

Governance Action Research Initiative

Synthesis Workshop December 2010

Executive Summary

CARE International UK

1. Introduction

The Governance Action Research Initiative (GARI) was designed to promote learning and reflection in country offices (COs) on their governance programming. CARE's strong focus on implementation of projects can risk the marginalisation of learning. However the shift to a programme approach in the organisation brings learning to the centre while also challenging us to be strategic about what we learn about and how we learn. Within this context the GARI aimed to provide an approach to learning for CARE using an action research approach. The GARI was guided by the loose research question: how does CARE's work impact on governance processes?; helping us to start to analyse the impacts of our work. The GARI sought to empower CARE staff to surface their assumptions and beliefs about how change happens, and to feed these lessons back into practice. The GARI synthesis workshop in December 2010 brought together the six participating CARE offices (Angola, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Nepal and Peru) and other CARE colleagues to explore the findings of these studies, their implications for cross-cutting issues and questions in governance, and to promote further learning and sharing in the organisation.

A central predicament for the workshop was how to share experiences and lessons of practice in very different contexts despite our belief that context is fundamental to our practice. The GARI synthesis workshop sought to share findings and experiences and to draw out common (and also different) perspectives, strategies and challenges across the six contexts, while also respecting the different realities in which we work. A reflection from the workshop is that despite these being highly different contexts there are many shared experiences and strategies and much that can be learnt and shared across the CARE world. The workshop was an opportunity to share findings and experiences of the GARI both in relation to our governance programming and also the relevance of action research as an approach to learning and impact measurement. The workshop (and hence the report) is a tale of two halves.

An organising theme of the workshop was the draft CI Governance Programming Framework, which CARE UK has been leading on the development. This framework helped us to organise the findings

and issues to be discussed. The development of all frameworks for an organisation such as CARE involves a tension between top-down, simplistic or reductionist models and those that are built from the bottom-up based on context specificities. As said before, the GARI country studies were loosely guided by the broad research question of “how does CARE’s work impact on governance outcomes”. Despite this very loose structure nearly all of the studies investigated how CARE’s programming models at the local level to enhance voice and participation and accountability relations had improved access to resources (section 2 outlines programming models and research questions for each country study). Furthermore the process of developing the GPF highlighted a number of important questions or facets of our work. During the workshop participants shared their experiences, perspectives and findings on the impacts (good and bad) of our governance work, issues shaping women’s participation, inclusion of spaces and engagement of public authorities.

A number of important themes were discussed to build shared understanding of our governance programming in CARE. The first discussion area (governance impacts) is important because our work on governance is based on the belief that changes in governance (accountability, transparency, participation) will lead to tangible improvements in people’s lives. Further, as an organisation we have identified marginalised and vulnerable women as our impact populations, therefore the second discussion theme (women’s participation) was important for improving our understand of factors affecting women’s public participation.

A related issue is that of inclusion, particularly of the spaces that we have created or strengthened through our work on governance. Most of the GARI studies explored the effectiveness of participatory spaces that had been established through our programming. This is also an increasing area of work for CARE in its governance programming and a key domain of change in the GPF, hence was the third discussion theme. Finally, engagement of public authorities is a challenging area of programming for CARE and our partners. We have tended to adopt a constructive model of engagement with the state, for example, as our default model regardless of their progressive or regressive approach to social injustice and poverty. We have also tended to engage them in a functional way, as partners to **our** projects rather than seeing our work with them as being functional **to** them. These four areas remain important areas for investigation, challenging our assumptions about how change happens, and how and why we should work on governance.

2. Governance Programme Impacts

The outcomes of governance programming that are discussed in section 4.1 were understood both in terms of democratic outcomes and also developmental outcomes (based on the GPF theory of change), where governance interventions had contributed to improvements in the quality of people’s lives. The creation of spaces for dialogue was seen by many as a major achievement of CARE’s work across all the research studies. In many of the contexts in which we work people do not have the opportunities to participate and the **creation of spaces** and committees in local governance planning has enabled this. However in all contexts this was not sufficient to promote greater participation of marginalised populations and our assumptions about these spaces encouraging inclusivity did not hold true. The studies showed that women in particular and other

marginalised groups were unable to use these spaces as effectively as others in their communities. CARE needed to implement strategies to build confidence and skills to participation, such as rights awareness, and building solidarity through collective actions.

In some of the studies they found that there had been substantive changes in people's lives, such as improvements in access to maternal health services which are culturally appropriate in Peru and access to public resources for the poorest in Nepal to enable income generating activities. This starts to build the evidence base that governance is important for long-term sustainable changes. However the workshop discussions highlighted the importance of the ***sustainability of citizenship***. We need to go beyond our own projects and objectives and look to a time when our engagement is no longer necessary. But what will get us to that point? How should we engage with extremely marginalised citizens, and alternatively how should we engage with elites and power-holders in society? Solidarity among our impact populations is critical, building a critical mass that can argue for their own interests. But it was also felt to be important to support this localised solidarity to evolve into new forms of alliances and partnerships between our impact populations and other actors.

Our ***strategies*** are also based on our underlying beliefs and values about how change happens in society. The strategies of empowering those with less power (our impact populations) to address inequities directly versus working with elites to address these power inequities are based on different underlying beliefs about who has the ability to promote change and the type of changes they will promote. However these beliefs are based on assumptions about the strength of collective voice of historically marginalised groups, the capability (or lack of) of marginalised people to address their own exclusion, the vested interests of elites inhibiting their contribution to progressive social change, among others. There is no one size fits all answer to these assumptions and no inherent objective "truth". Instead these assumptions first need to be recognised and then tested across different contexts. The approach adopted by CARE Nepal using underlying causes of poverty analysis (UCPA) to build understanding, self-realisation and collective solidarity of the poorest people in society, has been demonstrated as an effective strategy for building the power base of these people. However without engaging with duty-bearers in the local power structure CARE Nepal found that citizen solidarity was necessary but not sufficient for achieving tangible and substantive changes in people's lives, such as access to their entitlements and public resources.

An important challenge or tension that we need to manage is that between the perceived benefits of participation versus the costs that people experience when they participate. The expectation that people will participate in decision-making and governance processes in order to enforce accountability and to ensure that they receive their rights and entitlements is often taken for granted without real consideration of the consequences for these people. We must not assume that for everyone the benefits of participation will outweigh the costs, but equally we cannot apply our own values to decide what is important for others. The power of the GARI process is that in some countries it has resulted in the conclusion that we need a more participatory way of understanding what change is important and how we need to get there.

Moreover often efforts to strengthen participation of women in public processes can result in a double burden in their lives. The study in Peru found that the costs women experienced when participating had not reduced over time, but perhaps was also increasing in line with their increasing competence. Furthermore the role as social monitors played by these women in Peru is functional to the state, helping to ensure quality and effectiveness of services (maternal health) and decision-making processes (participatory budgeting), yet are still unremunerated.

This kind of nuance in our programming can often be missed by conventional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes that are concerned with upwards accountability, often failing to capture the positive and negative unintended impacts. The discussion on **women's participation** in section 4.2 therefore reinforced that we need to take a holistic approach to our impact populations bringing the private and public sphere together in our analysis and strategies. Women's leadership in many contexts in the GARI studies and beyond has not led to changes in their domestic relations or resulted in renegotiations over their roles and the sexual division of labour. Women were in fact still conducting all their household chores before undertaking their public responsibilities.

Further poor women face many barriers to participation related to gender norms as well as poverty-associated barriers. The concept of the "good woman" came up from a number of different country offices, which captures the characteristics that society ascribes to a "good woman". These characteristics are often antithetical to behaviours that are needed as rights claimants and as leaders within their societies and homes. Women often face multiple barriers brought on by the intersection of different factors such as religion, caste, class, age and ethnicity.

The GARI studies have confirmed other literature finding that we need to go beyond presence as an indication of **inclusivity and functionality or effectiveness of spaces**. In Anne-Marie Goetz's Social Justice Framework there is a distinction between social justice outcomes of participatory governance of access, presence and influence as different degrees of participation, which likewise stresses that access or presence does not denote influence. Our work on governance and our measurement of this work needs to get beyond simplistic conceptualisations that presence can be taken as a proxy of influence and change. In many cases we are measuring the success of our projects as the number of poor people participating in governance spaces. However at the same time we are not measuring indicators that allow us to assess whether those spaces are functional, such as how often they meet; whether they discuss issues that are relevant to our impact population; if actions and decisions resulting from these spaces reflect the interests of our impact populations.

Much evidence in the literature and other CARE experience has shown that the creation of alternative spaces for marginalised populations to deliberate and negotiate as a group is crucial for building the inclusivity of formal spaces¹ (Hinton, 2010). Furthermore, as we move away from the

¹ See also Hinton, R (2010) "Promoting Inclusive Governance in Bangladesh: Empowering the extreme poor", CARE International UK.

level of the village or community upwards to higher levels of decision-making the question of who has the legitimacy to represent the voices of our impact populations becomes more important. Not everyone can nor should be present at higher levels, this is not feasible. This therefore means that we need to build the representation of our impact populations at different levels of governance.

One element of this is strengthening ***legitimate and accountable leadership*** among our impact populations so that they are representative of their wider constituencies. CARE Angola found in their research that there is weak or low accountability of the area-based CBOs to their constituencies. Also going beyond the scope of community-level organisations we need accountable and constituency-based leadership and representation at higher levels through strategic alliances these groups form. Such accountability and strategic alliances can contribute to the longer-term sustainability of spaces and platforms, and also of citizenship. For example, CARE Madagascar worked closely with municipalities to build ownership for the local development platforms that were being created. This generated a sense of ownership and responsibility among municipalities both for the spaces and for local development.

The role of public authorities including the state is crucial and therefore section 4.4 looks at how we **engage with public authorities**. CARE has tended to adopt a constructive model of engagement with the state in our governance work. This essentially relates to concerns over the risks of taking a more combative approach. The tension was raised that projects that lobby the state or are part of civil society coalitions that take a more adversarial approach can risk our reputation with the state. Also we are increasingly recognising the importance of traditional authorities and mechanisms in our governance programming, going beyond the state as the most relevant or legitimate form of public authority.

Another tension we face is that of shifting our work to more of a partnership approach. This applies to our work with the state and other public authorities. Increasingly we felt we are trying to work in partnership with public authorities but we really need to be clear as an organisation on what partnership really means. We can build strategic alliances that include actors from state, informal power-holders, weaker segments of society, and private sector actors, what has been termed “sandwich” alliances, between public authorities and society. The key is the notion of progressive alliances among like-minded actors.

A thread that ran through the GARI workshop was the reflection on what is and what should be **CARE's role** in engaging in governance (discussed in section 5). There were a number of roles that recurred across the different strategies, such as bridging and building alliances across actors, facilitating dialogue and building capacity. However another important implication of this discussion for us was that we need to be more humble about our role and when working with other actors we need to play down our power. This is particularly the case when working with and as part of strong social movements.

A big issue we face is that of our *legitimacy* to work on governance processes. We are neutral and apolitical, which is seen as critical to our ability to work on governance. This means we are not partisan and do not engage in party politics as an organisation. However our entire mission and mandate as an organisation is one of poverty eradication and achieving social justice. These are inherently political issues looking at why people are poor and do not have capabilities to lead a life of dignity. Adopting a rights-based approach means challenging power inequities, which means taking sides – we are on the side of the poor and marginalised. As an INGO with a strong background in community-level work, we need to be able to bridge from the individual and household level to the national and international arenas to influence broader change. This means our governance work cannot happen in isolation of our work on women's empowerment and on other sectoral issues such as economic empowerment.

3. Action research as an approach to learning and impact assessment²

In the second part of the workshop we looked at action research as an approach to systematising learning in CARE. As an organisation we need to adopt a learning culture (section 7), identifying and questioning the assumptions that underpin our work, and going through a continuous cycle of reflection and adaptation of action – “there should be no action without learning”³. Action research is one approach to promoting this culture of learning and reflection. Its power comes in dispelling the artificial boundary often created between research and action. Action research however requires a commitment of staff time, often a precious and stretched resource in CARE, and buy-in from senior management to the actions recommended by these staff.

Action research also empowers our staff to make decisions based on their learning. A challenge for us is marrying up our vision of working in a programmatic approach underpinned by strategic and systematic learning, with the project-based realities in which we function and continue to survive. There are opportunities to learn within our project-dependent operational model, which needs us to start being more strategic on what we need to learn about and to build these into the M&E processes for our projects from the design stage. We need to get better at using existing processes to facilitate our learning and knowledge creation and then the application of the lessons in our practice.

A learning culture will help us as an organisation to continue pushing forward our collective knowledge and practice on governance. Work on governance processes inevitably raises questions of our identity and legitimacy as an INGO working on national processes. We must be aware of these challenges and able to learn about and adapt our positions and approaches in ever-changing contexts.

² Hinton, R (2011) Action Research – approach for testing theories of change, Development in Practice forthcoming

³ Quotation from workshop participant.