits or interest payments, but conversations with learners and facilitators, as well as spot-checks on exercise books, revealed that they have not been put into practice on an adequate scale. Instead, many circles have stuck to addition and subtraction, an exercise which should be of marginal value, particularly since many people in Bundibugyo are already mastering similar tasks without need for instruction. Though the cause of this weakness is not known, an important factor may well be the limited arithmetic skills that many facilitators themselves have acquired within the Bundibugyo school system.²

While learners are understandably keen on learning more useful mathematics in the future, they are confident that the reading and writing skills they have acquired are sufficient for them to progress on their own. Nonetheless, the limited use they can make of their literacy skills, not least because they are the only ones who read and write in Lubwisi and Lukonjo, is certainly one reason for their strongly expressed desire to learn English. Before turning to the complex question of language choice in literacy programmes, I will briefly discuss what BAP has done and can do to support the development of a literate environment in the mother-tongue of learners.

1.3. Post-literacy: a necessity?

The concept of post-literacy is based on the assumption that newly-literates quickly relapse into illiteracy if they do not have any meaningful ways of using their skills. Even though the empirical evidence on the phenomenon of relapse is, at best, incomplete, the position that post-literacy is crucial to the success of a literacy programme has become common place among literacy practitioners (see for example Dumont, 1990 and Ouane, 1989).³

In spite of this emphasis on the importance of post-literacy, few programmes appear to have consistent strategies to put it into practice. Some suggest that practice should occur through continued class-meetings, while others advocate the creation of libraries, the setting up of pen-pal systems, or the writing of newsletters. There are few examples of such concepts having been evaluated rigorously. One study about village libraries in Tanzania reports of books catching dust on the shelves, while lack of financial and logistical support had led to the demotivation of the people in charge of them (Kater et al., 1992). Notwithstanding the structural difficulties, it is evident that such an approach to post-literacy is doomed for failure since it operates on the assumption that mere access to the written word inspires and

² Despite successful efforts by the District Education Office to improve the quality of primary and secondary education, pupils in Bundibugyo still only learn the most basic skills. Teaching is mainly based on rote repetition and only teachers sometimes have access to textbooks.

³ A review article by Comings (1995) found that most sources highlighting the phenomenon of relapse into illiteracy cite only one empirical study, which was completed by Roy and Kapoor in 1975. The study compares the retention of literacy skills in primary school leavers and adult literacy class participants. The major weakness of the study is that it compares the two groups on the basis of the amount of years they spent in their respective learning programs, without recognising that pupils in primary schools spent a considerably higher amount of time per year in the classroom than adult learners.

are both positive and negative outcomes. To want to become "educated" is in itself a sign of wanting to advance in one's own life, and, regardless of what knowledge gains are being achieved, can boost one's self-esteem and lead to activities in various spheres. On the other hand, prestige is rarely gained without incurring negative effects on others. Where prestige is the motive, exclusiveness is the only way of getting and retaining it. Literacy is not only useful, it is also violent, as Stuckney (1991) provocatively points out with reference to the segregation often undertaken with the help of literacy standards. Those who are literate are seen as capable, intelligent and modern, while those who are not make up the rest of the world's population - to be pitied at best. As much as a REFLECT might like to avoid such classifications, it cannot be denied that those who want to become literate are understandably motivated by the thought of freeing themselves from a stigma via conforming to dominant expectations. A closer look at the choice of language in the Bundibugyo REFLECT programme helps to illustrate some of the conflicts and problems arising from the imposition of dominating standards.

1.4. Local languages: central issues

Whether to teach literacy in the mother-tongue of learners, or in a more widely spoken language (possibly the language of the former coloniser) poses a dilemma in the African multi-lingual context. The REFLECT pilot in Bundibugyo is no exception. Within the District, people are used to their mother-tongues not being an accepted means of official communication. Rutoro and, to a lesser extent, English are still the most commonly heard languages in office buildings. Leaving the district, one inevitably passes through the area of the Batoro who were formerly in control of Bundibugyo. Until recently, travel through this part of Uganda could often be a humiliating experience for those people who did not speak Rutoro. At best, they were ridiculed when trying to communicate, at worst beaten up and chased away. When REFLECT started in 1993/94, BAP initially experienced difficulty in convincing people of the virtue of learning how to read and write in Lubwisi and Lukonjo. Prospective learners were sceptical about the feasibility of writing in their mother-tongue and many only agreed to the experiment after persuasion.

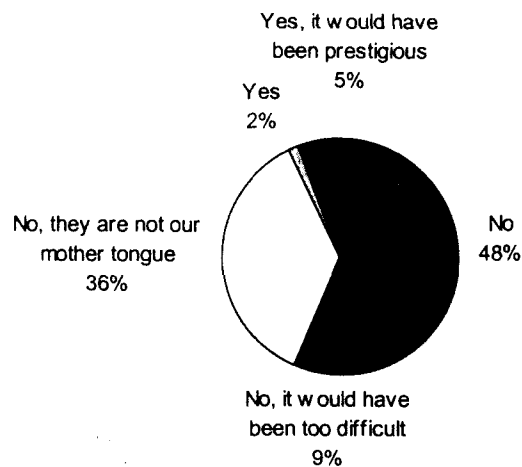
The concept of REFLECT, which is firmly based on the active participation of learners, is difficult to imagine in any other language than the one which learners are most fluent in. The understanding that learning in the mother-tongue is an asset to participatory development strategies is a recent addition to the debate on language in literacy (Robinson, 1994; Dieu et al., 1989). So far, mother tongue learning has been favoured widely because of its pedagogical advantages. Since UNESCO pronounced on the subject in 1953 (UNESCO, 1953), it has become conventional wisdom that the use of mother-tongues removes many obstacles from the learning process. Learning to read and write is easier when the language used is close to the everyday language spoken.⁵ The "ideological" approach to literacy (introduced in section 3.4.) further underlines the importance of local languages by affirming that there is a strong cultural dimension to how literacy practices develop in different parts of the world. In the words of Karl Marx: "Language is practical consciousness" (Marx as quoted in Tucker, 1976).

⁵ The Evaluation that UNESCO and UNDP conducted of the Experimental World Literacy Programme underlined this point - see UNESCO/UNDP 1976.

If that is the case, learning to read and write in a foreign language not only requires adaptation to a new set of cultural connotations, but also limits the ability to use literacy as a means of expressing ones own cultural experiences (see Freire, 1985).

Considering these positive attitudes towards local languages adopted by literacy practitioners and theorists, it is somewhat ironic to find that learners in Bundibugyo had initial reservations. However, the findings of this research suggest that BAP was justified in challenging these notions:

Figure 1: "Do you think the literacy classes would have been better if they had started in Rutoro or English right away?" (Question from learners' questionnaire)



More than ninety percent of learners are pleased to have learned in their own language. While many did not give further explanations, for a large percentage of people the high regard for their own mother-tongue determined the choice of answer.⁶ This value attached to local languages is further compounded by the finding that 37 percent of learners who send their children to school would like them to start learning in their mother-tongue. Also in speaking to learners, one cannot fail to notice the pride they are taking in their achievement. Several learners drew the author's attention to the fact that they are the only ones that can read and write in Lubwisi/Lukonjo, while many educated people with degrees cannot.

Nonetheless, learners have been and still are imminently aware of some of the limitations of being literate only in their mother-tongues. The demand from learners to be taught English has been high and insistent from the beginning. As the research was taking place, the BAP team was preparing three units for the commencement of English teaching. This was necessary since the designers of the original manual had not included a significant amount of material for English teaching. It was not originally anticipated that English teaching would feature importantly, and there were reservations about the start of this activity from both the

⁶ There are no significant variations between the sexes, nor do the answers differ according to which language participants speak.

Kampala and the London head-office of ACTIONAID. Also among theorists there are varying views of whether and how dominant languages should be linked to literacy programmes. Brian Street, who first framed the "ideological" approach to literacy, argues against seeing the acquisition of mother-tongue literacy as a bridge towards the study of other languages:

"If learning literacy involves not only acquiring technical decoding skills, but also learning the underlying cultural meanings and uses of that particular literacy, then using local literacy as a bridge to English or Spanish may serve as much to interfere with second language literacy as to assist it. The learner will need to know different things about the second literacy than they learned about the first one. In any case the 'bridge' philosophy seems to many to be demeaning to the local literacy, which is simply made subservient to the dominant literacy rather than treated as worth learning in its own right" (Street, 1994; see also Street 1993).

With regard to the first argument Street makes, it should be noted that English has different cultural meanings in different contexts. Even though it is not commonly spoken in Bundibugyo, it plays a (dominating) role in local culture. It is alien and familiar at the same time. People in Bundibugyo are aware of at least some of the underlying cultural meanings behind the English language - that is the reason why they want to learn it!⁷ Street's second argument is probably addressed to those who make decisions about language policies from official positions and in this context it is justified. But the argument risks assuming a paternalistic tone when local people themselves are seeking to use their mother-tongue literacy skills for the acquisition of a dominant language.

English: the "last frontier"?

Discussing language issues with groups of learners reveals a more ambiguous picture. They certainly see that Lubwisi is worth learning in its own right, but still do not want to be excluded from the dominant English language. When asking learners to compare the uses of English and Lubwisi there is an immediate thrust towards denying that Lubwisi has any use coupled with statements about English that fall nothing short of glorification. Lubwisi is then often characterised as the language of the poor and stupid. Comments like "we are fed up with Lubwisi" or "everybody speaks English" are the norm. To some people, the simple statement that "it is our language" seemed sufficient proof of Lubwisi's inferiority. On the other hand, English is seen as providing access to all spheres presently closed to learners. It is "the language of the educated and rich", "white people speak it." After having learned how to read and write, most learners now see English as the last frontier to achieve the status of an educated person.

The picture changes significantly when one asks learners if, given their low opinions on Lubwisi, it would not be better to abandon the language completely in favour of English. Disbelieving laughter at this, admittedly impractical, suggestion was the common reaction. But then the tenor of the discussion switched. "After all, it is our language," was the comment in one class. Given that many Lubwisi speakers are conversant in other local languages,

⁷ Apart from that, Street's argument is technical. It might well be that the acquisition of fluency in a second language requires a deeper immersion into the cultural context of that language, but in the context of Bundibugyo the aim cannot be other than providing basic communication skills in English.

learners are well qualified to argue that they could not express all they want to say in a foreign language. Learners emphasise that they are satisfied to have learned reading and writing in Lubwisi and that they cannot abandon it. A learner in one circle described how they were planning to put up signposts, so that more outside visitors would find their way to the village. He and the other members of the circle were quite amused by the thought that, since the signs would be in Lubwisi, outsiders would have to ask locals for translation, instead of them always asking outsiders what signposts mean. (In one circle, learners did not feel it necessary to give further reasons for the superiority of English than to point at the author's shoes, directly linking my ability to buy shoes to my ability to speak English.)

The example illustrates that, to some degree, people in Bundibugyo are foreigners in their own land. Furthermore, the example also shows that learners are beginning to realise that English is dominating by definition, not by nature. To them it is a revelation that signposts could be in Lubwisi as well. The ability to read and write Lubwisi is the key factor in allowing for such demystification of the role English plays in society.

The last example could serve as an example of Freirean "conscientization", if it was to be taken up and continued. Freire does not assume that learning a dominant language automatically renders the minority language subservient. Instead, he asserts that the minority language already is subservient and sees the learning of a language of power as one way of demystifying dominant cultures (Freire, 1985). Naturally, such a process would have to involve more than the learning of grammar and vocabulary. In chapter three I will illustrate that the REFLECT programme in Bundibugyo faces considerable constraints in accommodating the notion of conscientization, but for the moment it suffices to say that demystification of the cultures oppressing them is not among the motives that learners nurture for wanting to learn English. Rather than challenging dominant culture, their main purpose in learning English is to gain access to it. But this does also not mean that learners are seeking to assimilate to dominant culture entirely. The motives that learners put forward in the questionnaires is both revealing and deceiving at the same time. Learners were asked to answer the following question after they had been asked whether they wanted to learn English. Only one learner did not want to.

Clearly, people mainly want to learn English to gain access to the outside world and to the official sphere. But it is not communication for the sake of communicating that learners are seeking. They are also not conforming to the role that some theorists ascribe to the learning of English. Empowerment for economic activity is not among their motives (see Mayo, 1995), neither is the project of national integration of pressing concern to them (see Hornberger, 1994). This is not to say that economic gains are not part of what learners expect to get out of learning English. But the kind of activities they envisage are not compatible with conventional theories of economic growth. When asking learners why they want to communicate with white people, outsiders, and officials, most of them were bemused by the question. To them it does not require further explanation that good relations with high-ranking people are an asset, possibly also in financial terms. Similar motivations may also be assumed behind the desire that learners express for communicating directly with the individual sponsors of ACTIONAID.⁸

⁸ Child sponsorship is the main source of income for ACTIONAID. Though every sponsor has an individual link to one child, which includes the sending of photographs and letters, the money raised is being used for the

they are likely to use it in a discriminatory way against those who do not possess it. Much of the critical thinking that has emerged about literacy in the past three decades equally applies to the use of language. Language is not autonomous and the answer to language conflicts are not only a matter for linguists. This section has tried to place language and its uses into the context of the social, cultural and economic conditions of Bundibugyo.

It has become obvious that ACTIONAID is an important actor influencing the use of language and shaping language policy. Ironically, the area of language policy where ACTIONAID actively sought to make an impact (advocacy for local languages) is still weaker than expected, while the unwanted impact the programme has had on the popularity of English has been considerable. This situation is not surprising given the language and power configurations already in existence before the project started. Nevertheless, the dilemma ACTIONAID is now facing is also caused by the ambiguity inherent to the relationship between an aid agency with a firm commitment to participatory development and "partners" who often have a different ideal of empowerment. The notion of aid agencies merely acting as neutral facilitators of a bottom-up rather than top-down strategy to development presumes that the interests of aid agencies are either identical with those of local people or that aid agencies are willing to deny their own objectives wherever they are not. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that such presumptions are neither realistic nor desirable.

2. Aid Agencies and Rural Communities: Partners in Development?

Ever since the inception of the programme in Bundibugyo in early 1993, the ideal of BAP has been to develop projects with people, rather than for them. In line with current thinking in development circles, the project has opted for an integrated approach, rather than a sectoral one. Capacity building is one important objective, and the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of ACTIONAID activities has been largely decentralised to encourage a high degree of local participation. Operational objectives are set with parish representatives who identify and prioritise communal objectives which are then realised as a combined effort of BAP and community members.¹⁰ For this purpose, various new institutions have been initiated at both village and parish level. Most notably, elected female Parish Councillors are in charge of making decisions about projects at the parish level. Community Development workers (CDWs, mostly male) have some operational responsibilities and facilitate the literacy circles. I will focus here on a few operational aspects of the literacy circles to illustrate that some of the underlying assumptions of participatory development strategies are unrealistic.

Communities in control?

In an attempt to hand over control to local people, the monitoring of the attendance of learners is entirely in the hands of the facilitators and they themselves are controlled and paid by the Parish Councillors (who receive the money from ACTIONAID). Low attendance is a common feature in literacy programmes and Bundibugyo is no exception. As has been analysed elsewhere, low attendance and drop-out are not necessarily linked to low learner motivation or poor teaching, often times learners simply have more pressing commitments (see Cottingham, 1995 and Fiedrich, 1996). However, one purpose of monitoring systems is to identify the weak spots of a programme and that is currently proving problematic in Bundibugyo. During the research for this paper it was found that almost half of all registers surveyed had to be excluded from analysis because they were obviously kept improperly. Admittedly, the number of registers collected was low (12) but that was mainly due to many facilitators not volunteering to provide them. This makes it very difficult to evaluate a very crucial element in literacy programmes, namely facilitator reliability. At present, the parish councillors are responsible for monitoring how many classes a month are actually taking place, since the facilitators receive payment on this basis. According to parish councillors and BAP staff, it is rare that a facilitator does not receive the full monthly payment. However, it is evident from the registers and the authors own experience that the cancellation of classes is not uncommon, so, theoretically, deductions should be made. While it was originally anticipated that learners' commitment to the circles would ensure that they would report misconduct by facilitators, this has only happened in rare cases. It is unrealistic to expect learners and parish councillors to denounce facilitators. Given that the parish councillors were involved in the selection of facilitators they are often members of the same family or clan, so that punctilious reporting is likely to have a direct negative impact on them. Similarly, learners, no matter how much they value the literacy circle, have to live with the facilitator for years to come, while the literacy circles are not a permanent feature. The current payment and monitoring system provides an

¹⁰ So far communities have largely opted for infrastructural projects (which is not a requirement by BAP) such as health units, school construction or refurbishment, and water provision.

incentive for exaggerating the amount of classes taking place and the number of learners who attend them. The extent to which this is happening in practice cannot be quantified here, but there is enough evidence to state with confidence that it is a problem which needs to be addressed.¹¹

"Cheating" is no longer part of the vocabulary that aid agencies like to use when speaking of the populations they work with. It does not fit in with an image of development projects which are owned, controlled and directed by communities themselves. After all, would they not just be cheating themselves? There are two ways of looking at this uncomfortable issue. Firstly, one might want to check whether ACTIONAID has really gone far enough in its effort to mount a truly people centred project. This would constitute the critique immanent to the current discourse on participatory development, and indeed, there is some fault to be found. Because the literacy project was started as a pilot project and also because it was seen as an entry point to other activities, community members experienced quite substantial encouragement from BAP to start literacy circles. Even though the success and popularity of the circles appear to confirm this strategy it must also carry some of the blame for many villagers not regarding the circles as "theirs". The perception that one is doing a favour to ACTIONAID by going to the "ACTIONAID school" is not uncommon. In the parishes where REFLECT will only be starting now, there will be less emphasis on trying to establish a literacy circle in every village, and at the same time villages will be obliged to show higher commitment towards supporting the circles than is presently the case. That may go some way in addressing the problem, but - looking at it from a second angle - the incentive to cheat is there as long as ACTIONAID makes any material input because the assumption that "they" exist is flawed.

Communities, what for?

In reality, villages in Bundibugyo and elsewhere are not homogenous communities acting out of common interests. To claim that they are means to deny the power relations by which they are shaped (coming both from internal and external sources). At the same time, to admit that villages as such are little else but administrative boundaries is to erode the fundamental assumption of participatory development in which communities can be partners of aid agencies. A further example of a conflict which arose in the Bundibugyo literacy project serves to illustrate the twisted nature of upholding questionable assumptions.

How to reward facilitators is a common problem not only in literacy but also in other community development projects.¹² In Bundibugyo most facilitators are motivated for the work they are doing, nonetheless they prefer to refer to the payments they are getting as "salaries" rather than "incentives", which is what they are supposed to be according to

¹¹ In one village it became known to the author coincidentally, that classes are only taking place at irregular intervals because of facilitator absence. Despite indirect encouragement, none of the interviewed learners mentioned this as a problem. In two other villages it was suggested to the author that Parish Councillors (who do not receive payment for their activities) may be tempted to ask facilitators for small gifts in return for signing payment cheques. None of the Parish Councillors interviewed felt that their supervisory role rewarded them with a greater sense of ownership of the project. To them it was simply work.

¹² It should be noted that the question of payments has been resolved differently in other pilot projects of REFLECT. In El Salvador, for example, facilitators do work on a voluntary basis (see Archer and Cottingham, 1996b).

ACTIONAID. Regardless of how much a facilitator is dependent on the financial income, to have wage-employment is prestigious in itself, and facilitators are prepared to go a long way to preserve that privilege. This leads to some facilitators taking on tasks which, according to the agreements between communities and ACTIONAID, should be the responsibility of the whole community. For example, ACTIONAID required each community to help in the construction of shelters before the literacy circles were allowed to start. In some communities this assistance has been provided, though it should be noted that community labour is in some villages enforced through the imposition of money fines or even violent threats. However, others have not honoured this commitment, leaving the facilitators with the decision to either construct shelters by themselves or to forgo their payments. Everybody seems to have opted for construction. Similar problems are now prevalent with regards to the maintenance of the shelters, and many facilitators report that their requests for assistance are often met with resistance by other community members, who argue that the facilitators are the ones who profit from the literacy circles and therefore should also be the ones to bear the burdens. It is understandable that facilitators then regard their payments to be too low. An "incentive" would imply that the payment is simply an extra, which boosts a motivation which is essentially rooted elsewhere, i.e. in a firm commitment to the community. It is evident that this problem would not go away by increasing payments.

Such conflicts are easily reduced to their financial aspects. The payments to facilitators are by far the most substantial cost of the programme in Bundibugyo. But that is only part of the problem. Money could be found. The more difficult issue at stake is that what the facilitators are in fact seeking is to leave "them" (their united rural community) and become part of "us" (the salaried, modern world). But since "we" are here to empower "them", the demarcations must remain clear, by definition the facilitators have to remain part of "them". If they were allowed to become part of "us" they would become useless since their function is to guarantee that aid agencies remain in touch with authentic communities. What emerges is that the dichotomy between "us" as outsiders and "them" as insiders is one that aid agencies preserve artificially as a way of justifying their activities. The image of the rural community idyll is imposed on local people so as to legitimise the separate presence of a politically neutral actor who empowers without ever interfering with the real political powers to be. As soon as it were to be admitted that political power is not constrained to the district level and beyond, aid agencies would have to concede to being one political actor among others. To avoid this happening, local people are required to bend over backwards to demonstrate community spirit and the ability to reach consensus while at the same time assuring that their individual or group interests are still being served. This said, it may be necessary to reconsider whether "cheating" is the right term to describe the kind of actions individuals take to subvert the moral standards they are confronted with. One could also term it "resistance", but, at least in Bundibugyo, it is probably more adequate to speak of "adaptation". As a result, the conflict described here remains below the surface and only manifests itself in isolated incidents (salaries versus incentives) which do not serve as a challenge to the a-political status of development aid.

There are several conclusions to be drawn from this debate. On a pragmatic level, ACTIONAID should aspire to reduce its reliance on "community spirit" where there is none. With regards to the literacy circles this would inevitably mean to focus on learners and

prospective learners when it comes to taking on operational responsibilities. If others, who are not directly involved, wish to co-operate that is to be encouraged, but it cannot be expected. In adopting such a strategy care must be taken to limit any requirements to a minimum, in order to avoid that poorer people are excluded from the circles due to their inability to contribute labour or materials. Shelters should only be built where alternative accommodation is not available. The issue of payments is unlikely to be resolved easily. Optimistically, one can hope that the responsibilities facilitators are now assuming in mobilising community members to contribute to the maintenance of the literacy shelters may be reduced in the future. But their ambition to be considered full-time staff is still likely to remain a permanent feature. At a more conceptual level, the discussion of operational features has revealed that aid agencies make assumptions about their clientele which are unrealistic but serve to preserve a status quo. The a-political status that aid agencies assign to themselves and to rural society make it questionable in how far they are qualified to empower rural people.

3. REFLECT and Empowerment

REFLECT aims to contribute to the empowerment of non-literate people, who often are among the least privileged. In order to do so, the approach draws on various methodological tools and theoretical ideals. Before questioning the compatibility of the elements combined it is useful to consider some of the actions and changes that have arisen out of the practice of literacy circles in Bundibugyo. A previous evaluation has already looked at the extent to which members of the literacy circles have introduced changes to their lives as a result of discussion in the circles (Cottingham, 1995). The following table provides a brief summary:

Table 3: Summary of evaluation results (1995)

Unit	Title	Action done	Nature of action
1	Natural resources	88%	Tree planting
2	Human resources	75%	Agricultural work
3	Household map	71%	Family planning
4	Mobility Map	67%	Children's education
5	Ideal futures map	75%	Infrastructure
6	Rainfall calendar	92%	Terracing
7&8	Agriculture & gender	100%	Gender roles/crop spacing
9	Hungry season	83%	Crop diversification/granaries

Source: Cottingham, 1995

The results are surprising, not only because of the high level of change they imply¹³, but also because of the nature of the changes suggested. Looking at the right column of the table one discovers that, at the end of discussions in the circles, learners obviously came up with concepts and ideas which are suspiciously close to those that aid agencies have had in store for them long before they caught on to the idea of consulting local people about their own ambitions. Small wonder that major donors take a keen interest in REFLECT if the end result is that learners are self-motivatedly embarking on the kind of activities which they had always thought right for them. But before jumping to conclusions, it is necessary to ask how learners actually came to decide on the above activities. And, secondly, what has happened to the

¹³ To avoid misunderstandings, the above data was gathered through PRA exercises at group level. Given that most Action Points were carried out at an individual or household level, the data may overstate the actual level of realisation. For example, when the table states that in 92 percent of all sample groups (20), people started to use terracing, it could be that only a couple of people in each of those group actually did so.

activities since then? For this purpose I have revisited several of the units together with learners. Two examples, one on family planning and the other on gender relations, serve as an illustration of the process through which REFLECT seeks to empower.

3.1. REFLECT and the other half: gender relations

Concerns for gender equality are not only part of the REFLECT curriculum, they are also integrated in the set-up of the circles. Facilitators (mostly male) take part in gender training so as to assure that women are encouraged to participate in the discussion of the circle just as actively as men do. Already last year, the evaluation team noted that the most significant change in gender relations is that women are more confident in speaking in front of men. This picture was widely confirmed during the research for this study. Female class participants were remarkably more comfortable in speaking to a foreign man than other women. Rather than attempting to give a full picture of gender relations, this section only concentrates on the analysis of a few factors.

Addressing gender within REFLECT

Apart from bearing full responsibility for all household work, women in Bundibugyo are also the main providers of the family. Former male responsibilities, like hunting, gathering and warfare have declined in importance and the vacuum does not seem to have been filled with much else but the distilling of alcohol. This situation was graphically exposed in the circles through gender work load calendars which were part of more general units on agriculture. As a result it was agreed that it was impractical for women to fulfill all the tasks assigned to them and that men should help them. Many changes can be observed in practice, mostly on a very small scale, but that is to be expected. Some men were observed fetching water, washing clothes, preparing tea or cleaning the compound.¹⁴ It is interesting that none of the men interviewed regarded this as an insult to their masculinity since they were only helping women to fulfill responsibilities which remain essentially theirs. Men report that they are now more aware of the amount of work women do and are therefore willing to assist so that everything gets done. This has led to higher recognition of female tasks formerly not regarded as work, but has not led to women having less work since they cannot rely on men helping them regularly and still have far more tasks than time. Some women are very vocal in pointing out that current working patterns are not living up to the aims decided at the end of discussion last year, but most women prefer to point out that the changes made by men have greatly enhanced the spirit of unity in the household. Both points of view bear some truth.

Many of the women interviewed in groups and individually stated that they have reached a better understanding with their husbands by being more humble to them. From men's point of view the same is expressed by stating that women are now more educated and have greater understanding so that things can be discussed with them. It is very difficult to state exactly what "being humble" and "discussing" means in this context. The reason for both men's and women's reluctance to talk about decision making in the household is linked to the fact that

¹⁴ In some villages longer brooms have been made so that taller men do not have to bend down too far when cleaning.

nobody really adheres to the "official" version.¹⁵ While men are nominally in charge of all major decisions taking place, in reality women do have some limited influence due to their productive role. Ultimately, a woman can leave her husband and devoid him of her labour.¹⁶ Less drastically, women sometimes hide parts of the income they have obtained as a result of their productive activity and it is fair to assume that women cheat their husbands just as much as vice versa. Consequently, relationships between husbands and wives are often based on secrecy and mistrust. In this context it was observed that major decisions, such as for example whether a child should go to school, are rarely made on the spot and once and for all, but are much rather a continuous process of subdued haggling and bargaining.

While the extent to which these observations are valid remains open to question, they could explain the role reflect circles are playing in changing gender relations at the household level. Firstly, the discussions in the circle allow for an open but somewhat more distanced dialogue between men and women. Concrete problems can be addressed in a less personal way than is possible in marriage relationships, particularly when they are based on mistrust. Secondly, the circles are also off-limits in another sense, here women are allowed and encouraged to speak in public and they are seen to progress in learning just as men do. This is also the most important factor contributing to women's increasing role in public life.

The role that REFLECT can play in re-defining gender relations

Now as before, women have very little access to leadership positions at community level. Nonetheless, some women are now going to the meetings of the local councils and report of having lost their fears to speak in public. Furthermore, women are increasingly involved in communal labour activities, such as clearing roads. However, given the difficulties women encounter when entering public domains it is not surprising to find, that many more organise in small women's groups. The nature of these groups varies, some make contributions to help each other out in emergencies, while others function as labour groups. Interestingly, these groups are not restricted to learners only, but also incorporate other women. It is evident that these engagements represent an extra burden on women's restricted time, but many women are willing to accept that burden, stating that they now recognise the importance of organising in groups. Much of this can be attributed to the literacy circles, and the skills and confidence gained there are currently supplemented by government policies which encourage female participation in leadership (see Trapp, 1994).

The example illustrates some of the strengths of REFLECT. Of course, the notion to put gender on the agenda did not come from the learners themselves, it came from the curriculum planners and the ACTIONAID staff who initiated the programme. Nonetheless, the gender awareness that has been raised is not simply the result of an imposition of a western ideal of equality. The idea of looking at workloads from a gender perspective was genuinely new to

¹⁵ When asked to be specific about situations in which the REFLECT class had fostered unity within the household, most learners answered in very general terms. However, one man said that he and his wife had discovered one day that they both wanted to have iron-sheets for their roof. They calculated the cost together and then made a decision to pool efforts to save the money. When asked why he needed to have the consent of his wife to make such a decision the man answered that ideally he should not be needing her consent, but that things are not always the way they are supposed to be.

¹⁶ Even though she will normally depend on a male member of her family or a new husband to repay the dowry.

most learners and they have taken the freedom to draw their own conclusions from the debates in the circle. Gender equality as such was never discussed, instead, specific features of gender relations in Bundibugyo were analysed and in some cases there was consensus about changing them. Those men who have taken over some of the work tasks of their wives are doing so out of informed self-interest, not because of a commitment to gender equality. This is as far as REFLECT can and should go at the moment. As soon as changes in gender relations require men to sacrifice privileges, they can no longer be seen as a simple result of learning something new. Such changes can only come about through struggle initiated by women.

The strength of REFLECT then is, that it has introduced a new idea to learners and has provided a platform for considering it fairly openly. The changes made as a result were not pre-determined and the process continues to develop both within and outside the circles. However, it is important to note that there are certain factors which have enhanced success in this particular case. The fact that both men and women have started debates on gender fairly open-mindedly is related to there not having been much of a debate on gender roles beforehand. If gender attitudes had already been a more prominent part of the local power struggle, the PRA exercises on which discussions were based would probably have served to manifest the pre-conceived ideas of some, rather than generating knowledge on the basis of consensus. Only in this context was it possible for ACTIONAID, the agency who provided the initial input to this discussion, to appear as a fairly neutral facilitator. The next example illustrates a more ambiguous situation.

3.2. Family planning

The household map is an illustration of all households and their inhabitants (children and adults) existing in a village. During and after creation of the map, learners discuss questions of family size with the help of guiding questions given to facilitators. Family planning is the suggested activity that has stood at the end of the discussions in almost all circles. The household map is probably the most popular unit among learners and, according to the questionnaire results, particularly to women (see figure 5.1.). This is surprising because during discussions with circles it was mainly men who expressed enthusiasm for the idea of family planning. At least officially, it is men who take the decision whether a woman should take up family planning or not. Women are not expected to have an opinion on the subject. However, women are the ones who bare the main burden of pregnancy and child rearing.

Women use both indigenous and conventional medical practices for contraception, but it cannot be established in which proportions and to what extent. According to the family planning officer at Bundibugyo Hospital, the number of women coming for injections has increased significantly over the last two years, despite the fact that he had no means of publicising that family planning is available free of charge at the hospital.¹⁷

The main reasons that men give for supporting family planning is the shortage of land and the difficulty in supporting a large family. Having many children used to be a genuine asset in

¹⁷ Registers at Bundibugyo Hospital were unfortunately incomplete so that no further empirical evidence is available.

Bundibugyo when tribal warfare was still rampant and a large family ensured maximum protection. At the same time, land was not scarce until recently, so that it was desirable to have many children who worked in the fields. Nowadays, there is not only more peace and less land, there is also a growing social obligation to send children to school. All good reasons for not having many children. However, in any context it would be naive to only consider the pros and cons of having children when it comes to decision making about family planning. Discussions in many classes are biased in that they only address the negative side of having many children, thus making it difficult for learners to reveal the depth of their feelings on this sensitive issue.

In reality, attitudes towards large families cannot be other than ambiguous. Not only are people genuinely convinced of the difficulties involved in having many children, they are also well aware that a small family is "modern", and the desire to be modern is strong. On the other hand, the status of both women and men still rises with the number of children they have, and a small number of children also implies risks for old age care.¹⁸ The result of not addressing the whole width of the subject in the literacy circles can lead to - sometimes bizarre - distortions. During a visit to a basic literacy class which was working on this unit, both the facilitator and learners enthusiastically put forward arguments against large families when analysing the household map. At an advanced stage of the debate the facilitator announced that all of the good advice about having few children only applies to those women who do not yet have many children, prompting a sigh of relief from those women with many children and anxious looks from those with few children. During discussions after the session, it turned out that those with many children took the announcement as an authorization to have even more children, and in fact, that is how the facilitator herself had meant it.¹⁹

The picture thus emerging is not straight forward. There is a group of learners who have been able to use the circles to consider family planning in a simple and structured manner. That is more than can be said for many other programmes who have family planning as their single objective. On the other hand, those learners who held serious reservations against family planning have not had sufficient opportunity to voice them in the circles. To some extent, this bias can be blamed on the way discussions in the circles are structured. The fact that there are far more children than adults is made graphically obvious through the map. If one is already predisposed towards family planning, the step towards concluding that there are too many children is an easy one. In the face of such strong visual "evidence" it can be hard for learners who are not entirely convinced to express that they would still like to have many children, particularly when they are under the impression that their reservations are irrational.²⁰ Adding

¹⁸ During discussions in the circles learners are very eloquent in underlining how large families contribute to poverty. In the individual interviews, where learners were asked what they regard as the main factors causing poverty, only one learner (out of 105) mentioned large families.

¹⁹ The announcement the facilitator made was based on an amendment made to the curriculum as a result of the 1995 evaluation. Then, it was discovered that the unit caused discomfort to women who already had a large number of children and facilitators were subsequently trained to reassure them. This woman facilitator did follow the instructions she was given accurately, but consequently interpreted it in a way that was certainly not intended by the designers of her training course.

²⁰ Another good example of a PRA format which introduces a bias via its graphical set-up is the income and expenditure tree. Here all income sources are illustrated as roots, while expenditures are represented as branches. When there are too many branches and too few roots the tree falls over. Learners are enthusiastic about this

to that, even though the guiding questions to this unit are supposed to facilitate a multifaceted discussion on family size, learners do not need much intelligence to find out that family planning is what ACTIONAID would like to see them practising.

The scenario described above is not exceptional, there are other examples from other units where learners are not demonstrating the trust in local knowledge (i.e. "their" knowledge) on which the REFLECT methodology is supposedly based. While many adult learners are gaining confidence in the circles by realising how much they already know, they are also clinging to the guidelines and are eagerly trying to decipher what is expected from them. It is, for example, somewhat suspicious that there is little variation in how circles have used the guidelines given to facilitators. The outcomes of discussions appear almost uniform in all circles visited. Ironically, while ACTIONAID is trying to work with learners on their own terms (to a large extent), learners often have a strong desire to comply with what they perceive as ACTIONAID's expectations. This is problematic because it means that local knowledge and interests cannot be disentangled from external factors who have an influence on them - ACTIONAID is one very influential external factor on the literacy circles in Bundibugyo.

3.3. Banking on the purity of poverty? - lessons learnt

In the light of the analysis so far, is it fair to assert that REFLECT in Bundibugyo does not impose external knowledge but reaches essentially similar results through the selective reinforcement of already existing knowledge? Are learners co-opted into fully embracing the knowledge they only half share? Again there are no straightforward answers. REFLECT gives learners the opportunity to analyse issues of interest to them and many learners are critically re-evaluating their own positions. But it must also be recognised that learners have a strong sense of inferiority and an equally strong desire to conform - at least outwardly - to "modern" or dominant lifestyles. Some learners may be willing to push one part of their thoughts to the back of their mind, while expressing only those thoughts deemed fit for public consumption. Discussions are then adaptive rather than transformative.

As yet, the REFLECT method does not recognise this situation sufficiently. One reason is that PRA formats are not well suited to bring to light and analyse the origin of hidden thoughts and feelings (see also Mosse, 1993). Unless used very skillfully, PRA formats can have a tendency to generate "common sense"/officially accepted knowledge (see also Navarro Oliván, 1995). PRA is based on the assumption that the main problem in development is that the voices of poor people are not being heard because expert outsiders do not "shut up" (see Chambers, 1996). To represent poor people's view is therefore the main objective in using PRA tools. What this approach fails to recognise is that while poor people might not have had much voice in the past, they have certainly listened to what the outside world communicated to them. The PRA approach has difficulties to accommodate the finding that poor people's knowledge can be just as ideologically subverted as that of outsiders. The dichotomy which PRA creates between "local" knowledge and "expert" knowledge relies on the same naive perception of rural society as the distinction between "them" and "us". To express a seemingly

allegorical image and conclude that they must increase their income sources and reduce expenditure.

Unfortunately, capitalism in Bundibugyo is not quite ready for the ambitions of learners. At least with regards to expansion of income sources, opportunities are very limited.

unconditional trust in local knowledge is to assume that there is a distinguishable, homogeneous body of knowledge of which rural communities make well-intentioned use. The image of the noble savage unspoilt by western civilisation has obviously not gone down the same route as the historical era of colonialism which first evoked it.

The second theoretical influence on REFLECT, Freirean pedagogy, takes a significantly different position towards local knowledge than PRA. When Freire speaks of a "culture of silence" in which poor/oppressed people live, he does not refer to their lack of opportunity for expression only. Instead he asserts that poverty and oppression are a state of mind. To him, the poor/oppressed have internalised their subordination and participate in their own oppression (Freire, 1985). Local knowledge, or better the knowledge of local individuals, is highly problematic as long as it is ideologically subverted (McLaren, 1993). It is not enough to represent this knowledge, that is why Freire's ideal is based on education rather than representation. He regards "conscientization" as the process in which individuals learn to understand the socially constructed nature of their own experiences (Freire, 1985).

Even though the REFLECT manual is trying to combine the positive aspects of both views, there are tensions which need to be exposed. The designers of REFLECT are going along with Chambers (one of the main proponents of PRA) when proclaiming their faith in local knowledge. At the same time they also adhere to Freire's ideal of an emancipatory education which is necessary because of the socially constructed nature of knowledge. The bridge between the two positions is created by stating that REFLECT learners are perfectly capable of performing the emancipatory analysis themselves within a process of structured learning (Archer and Cottingham, 1996a). The above discussion shows that this view is optimistic. Instead of confronting their own ideological perceptions head on, learners are more likely to voice what they regard as "politically correct".

The very nature of ideology is that it presents itself to its holder as knowledge. In other words, ideologies can only function if they are not recognised as such (Hauck, 1992). It is difficult to see how REFLECT learners could address their own ideological perceptions while their knowledge remains unchallenged. Archer and Cottingham discover a shortcoming of Freire in his portrayal of non-literate people as knowledgeable on the one hand and ignorant on the other (Archer and Cottingham, 1996a). But the authors fail to point out what is ambiguous about Freire's description. All that Freire is saying is that oppressed people have a potential to overcome oppression, but that they are not using it because they subscribe to dominant ideologies set out to preserve the oppressive status quo. It may be unfashionable to assert that poor people are not a-priori correct in what they are thinking about their livelihoods, but it is most definitely not contradictory.

So far, I have shown that the combination of PRA methodology (and ethics) with Freirean ideals is not as easily performed as a superficial understanding of REFLECT might suggest. Freire does not offer much practical advice on how to realise his project of emancipatory education, but the attempt to overcome this dilemma by adopting PRA methodology runs the risk of curtailing important elements of his approach. The main difficulty identified here, is the status assigned to learners and aid agencies. The idea that learners already have everything they need to perform an emancipatory analysis is unfounded, but it allows aid agencies to

claim the position of neutral facilitators who only provide a platform on which learners reshape their own knowledge. If learners are to question some of their ideological perceptions, someone must actively challenge them. It is by no means easy for a powerful aid agency to challenge without imposing her own standards, but the first necessary step would be to admit that one has an own agenda.

Once it is clear that there can be no neutral actors in any form of dialogue, REFLECT has the potential to play an even more significant role in promoting the well-being of poor people than it already has. In the next section and last section I take the example of poverty perceptions in Bundibugyo to illustrate the benefit of actively challenging some of the perceptions learners have.

3.4. Poverty and change: putting REFLECT in perspective

The "culture of silence" that Freire describes often remains abstract. Elements of local culture in Bundibugyo illustrate what he means by saying that poverty is a state of mind in which oppressed people reproduce their own oppression. This section discusses the perceptions of poverty that people in Bundibugyo have, exposes how they are historically and socially shaped, and highlights the importance of addressing these within REFLECT.

All questionnaires used for this research included the question "what do you think are the reasons for some people being poorer than others?" The following answers were given most often:²¹

Laziness	51%
Lack of land	31%
Lack of education/knowledge	23%
Lack of planning	18%
Alcohol abuse	13%
Misuse of money	11%
Poor farming practices	9%

The answers are revealing. REFLECT learners are no less rigid than others in their perception that they themselves are to be blamed for their poverty.²² This is not only demonstrated in half of all respondents quoting laziness as a cause of poverty, but also the last four answers firmly plant the responsibility for poverty in the hands of poor people themselves. In giving these answers participants often explicitly referred to themselves, not others. But are these the causes of poverty or the outcomes of being poor? On first sight one is tempted to believe that these really are the causes. In Bundibugyo the land is fertile but often under-utilised, despite there being not enough of it. Farming practices are sometimes fostering food-insecurity rather

²¹ Based on 305 answers given by learners, non-learners and drop-outs. Multiple answers were possible.

²² If anything, learners are quoting laziness slightly more often than other people. In general, the pattern does not vary much between the different categories of respondents. Neither is there significant variation along the lines of gender or age.

than alleviating it.²³ Many people's spending patterns are just as erratic as their income from cash crops (particularly among the Bwamba in the lowlands). Spending on expensive consumption goods, such as mattresses, fancy clothes, and bicycles is very high at harvest time and culminates during the festival period around Christmas when anyone who can afford it buys large amounts of beef (being mainly brought in from outside). This is so despite the fact that many people depend on their money from cash crops to buy food throughout the year. Periods of wastage are thus contrasted with periods of extreme shortage.

When asking people why they continue to live in this way, answers such as "we are stupid" or "we are lazy" are common. Their views are shared by many of the officials and NGO employees interviewed during the research. Further questioning about the reasons for being lazy or stupid are normally met with shoulder shrugging or reference to the will of god.

However, there are strong indications that the reality of life in Bundibugyo, and the perceptions people have of it, are a historical product of the struggle they have lead against nature and human intervention. This was first revealed in a community meeting where participants marked the most important historical events of the area along a timeline. During this exercise it was realised that the area has been subject to a major disaster every few years. Earthquakes, floods and epidemics alternate with refugee migration, wars and barriers to economic activity. Participants opted to include only major events, but during discussion several smaller floods, epidemics and intra-village wars were mentioned. When the author remarked that there was no obligation to only list negative events, all participants agreed that there were no positive events worth mentioning.²⁴

It is fair to say that people in this area have lived in permanent insecurity throughout most of this century. Loss of life and possessions are a recurrent theme in almost every household. Is it surprising to then find that people resist planning beyond the next few days? To find them spending money rather than saving or investing it, or to see that many are apathetic and do not see the point of working too much? Such questions were used to challenge people in this and other meetings focusing on their self-perception. The mere fact of looking at themselves from a historical point of view was amusing to many people. It is a perspective that is not part of local knowledge. Understandably so, many people enjoyed the idea that their "laziness" can be explained and does not necessarily have to be accepted as natural or god given. Even though learners are obviously aware that historical events shape their personal fate, few had previously seen them as having an influence on their character and culture. During discussions some learners, independently of each other, pin-pointed the cholera epidemic of 1978 as a critical turning point. This was a particularly severe outbreak in which almost every family lost members and apparently many survivors lost hope for the future and started living as if it was their last day.

²³ The author was surprised to find that some farmers with small plots of land only start cultivating new food crops when they run out of food with the result that they face food shortage in the interim period. Furthermore, many people in the lowlands are planting rice (a dry-land variety) which is a prestigious, non-traditional food crop which requires 6 - 8 months and a large labour input to mature. It is not uncommon for families to go hungry while anticipating the large, one-off profits from a successful rice harvest.

²⁴ After a while somebody suggested that the election of President Museveni (two weeks prior to this meeting) should be included in the time line, and everyone agreed.

Since then, the situation in Bundibugyo, and Uganda more generally, has changed significantly. While natural calamities remain an important but largely uncontrollable factor, the political situation has improved under the government of President Museveni (since 1986), so that the situation is far more stable now than before. This explains why people are again seeking to make future plans and engage in activities such as the learning of literacy skills.

Perceptions of the past are an important element in making plans for the future. It makes a difference whether one knows the origins of one's own behaviour and thinking or not. There is a lot of discussion on poverty in the literacy circles at present, but the following example shows that they are mainly reinforcing people's existing perceptions:

Income and expenditure of a rich and a poor man (per month, outside of main cash crop season)

income source	poor		expenditure	income source	rich		expenditure
	US\$	US\$			US\$	US\$	
oil fruit	1	1	cassava flour	fish trade	50	2	
spear grass	0.5	3	local cigarettes	oil fruit	60	0.65	information
pineapple	0.3	0.25	paraffin/soap	beer brewing	50	5	not
		1	fish	rice	36	0.3	available
		1.6	drinks			10	
total	1.8	6.85			196	18.95	
balance	-5.05				177.5		

REFLECT learners have created this matrix in combination with an income and expenditure tree. The outcome of the discussion was that learners suggested that the poor man must stop being lazy and start to increase his sources of income (roots of the tree), while cutting his expenditure (branches of tree). Given that the poor man is already solely depending on wildy grown goods there is virtually no scope for him to follow this advice without starting to steal. Learners automatically assumed that the man must be lazy, they did not envisage any other possible cause for the miserable income situation this man is facing.

As long as poverty is seen as a result of personal weakness only, the content and structure of the REFLECT classes are at risk of alienating the very poor. At the end of a unit there is normally an activity which learners can undertake to improve their situation. This pattern in itself implies that learners are creators of their own fortune and consequently also of their misfortune. There is nothing to be said against people improving their immediate situation, but a conscience of the structural limitations they are facing in overcoming poverty is a precondition to challenging the mechanisms which perpetuate poverty. Such form of analysis can be initiated through a PRA exercise, such as for example a historical timeline, but the outcomes would have to be challenged and put into a wider perspective. At the end of a unit there would probably not always be an Action Point which helps to address the problems identified. In fact it is unclear what would happen in the end.

Apart from the earlier mentioned structural constraints to expanding the Freirean element in REFLECT, there are also some practical constraints which should not be over looked. In Bundibugyo and elsewhere there are few people who could take on the role of being a counterpart to learners. Freire assumes that conscientization is a process of dialogical learning between teacher and learners, between enlightened and well-meaning oppressor and the oppressed. Facilitators in Bundibugyo are not that far removed from the living conditions of their learners. This is an asset to most parts of the programme but it also means that they cannot easily assume the role of the external challenger. The capacity of BAP to assume this role is also limited since its communication with learners is based almost entirely on the guidelines and training given to facilitators. This necessarily is a one sided and indirect means of communication with learners not a dialogical one. But given that it is the only one, the emphasis must be on ensuring that the curriculum does not stop at addressing practical problems, but also includes some of the more structural issues surrounding poverty.

Conclusion

Regenerated Freirean Literacy Through Empowering Community Techniques, as the name suggests, aims to empower communities. In this paper I have illustrated some of the potentials and limits of REFLECT. Learners in the literacy circles in Bundibugyo have achieved a great deal in a relatively short period of time. They have not only acquired the skills of reading and writing but have also found meaningful ways of applying them. This is particularly remarkable when considering that there was virtually no literate environment in existence before the programme started. All too often literacy remains an awe-inspiring but abstract notion to participants of literacy programmes. The reasons for that not being the case in Bundibugyo are to be found in the way the learning process has been structured. Right from the beginning of the circles learners have sought to make a connection between their situation and literacy, exploring how the latter can be used to enhance the former. These discussions have also resulted in a wide range of developmentally oriented activities, of which only a few have been mentioned here (for further detail see Archer and Cottingham, 1996a). The immediate benefits that learners are drawing from activities such as tree planting, improved agricultural practices or family planning, to quote but a few examples, are obvious and impressive.

At the same time the REFLECT programme in Bundibugyo is not free of ambiguities. Most of the difficulties identified here surface wherever the objectives of the programme collide with the power constellations in existence in Bundibugyo. Payments to facilitators are one example of a conflict where the ambitions of local people to gain wage employment with ACTIONAID are contrary to the agency's ambition to foster independent development. The language question is another challenge which is difficult to resolve. Notwithstanding the practical problems to teaching English, the desire of learners to gain access to a powerful language has not exactly been greeted with enthusiasm by ACTIONAID. It is incompatible with a development ethic which idealises "local" knowledge. A romantic but naive perception of rural society has been identified as the main cause for ACTIONAID being uneasy when it comes to facing the power dynamics influencing people in Bundibugyo.

An uneasiness with power while at the same time wanting to empower appears contradictory. Throughout this paper the use of the term "empowerment" has purposefully been limited. It is a catch-all term whose meaning is at best ambiguous. But REFLECT is being implemented within the framework of an empowerment agenda driven by aid agencies and some of its theoretical assumptions are drawn from this agenda. The term "empowerment" and the way that it is presently being used embodies much of the criticisms voiced here. To situate REFLECT within the context of the empowerment agenda is therefore a useful way of rounding up this analysis.

Marsden (et al) describe empowerment as "the aim of building sustainable assets, both human and physical, and of transferring resources, responsibility and ownership to those who have hitherto been excluded from development efforts - the poor and the marginalised - because they are seen to have been disadvantaged by social, economic and political changes" (Marsden et al, 1994: 10). Note that power or the distinction between powerful and powerless people do not feature in this definition of empowerment. Poverty is not portrayed as a result

of the action of powerful people but rather as the outcome of seemingly depersonified "social, economic and political changes". The motivation or necessity of these "changes" remains unquestioned and the only fault to be found with them is that some have been excluded from their positive effects. An unfortunate, but seemingly coincidental state of affairs which advocates of the empowerment agenda are seeking to rectify by including the previously marginalised. Since their initial exclusion from the perks of (capitalist) development are not seen to be connected to the action of powerful people, there is no reason to believe that their planned inclusion should cause any difficulty to those in power.

To criticise capitalist society for excluding the poor is obviously very different from accusing it of exploiting them. For ones understanding of the purpose of REFLECT and of empowerment more generally, it is crucial to which of these two views one subscribes. Where exclusion is seen as the cause of the problem, inclusion is the logical answer. In this case power must be understood as a question of access. To become empowered is then not to be mistaken with taking over power, it is more so associated with building up the capacity of poor people, their potential, and their ability to gain access to more resources. Integration is the main aim of this empowerment strategy adopted by most aid agencies. Participatory approaches such as PRA can certainly not be accused of wanting to impose the way in which such integration takes place but they do work on the assumption that poverty and marginalisation are not an integral part of capitalist society and can be overcome within it. In these approaches the main obstacle to gaining access is seen in the professional arrogance of development practitioners and institutions who fail to adequately recognise the expertise that poor people have in developing strategies to tackle poverty. PRA practitioners seek to address this problem by advocating participatory methodology and ethic so as to guarantee that poor people enhance their opportunities and can make full use of the resources already available to them. REFLECT in Bundibugyo is implemented in this spirit and I have shown that it does enhance the opportunities of many participants who show themselves very satisfied with their newly acquired status. Nevertheless, I have also shown that while the strategies for empowerment may be decided upon in consultation with participants, the framework in which they are taking place is not up for negotiation. The resourcefulness that various people in Bundibugyo have developed in attempting to help themselves to some sustainable assets courtesy of ACTIONAID have, for example, not been classified as empowerment. While dependency on the market and on money income sources is compatible with being empowered, dependency on aid money is clearly not. The hurdle that one must take in order to no longer be considered in need of empowerment is to lawfully make a living within the mechanisms of capitalist society.

The meaning of empowerment is substantially altered once exploitation rather than exclusion is seen as the main cause of poverty. Authors like Paulo Freire insist that it is not the exclusion from capitalism which causes poverty, but capitalists themselves. This tradition of thought uses the term "empowerment" more cautiously, presumably because its notion of power simply being passed on from one category of people to another is alien to its understanding of society. In fact, the understanding of power described above does not even require the division of power. By virtue of seeing it as a matter of individual capacity, potential, or ability it is implied that power can grow everywhere and is unlimited in expansion. Freire and others do not regard the growth potential of power quite as

optimistically, to them the struggle for power is a zero sum game in which the gains of the one side are the loss of the other. Ideology is an important component of sustaining present power constellations. This is to say that frequently conflict over decisions does not even emerge since the conscience and needs of both dominant and subordinate groups are perceived as natural and thus remain unquestioned. I have attempted to demonstrate here that the present empowerment agenda readily accepts the assumption that capitalist society is the given and natural framework for its activities. It is therefore not easily reconciled with Freire's ideal of conscientization in which this ideological content of empowerment would have to be the subject of critical analysis rather than the accepted basis of operation.

At present, the REFLECT programme in Bundibugyo is aiming to better the livelihood of participants within a given framework and, wittingly or unwittingly, replicates dominant ideology in the process. This is not to say that REFLECT per se lacks the potential to perform Freirean conscientisation. The issue of gender relations is only one example that I have used here to illustrate how ideological perceptions of learners are being challenged in the circles and how learners draw conclusions from it. Clearly the encouragement and skills which learners have acquired will be of great value to those who decide to embark on a more fundamental questioning of their own ideological perceptions in the future. But for a more concerted initiative towards conscientization within the circles it would be necessary for ACTIONAID to critically re-assess the ideological biases inherent to its own position. The delicacy of Freire's concept of dialogue is that it requires members of the dominant classes to expose the foundations of their own domination and render themselves vulnerable. This is difficult to achieve, but is definitely incompatible with assuming the role of a neutral facilitator.

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ABSTRACT

1. Background

- 1.1 In October 1993 ACTIONAID began a two year action research project to explore possible uses of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques within adult literacy programmes. This has led to the development of the REFLECT approach (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques).
- 1.2 The action research was carried out in over 100 villages spread through three projects in Uganda, El Salvador and Bangladesh (involving a total of 1,550 women and 420 men). These pilot projects were rigorously documented and evaluated (with control groups) to determine the practical value of using PRA techniques in adult literacy in very diverse circumstances.
- 1.3 The REFLECT approach seeks to build on the theoretical framework developed by the Brazilian Paulo Freire, but provides a practical methodology by drawing on PRA techniques.

2. The Method

- 2.1 In a REFLECT programme there is no textbook - no literacy "primer" - no pre-printed materials other than a guide for the literacy facilitators. Each literacy circle develops its own learning materials through the construction of maps, matrices, calendars and diagrams that represent local reality, systematise the existing knowledge of learners and promote the detailed analysis of local issues.
- 2.2 These "graphics" might include maps of households, land use, or land tenancy; calendars of gender workloads, illnesses or income; matrices to analyse local crops, credit sources / uses or participation in local organisations. Each graphic is initially constructed on the ground, using whatever materials are locally available (sticks, stones, beans etc). Simple visual cards (locally designed) help with the transfer of the graphics from the ground to large pieces of paper (the first step to literacy). Words can then be introduced in places where their spatial location helps to reinforce recognition. As the literacy course progresses so the range of graphics produce a wider range of vocabulary (from the linguistic universe of the learners) and learner-generated writing is promoted.
- 2.3 By the end of the literacy course, each circle will have produced between 20 or 30 maps, matrices, calendars and diagrams; and each participant will have a copy of these in their books, together with phrases they have written. The participants are able to produce a real document rather than being left with an exercise book full of copied scribbles. The graphics become a permanent record for communities, giving them a basis on which to plan their own development. Meanwhile, the organisation which has promoted the literacy programme can also end up with a detailed survey of the conditions, needs and attitudes of people in every village (which might take years to produce using other methods).
- 2.4 The method aims to promote active dialogue (which was at the basis of Freire's method but which very rarely happens with primer-based approaches) and empowerment. As learners construct their own materials they take ownership of the issues that come up and are more likely to be moved to take local action, change their behaviour or their attitudes.

3. The Pilots

- 3.1 In Bundibugyo, Uganda the pilot was in a multi-lingual area where neither of the two main local languages was previously written. In Bangladesh the pilot was with women's savings and credit groups in a conservative Islamic area and in El Salvador the pilot was with a grassroots NGO, "Comunidades Unidas de Usulután" (supported by the national NGO, CIAZO) which is led by ex guerrillas converting to peaceful methods after 10 years in arms.
- 3.2 The three pilot programmes were evaluated (compared to control groups using traditional methods in each country) in the first six months of 1995. The evaluations included basic literacy and numeracy tests and assessments of the wider impact of the literacy process on community development and empowerment.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 In the three pilot programmes the REFLECT approach proved to be both more effective at teaching people to read and write and more effective at linking literacy to wider development.
- 4.2 Of those adults who initially enrolled in REFLECT circles 65% in El Salvador, 60% in Bangladesh and 68% in Uganda, achieved basic literacy over a one year period. This compared to 43%, 26% and 22% in the respective control groups [and a typical 25% according to Abadzi (1994)]. REFLECT was particularly effective with women (and in Bangladesh specifically with younger women in the 15-19 age group). Participants in REFLECT circles remained well motivated and dropped out in much lower numbers than those in the control groups. There were positive signs that the participants are developing literate habits but it is too early to evaluate fully the extent to which literacy skills have been permanently consolidated.
- 4.3 In respect of empowerment the three evaluations identified the following major outcomes:
- Participants in all three pilots spoke of self realisation as one of the major benefits of the REFLECT circles. Most spoke of better self esteem and the increased ability to analyse and solve problems as well as articulate ideas. Furthering their knowledge of the local environment (agriculture, health, income generation and survival skills) helped this process of self realisation, which was also reflected by improved relations within the community (and within the household).
 - Increased participation in community organisations was a concrete outcome of the REFLECT circles in Uganda and El Salvador. Most strikingly, 61% of learners in El Salvador reported that they had now assumed formal positions of responsibility in community organisations which they did not hold before the REFLECT literacy programme (eg chair, secretary or treasurer on the Community Council, Cooperative Directorate, Credit Committee, PTA, health committee, women's group or church group).
 - The discussions in the literacy classes often led to community level actions to improve local conditions. These actions ranged from the economic sphere (constructing grain-stores, diversifying crops, cooperative buying or selling) to community projects (small infrastructure such as re-grading access roads, school repairs, water pipes); from the environmental sphere (terracing, organic fertilisers, tree nurseries, tree planting) to the health sphere (digging a tubewell, building latrines, clearing rubbish, cleaning stagnant water). The key factor in achieving the implementation of these actions was felt to be that the learners had independently arrived at decisions to do something

through their own analysis - they felt a local ownership of the problems and of the possible solutions.

- The evaluations also revealed that the REFLECT circles had a positive influence on people's resource management at an individual or household level. Women in Bangladesh repeatedly spoke of the value of calendars and matrices to strengthen their analytical skills, enabling them to plan better, develop more effective coping strategies (eg bulk buying and storing goods) and have more control over decisions regarding loan use (which was previously dominated by men). In Uganda there were what appeared to be the beginnings of significant attitudinal changes seen in relation to child spacing, polygamy and traditional cultural practices which can undermine food security.
- The REFLECT pilots appeared to have had a positive initial impact on gender roles and relations in Uganda and Bangladesh. In Uganda learners and facilitators reported that many men have taken on domestic work, such as carrying water and fetching fuel wood, previously carried out by women. Women are now more vocal and more involved in key household and community decisions. In Bangladesh women attributed their growing involvement in household decision making to the REFLECT circle. However, in El Salvador, where the organisations and individuals involved in the pilot lacked basic gender awareness, there was no significant impact on gender roles, revealing that much depends on how the methodology is interpreted and applied.
- The evaluations revealed that the REFLECT circles had a positive impact on health awareness, typified by the comment of one woman from Bangladesh: "We learnt something of health before but it was not very practical and felt like a lot of rules. With making maps it was a lot more helpful and we understand things a lot better." This was translated into concrete actions in many communities, particularly involving latrine building and more effective disposal of waste.
- In respect of children's education the most dramatic results were seen in Uganda. Government schools fed by REFLECT parents have experienced a 22% increase in enrolment; and parents in over one-third of the REFLECT classes have started their own NFE centre for primary age children. A more modest increase in school attendance was registered in the other pilots.

4.4 The REFLECT approach proved to be low cost and cost effective in Bangladesh (£12 per learner) and Uganda (£11 per learner), in both cases cheaper than an equivalent primer-based programme. In El Salvador, the only pilot programme to use volunteer teachers, the costs were surprisingly higher (£34 per learner) owing to the small scale of the programme in a country where costs are high. In a REFLECT programme resources are shifted from printing to training, which makes the REFLECT approach generally cheaper than a primer-based approach at a time of high printing costs.

4.5 A process of methodological learning has taken place through the pilot programmes so that the REFLECT approach is now stronger. Certain core recommendations are made. For example: facilitators should normally have at least 6th grade primary education in order to teach other adults; visual cards should be made much more simple than in the pilots; a broad range of approaches to reading and writing integrated with the graphics should be stressed (avoiding the use of key words throughout) and training for facilitators should be ongoing. Most of these observations are relevant to making any adult literacy programme effective. The essence of the REFLECT method as it has emerged through the pilot experiences has been compiled into a REFLECT Mother Manual available from ACTIONAID.

4.6 Literacy does not empower people. The control groups showed very few signs of having changed peoples lives. It seems that many of the past claims about the benefits of literacy are bogus. Literacy in itself probably does not empower and does not bring benefits in respect of health, productivity, community organisation, population growth etc. However, this is not to say that literacy can never bring such benefits. This research has shown that the REFLECT

methodology has brought quite dramatic benefits in the three pilot projects. This appears to be because the REFLECT approach involves two parallel and interweaving processes: a literacy process and an empowering process. The literacy gives people practical skills which will help in the empowerment process (eg as they assume positions of responsibility in community organisations) and the empowerment process in turn creates uses for literacy in people's everyday lives. This mutual consolidation and reinforcement is the essence of why it makes sense to fuse the two processes. To successfully interweave the two processes requires a well structured participatory methodology. Literacy programmes in the past (especially since Freire) have tried to fuse the two processes and some have succeeded, with remarkable results. However, most have failed because they have fallen into believing that either literacy in itself is sufficient (so they have ignored other processes and focused on the product) or they have assumed that empowerment in itself is enough (but have in practice tried to "indoctrinate" people into new ideologies). REFLECT holds these two processes in an effective balance and helps them to build on each other.

4.7 There are many unanswered questions that remain. How flexible will the REFLECT approach prove to be? Will it work in urban areas, with refugees, with adolescents, within a government programme? Will it work on a large scale or will the participatory essence be lost? Will people who have learnt in the original pilots retain their skills in the longer term? Three things are needed:

- ongoing evaluation of the original pilot programmes and of new REFLECT experiences (for a minimum of three years).
- a capacity to train others and promote best practice so that methodological learning is continuous.
- the continual experimentation and scaling up of the approach in different contexts.

ACTIONAID is planning to address all three of these in the coming three years.