



Learning is Changing

Reconnect, Reflect, Reboot

5 February 2023



Setting Context

“We give lectures on environmental issues to our students through power points in classrooms” - a professor at a university in 2021; a workshop on community-based learning methods gave him some new ideas and skills to take his students to communities to learn about the natural environment.

“No information is reaching rural areas about Covid; we are worried” - a senior government official in Delhi, June 2020; an online conversation with a couple of senior development professionals created the possibility of reaching out through CSOs and their community organisers and SHG facilitators, using local language WhatsApp groups.

The above snippets are a small part of PRIA's 40 years of impactful journey. When we began to facilitate participation, we recognised that the obstacles experienced in the everyday life of hitherto excluded and marginalised people and households were real. Sharing those experiences to figure out what to do differently was the starting point of learning. Perspectives of Participatory Research helped us to begin to value lived experiences as the knowledge they possessed. Bringing new ideas and information about participation required us first to value their knowledge. #KnowledgeIsPower was PRIA's motto since the beginning. When we asked women to acquire literacy, workers to demand compensation, or parents to send daughters to high school... we were asking individuals and families to change – their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. We seldom realised that change entailed ‘unlearning’ current habits, beliefs, and behaviours so that new ones could be imbibed and practiced. This ‘unlearning’ entails risks of failure, which may be very costly and damaging. Hence, cautious, easy-paced, supportive and safe efforts are essential to mitigate risks and encourage change.

“I am too old to learn now; what will I do with reading and writing?” - a 40-year-old woman in rural Udaipur in 1978. She agreed to attend night classes and went on to become a community organiser a couple of years later.

“Girls cannot run as fast as we boys, and they will always lose” – a 14-year-old boy from a village in Anantapur (Andhra Pradesh); a sports coaching programme in 2014 for a week where boys and girls play various sports together made him (and his buddies) realise the strength girls have.

One of the effective ways to enable change is to provide a safe space for collective learning. We called it ‘empowerment’ – changing through an interlinked process of learning and organising. Similarly, efforts to change the behaviour and perspective of institutions require opportunities for them to ‘unlearn, learn and change’. When institutions are expected to become transparent and accountable to citizens, especially excluded and marginalised ones, we expect them to change; creating opportunities for institutional learning becomes critical for change to happen.

Institutions change when regulatory and policy environments change. To support such policy and regulatory changes that benefit ordinary citizens requires the voice of such citizens, based on their lived experiences and reflections. Inclusive development occurs when the voices of excluded citizens are heard.

“The panchayat is run by the landlord of the village; we Dalits do not get invited to attend Gram Sabha; what is the use?” – a 35-year-old daily wage worker in 2001 from Coimbatore district; A voter awareness campaign gave him knowledge about the responsibilities of a Sarpanch and how to file nomination; five years later, his Gram Panchayat received a national award.

“We have been working in these conditions of cotton dust for twenty years; nothing can be done to prevent tuberculosis” – a 45-year, textile factory worker from Ahmedabad in 1989; he attended a workshop on diseases from cotton dust causing byssinosis, which can get him compensation, mobilised fellow workers, and first ever compensation was secured for 224 textile workers in the country in 1997.

“I don’t believe it; we never discriminate on the basis of gender here” – a 29-year young founder of a tech-social enterprise in Bengaluru, on receiving a complaint from a female employee in 2018; a two-hour one-on-one conversation with a gender facilitator enabled him to look at his own attitudes, and how he learnt them during his upbringing; he is now championing gender equality among start-up investors.

“We get our daughters married off after they finish studying up to class six” – the parents of a 13-year adolescent girl from Panipat district, about to get married in 2006; discussions about girl’s health and teenage pregnancy with a local nurse, and meeting with school teacher to find out how intelligent the girl was, made her parents re-think their beliefs; She is a school teacher now, having completed B.Ed.

Knowledge. Voice. Democracy. became PRIA’s motto in 2017 to manifest the same. Such change efforts redefine relations of power to enable the sustainability of change.

Learning is Changing – Reconnect, Reflect, Reboot

PRIA’s 41st Anniversary celebration in February 2023 was used as an opportunity to come together to *reconnect* – meeting each other; *reflect* – interacting with each other; *reboot* – deriving energy from each other. Welcoming the participants and recalling an old saying *“change is the only constant”*, Dr Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay¹ said that we all are in the business of facilitating change. We have invested years of efforts into transforming individuals, institutions, and society as change makers. As we make efforts for facilitating change in others, we ourselves have also changed to remain relevant to the communities with whom we work.

PRIA’s theory of change emphasises ‘learning’ as a prerequisite for any kind of change, in the context of *Knowledge, Voice and Democracy*.

¹ Director, PRIA

To take the celebration further, participants (civil society representatives, academicians, youth, and women groups) divided themselves into eight small groups to reflect on the following questions:

- **What has been your experience in supporting changes by individuals and communities?**
- **How integral is the process of learning to change?**

Members of the groups, each guided by a facilitator, were also asked to present the findings and learnings that emerged from their discussions. The discussions were presented using creative methods such as – poems, storytelling, songs, and theatre. The stories and experiences reiterated that reconnecting and reflecting on our lived experiences leads to learning, which in turn can catalyse change.

[Group 1 Presentation](#)

[Group 2 Presentation](#)

[Group 3 Presentation](#)

[Group 4 Presentation](#)

[Group 5 Presentation](#)

[Group 6 Presentation](#)

[Group 7 Presentation](#)

[Group 8 Presentation](#)

[Group 9 Presentation](#)

Key Takeaways

The process of change begins from within: Change is a slow process, and its impact can be measured through various indicators throughout its journey. The seeds of change are sown when a need is realised. The attempt to comprehend it is defined by a person's lived experience.

Shifting perspectives and attitudes: These are social setups that command a society. There are both encouraging as well as discouraging factors in trying to bring about change. Discouraging factors could act as barriers, especially when change challenges existing socio-cultural norms.

Learning to catalyse change: Every individual has the potential and willingness to change. This potential can be enhanced by creating a learning environment.

Actionable intent when equipped with knowledge brings change: As every individual has the capacity to alter their realities, it becomes imperative to build these capacities and provide them with enough knowledge and resources to facilitate the desired change. Learning becomes a conduit between strategy and implementation.

Creating a collaborative platform: It is important to create a safe and collaborative platform for communities and individuals to share their experiences and co-learn. This eases integration at the policy level.

Think globally, act locally: A policy might fail to connect with the grassroots. To challenge the status quo, it becomes important to empower communities so that they can collectively use indigenous and acquired knowledge to facilitate change. It is, therefore, important to be relevant locally.

Defining Change

Social change entails changes in social structures, institutions, beliefs and value systems, cultural symbols, and behaviour. There are multiple facets of change – what seems to be a good change for one person, might not be the same for another person. Using the example of technology, Dr Madhura Yadav² said that while technology has revolutionised several aspects of our lives for good, it has also its downside. For instance, these days a common phenomenon among students is that they simply copy-paste information from the internet, thereby limiting their creativity.

“When I got married and came to my husband’s house, I was told that I must put a safety pin on my sari pallu because if it falls, it will reveal my body. For me the fact that my daughter doesn’t have to put a safety pin on her pallu, though a small act, is a big change in attitude .”

- Story shared in small group discussion

Change is a gradual process and it is over time that we witness a shift in the perspective/ mindset of a society or an individual. This process has its own share of resistance because challenging the status quo is not always easy. People’s experiences and knowledge impact the myriad definitions, paces, and processes of change.

Learning as a Medium to Change

The process of learning often acts as a catalyst for change – when we learn, we alter the way we perceive our environment, the way we interpret stimuli, and therefore the way we interact or behave. Ms Thresiamma Matthew³, said, *“Skilled labour (as mason) is considered as a male-dominated field. But the women working in Archana Women’s Centre have acquired these skills and have broken this notion by learning and acting.”* Thus, learning plays an important role to facilitate the process of change.

“When I visited flood torn Bahraich in Uttar Pradesh, I realised that the communities are well equipped with the knowledge to protect themselves rather than people who are self-proclaimed experts. Hence, to support change by individuals and communities the most important thing one can do is to open themselves to learning from the community.

At times, one learns simply by *observing* things. For instance, it is through mere observation that initially a child seeks to learn how to communicate through gestures. Further, *experiential learning* is a process wherein an individual learns from

- Amit Kumar Singh, Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra

² Dean Faculty of Design, Manipal University Jaipur (MUJ).

³ Founder- Director, Archana Women’s Centre, Kerala

reflecting upon their experiences. *Self-actualisation*, i.e., introspection and reflection, is yet another facet of learning. Individuals make sense of their learnings through questioning and retrospection. This helps learners create new learnings based on past experiences. One can also learn a great deal through the process of sharing one's learning with others thereby making it a *collective learning* experience.

Enabling Factors

Realisation and Actualisation

According to G. Placid⁴, *"The initiation of change begins with the realisation of its need."* The process from realisation to actualisation should be such that it empowers individuals and communities to take ownership. It is a collaborative effort.

Ownership makes changemakers.

- Participant in small group discussion

Platforms for Collaboration

Providing collaborative platforms or altering and strengthening the existing platform is crucial to facilitate change. It is imperative to create equitable and accessible platforms to enable actions in the direction of change. Prof. Vinod Pavarala⁵ narrated how the use of community radio has had a positive impact to attract young voters in a district of Rajasthan. Community members wrote rap songs and the community radio stations produced 100 hours of radio content. As a result, the turnout was massive that particular year. In the process of change, one must learn from communities and generate knowledge jointly.

Ten years ago, many community radios were expressing concern about external evaluations by donor and funding agencies, imposing onto them their own parameters. However, we wanted something that we could do on our own. Therefore, as the UNESCO Chair on Community Media, I consulted with several community radio stations across the country and created a toolkit called 'Community Radio Continuous Improvement Toolkit' based on the principles of co-learning and continuous improvement. All parameters and indicators came from the community.

Initially we delivered content in both English and Hindi, followed by crowd sourced translations in several regional languages. Then we made it available in Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh. Because it was run by the communities, it became a very useful and viable tool that people could adapt in different contexts in other parts of the world.

⁴ Director, Sahayi Centre for Collective Learning and Action

⁵ UNESCO Chair on Community Media, University of Hyderabad

The tool is now being used in East and West Africa, Germany and most recently in the UK. This is the wonder that community-based learning has managed to create, a viable tool like this as opposed to an intellectual effort coming to them from the top. So, there is much to co-learn with the community.

- Prof. Vinod Pavarala, UNESCO Chair on Community Media

Indigenous knowledge has sustained the test of time and should be valued. It is important to validate that knowledge through evidence generation. As illustrated by Prof. Pavarala's initiative of community radios, the co-production of knowledge is not enough. One also needs to pay attention to the dissemination and distribution of knowledge generated. The 'know-it-all' complex of experts (academia, researchers, etc) is visible not just in its reservation towards community participation but also through the ways in which knowledge is disseminated. The ways and methods of distribution and dissemination of knowledge sometimes hinder the process of learning.

Role of Facilitation

Collective learning is defined as a process concerning joint group activities in a certain social configuration, resulting in shared learning. When people from similar social constructs come together on a platform, learning happens. Thus, collectivisation is an important way to facilitate learning.

The role of the facilitator is to be able to probe and use prompts to make the community identify the gaps and not merely question the belief system and traditional practices. The facilitator should also recognise and value the indigenous knowledge residing in communities with open minds. In a dialogue between Dr Reeta Venugopal⁶ and Mr G. Placid, they shared their experience of how they anticipated the role of a facilitator as a giver and took pride in the authority that came with it. It was only after they attended a workshop conducted by Dr Rajesh Tandon⁷ that they understood the art of facilitation, as a dialogue between the moderator and the learner. When one enters a space of learning, one should remember that each learner has innate capacities. Becoming an effective facilitator needs nurturing those skills in practice. It is important for the facilitator to continuously update their knowledge and skills. There must be continuous improvement and innovation in facilitating learning and its methods. Facilitators should also keep in mind the pace of learning for everyone.

“Collectivisation gave me strength and confidence to learn more about sexual harassment policies and laws to act against my perpetrators. It also enabled peer-learning.”

- Moni Devi, woman domestic worker

⁶ Director, Center for Women Studies, Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University (PRSU), Raipur

⁷ Founder-President, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)

Trust

For learning to drive change, its foundation should be built on trust. An emotionally supportive and psychologically safe learning environment catalyses the entire learning process. A dialogue of faith and understanding between the facilitator and community ensures their active participation in the process of learning.

Policy Level Interventions

Dr Yogesh Kumar⁸ mentions, “1000 mutinies are happening in rural areas with women fighting patriarchy, fighting for their rights but unfortunately these mutinies that bloom every day, die without turning into a revolution.” It is important to acknowledge, disseminate and scale up the small successes to bring about a revolution. For this to happen, a favourable policy environment is crucial. All the discussions and work at the grassroots remains limited due to restricted resources at their disposal. It is critical to incorporate community knowledge and community experiences in the policy making process. If the government and the public meet halfway in setting up and implementing the policies, it would help in better implementation of various government schemes and programs.

Shift in Attitude

For change to happen, it is important that learning translates into attitudinal shift. As society changes, we juggle with the new structures and realign our beliefs and ideas.

Attitudinal shift is required both for the facilitator and at the community level. The key is unlearning – for a facilitator to start from self-introspection and changing oneself, before facilitating change in the community. The idea behind unlearning is to keep an open mind and factor in the changes that have occurred in society. For this, it is crucial to replace empathy with sympathy.

One needs to challenge stereotypes and biases in the process of change. We tend to abide by social norms and practices prevalent in our surroundings, sometimes without even questioning them. The biggest roadblock to facilitation is *un-relatability*. Community engagement becomes imperative for the facilitator to relate the change with lived experiences.

⁸ Founder member and Executive Director, Samarthan – Centre for Development Support

Capacities for Facilitating Learning for Change

In this session, the participants reflected on:

- What capacities are needed to facilitate learning for change?
- What opportunities can be created to strengthen such capacities?



Learning is lifelong. It not only happens through books but also through lived experiences. To learn to change, one must learn to unlearn, creating space for newer understandings. These newer understandings are nothing but change in perspectives – the ability to look at a problem through multiple lenses. Traditional rituals and writings are proof of community knowledge and valuing it will create the connection for change in the present. This restoration happens only when we realise the significance of our indigenous values and practices. The *exchange and dissemination of knowledge* are important in strengthening capacities to facilitate change.



To facilitate change, first and foremost there should be a *commitment to change*. Commitment entails determination, openness, and flexibility, along with continuous learning from one another.

However, one cannot commit to change without *understanding the need for change* and how the world is changing. Therefore, developing an understanding of the changing world becomes imperative to commit to change.

Change cannot be initiated without *knowledge of the context*. It is important to be locally and contextually relevant.

Communication skills are integral to the process of change. It includes observation, active listening, presentation and debriefing and so on.

Change demands time, therefore, *patience* becomes an important attribute along with *critical thinking and creativity*.

Annexure 1 – Programme Agenda

Time	Activity
9:45 pm- 10:30 pm	Registration & Tea Meet & Greet
10:30 pm- 12:00 pm	Learning for Change: Our Stories Sharing personal experiences of learning and changing in small groups Creating presentations in groups capturing the stories using creative methods
12:00 pm – 1:30 pm	Learning for Change: Emerging Lessons Sharing the presentations in groups and collective reflections
1:30 pm – 2:30 pm	Lunch
2:30 pm – 3:15 pm	Learning for Change: Emerging Lessons (contd.) Sharing the presentations of the remaining groups and collective reflections (contd.)
3:15 pm – 4:30 pm	Capacities for Facilitating Learning for Change Harvesting ideas for common appreciation and reflections
4:30 pm	Closure: Exchanging Messages of Solidarity

Annexure 2 – List of Participants

#	Participants	Organisation
1.	Aanchal Seema Khulbe	Martha Farrell Foundation
2.	Aditi	Martha Farrell Foundation (Youth Group)
3.	Amit Kumar Singh	Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra
4.	Amrita Shastri	Jesus and Mary College
5.	Anshuman Karol	Participatory Research in Asia
6.	Anuj	Martha Farrell Foundation (Youth Group)
7.	Anuradha	Jesus and Mary College
8.	Ashish Shukla	Shramik Bharti
9.	Basanta Nayak	Centre for Youth and Social Development
10.	Bharat Bhushan	People's Action for National Integration
11.	Binoy Acharya	UNNATI
12.	D Thankappan	Participatory Research in Asia (Former Governing Board Member)
13.	Darlene Clover	University of Victoria
14.	Deo Dutta Singh	People's Action for National Integration
15.	Dimgonglug Rongmei	Rongmei Naga Baptist Association
16.	Dr. Kishore Babu	Christ University
17.	Edith Read	Aga Khan Foundation
18.	Farhan Khan	Pro Sport Development
19.	G. Palanithurai	Gandhi Gram
20.	G. Placid	Sahayi Center for Collective Learning and Action
21.	Ganesh Pandey	Participatory Research in Asia (Former Governing Board Member) / Shramik Bharti
22.	Gayaprasad Gopal	Akhil Bharatiya Samaj Sewa Sanstha
23.	Hannah Fischer	Participatory Research in Asia
24.	Harsh Jaitli	Voluntary Action Network India VANI
25.	Harshita Umrao	Participatory Research in Asia
26.	Isha Saxena	Pro Sport Development
27.	Jagadananda J	Centre for Youth and Social Development
28.	Joe Madiath	Participatory Research in Asia (Former Governing Board Member) / Graam Vikas
29.	Jyoti Chandiramani	Symbiosis School of Economics
30.	Kaustuv Chakrabarti	Participatory Research in Asia (Former Colleague)
31.	Kaustuv K. Bandyopadhyay	Participatory Research in Asia
32.	Kripa Gressel	Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham
33.	Lakshya Yog	Action Aid
34.	Madura Yadav	Manipal University Jaipur
35.	Mahzer Hussain	Confederation of Voluntary Associations Network
36.	Mana Mandelkar	Tinka Samjaik Sansthan Timarni
37.	Manoj Rai	Participatory Research in Asia (Former Colleague)
38.	Meghna Sandhir	Participatory Research in Asia

39.	Moni Devi	Domestic Worker
40.	N. Krishnamoorthy	SEVAI
41.	Nalini Menon	Martha Farrell Foundation
42.	Namrata Jaitli	Save the Children / Participatory Research in Asia (Former Colleague)
43.	Nandita Bhatt	Martha Farrell Foundation
44.	Neharika Mahajan	Nirantar / Martha Farrell Foundation (Former Colleague)
45.	Nitya Sriram	Martha Farrell Foundation
46.	Pankaj Anand	Oxfam India / Participatory Research in Asia (Former Colleague)
47.	Prabhat Kumar	Pro Sport Development
48.	Praveen PV	Participatory Research in Asia
49.	Purna Mohpatra	Centre for Youth and Social Development
50.	Rahima Khatun	Nari-O-Sishu Kalyan Kendra
51.	Rajita Mamgain	Pro Sport Development
52.	Rashtradeep	Akhil Bharatiya Samaj Sewa Sansthan
53.	Reeta Venugopal	Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University
54.	Ridhima Rathi	Martha Farrell Foundation
55.	Rizwana Begum	Action for Environmental Stability
56.	Rohan Pereira	Pro Sport Development
57.	Ronak Shah	SEVA Mandir
58.	Rukmini Rao	Participatory Research in Asia (Former Governing Board Member)
59.	Sadhna Gosh	Shramik Bharti
60.	Samar Verma	Ford Foundation
61.	Samiksha Jha	Martha Farrell Foundation
62.	Samir	Martha Farrell Foundation (Youth Group)
63.	Sanjeev Sinha	Sido Kanhu Murmu University
64.	Shakuntala Dey	Martha Farrell Foundation (Domestic Worker)
65.	Shamala Kadam	Parivartan
66.	Sharmila Soren	Sido Kanhu Murmu University
67.	Shilpi Agarwal	Social Action for Knowledge building & Awareness Raising
68.	Shilpi Jain	Participatory Research in Asia
69.	Shradha Kumari	Participatory Research in Asia
70.	Shreya	Jesus and Mary College
71.	Shruti Priya	Participatory Research in Asia
72.	Soja Mathew	Participatory Research in Asia
73.	Sonajharia Minz	Sido Kanhu Murmu University
74.	Sonia	Martha Farrell Foundation
75.	Srividya Sheshadri	Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham
76.	Suheil Tandon	Pro Sport Development
77.	Sumesha	
78.	Sumitra Srinivasan	Participatory Research in Asia
79.	Swapni Shah	UNNATI
80.	Tariqa Tandon	Pro Sport Development
81.	Thresiamma Mathew	Archana Women's Centre
82.	Vijay Rawat	Participatory Research in Asia (Former Colleague)
83.	Vijendra Singh	Asangathit Karmchari

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|-----|--------------------|---|
| 84. | Vikas Jha | Participatory Research in Asia (Former Colleague) / S M Sehgal Foundation |
| 85. | Vinod Pavarala | University of Hyderabad |
| 86. | Yogesh Kumar | Samarthan |
| 87. | Yogita Hiranandani | Martha Farrel Foundation |
| 88. | Uday Shankar | Vishwa Yuva Kendra |