

Transforming power

**Participatory Methodologies Forum,
ActionAid, February 2001**

Transforming Power

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N.B. All unattributed quotes in this report are from participants

Section 1. Introduction

The ActionAid Participatory Methodologies Forum (January 27th - February 3rd 2001) hosted by AA Bangladesh attracted 44 participants from 20 countries. This was an unprecedented gathering of key people working at different levels in different vertical or horizontal functions across ActionAid.

"Only with a deep awareness of power at all times and at all levels can we use participatory processes effectively"

The forum was initially conceived as a space to share experiences around participatory methodologies, adapting them to the new strategic direction of ActionAid. However, it rapidly evolved into a space for the analysis of power relationships, with the recognition that all participatory methods, tools and techniques can easily become manipulative, extractive, distorted or impotent.

"ActionAid is in a change process but it is only possible to change if we are aware of power dynamics and relationships."

This meant looking inwards, at our own personal experiences of power and at power relationships within ActionAid, in order to identify contradictions and develop new "lenses", sensitive to power, with which to see our work with our partners, our allies and crucially with the poor and the excluded.

This is not a traditional workshop report as it does not attempt to offer a simple sequential or chronological overview of proceedings. Rather it aims to present a synthesis of the key ideas and a flavour of the experience. Moreover, this report has been compiled by the core planning team (David, Dede, Dharitri, Irûngû, Keshav, Martin, Meenu and Nico) and is very much the planning team's **collective interpretation** of the Forum. We are conscious that each participant in the forum experienced the process differently and that no report can ever hope to capture such diversity.

The photograph below gives a sense of the range of participants involved (and a full listing is provided in the related papers).



Design And Process Of The Forum

The facilitation or core planning team for the PMF consisted of eight people:

David (UK), Dede (Ghana/Africa region), Dharitri (India), Keshav (Nepal), Irûngû (US), Martin (Latin America region), Meenu (Uganda), and Nicola (Basque Country)

This group (together with Antonella and Carol from UK who were unable to participate in the final event) was initially conceived as a core team to mobilise participants to come to the Forum, negotiating institutional blocks and galvanising interest. All eight arrived in advance of the Forum (between one and three days) and became involved in the detailed planning and facilitation process.

Having such a large team caused a number of difficulties and effectively led to a workshop within a workshop - which proved emotionally intense but rewarding for all involved. This team became acutely aware of power dynamics within its own process. These were shared with all participants on the final day. A simplified portrayal of this is shown as a daily chapatti diagram of personal power relations in the related papers.

Many of the debates in the planning team revolved around the tensions between a **process / experiential approach vs. content / output approach**. Although these tensions persisted throughout, the core design of the PMF was a process / experiential one in which we used the dynamics of the forum process itself as a basis for analysis and reflection on power.

The forum process can be summarised in the table below which was shared with participants on day one and which, to a large extent, was followed. This process involved establishing a strong set of “lenses” on the first two days:

- lenses which gave a sensitivity to power relationships of different forms (e.g. gender, hierarchy, knowledge and information, culture)
- lenses which put us in the picture as subjects (rather than pretending that we are neutral or invisible observers outside of the process).

DAY 1	DAY 2	DAYS 3 / 4 / 5 / 6	DAY 7	DAY 8
Socialisation; Analysing pre-forum process; Expectations Forum process; Forming Working Groups (WGs);	WGs report Us as Subjects Power in ActionAid Personal Rivers of Life WGs meet	WGs report each morning Analysing our practice (around 5 clusters of issues in original concept note) - identifying contradictions Personal presentations: sharing our experience in order to address change. Identifying the logic of the process of transformation WGs meet each evening	Day of reflection and internalisation	Implications at personal and institutional levels and Action

The core work of the forum was clustered around 5 sets of issues as outlined in the concept note (see Related Papers, section 3). Participant expectations were clustered around these key issues and these were then analysed through the “lenses of power analysis”, to draw out tensions and contradictions. Over 20 personal presentations of different participatory approaches provided another core input in days 5 and 6.

Much of the work of the PMF was conducted in working groups. Four working groups were initially proposed, each to look at different dimensions of power:

- Gender
- Culture / inter-cultural relations
- Institutional systems, structures and hierarchy
- Knowledge and information

At the start of the workshop, no one wished to join the culture group, though later observations showed that this could have led to a rich vein of analysis. The other three groups were formed and the Institutional Systems group divided into two (Original and Splinter).

These working groups had two central functions:

- To monitor the process of the Forum itself through their particular lens of power, taking positions on the Forum dynamics and providing inputs to the Forum plenary accordingly;
- To identify existing tensions, contradictions and implications on their particular issue in relation to the wider functioning and work of ActionAid – prioritising those issues that the forum should address.

The planning team expected these working groups to become increasingly powerful over the days of the forum and indeed, expected their own power as a planning team to be challenged. Whilst this happened to some extent, the planning team remained the centre of power throughout the forum. There were, however, protests at different points. Many of these revolved around:

- the desire for a more traditional AA content/output oriented workshop;
- a feeling that we were not spending enough time looking at participatory methodologies per se; or
- a concern that we were spending too much time thinking and talking about ourselves.

Section 2: Understanding Power

“Power underlies all human relationships”

Introduction

ActionAid’s work revolves around a complex set of human relationships:

- relationships with people (men, women, boys and girls) living in poverty / “excluded”;
- relationships with people in partner organisations;
- relationships with people who are allies in coalitions and alliances;
- relationships with people in powerful institutions / governments / donors.
- relationships with people who are sponsors or supporters;
- relationships with each other as colleagues, both those in our immediate teams and in other parts of the organisation.

**“Unless we are sensitive to power ourselves we cannot promote
a truly rights based approach in our work”**

When we are in a position of power over others we often deny it, feeling ashamed of it.

**“If we deny our power it does not go away.
We must recognise it if we are to transform it positively.”**

Personal Experiences of Power

“We all have power and we all lack power”

Participants identified specific relationships in their own lives where they had power over someone else and then relationships where someone had power over them. In each case they discussed the source of power and drew out some principles about how to practice power equitably. The examples generated were diverse.

**“We must talk about power in our own work so that we are truly gender sensitive
and democratic. We must achieve coherence in our own work and in our own lives
if we want to be in a position to really help the poor to change their lives”.**

Relationships where people had power over us included: donors, immigration officials, estate agents, academic hierarchy, country directors, military dictatorships, corrupt policemen, market traders, taxi drivers, school teachers and the PMF planning team.

“... we find it difficult to recognise our own power”

Relationships where we had power over others included: children, wives/husbands, market traders, partner organisations, domestic helps, making staff redundant, editing poor people’s voices, planning for people. On the whole participants found this more difficult.

**“You need knowledge and information to be able to
negotiate with those in power over you.”**

Different sources of power were discussed, drawing on these examples and others:

“The child’s relationship with parents is fundamental. For most of us, as children, it is the first experience of power and it is always abused - whether in small or big ways. It is a constant struggle not to reproduce that when we grow up and have children ourselves.”

- internalised power (where we accept position/condition/status)
- institutional positions / hierarchy
- age
- sex
- money
- time – controlling how others use their time
- space – how things are laid out or organised
- tradition
- experience
- understanding systems and structures
- rules and regulations (and the power to apply / interpret / abuse them)
- persuasion
- emotional power
- knowledge / access to information
- level of support / solidarity / organisation
- political power
- contacts / proximity to power brokers
- power to frame debates and power to edit conclusions!

“There is no way of living without power – it becomes a problem when you cannot change or challenge it. You can't eliminate or deny it – but you must have the means to challenge/ transform/ change it. The key is to make it open not closed”

Power in ActionAid

“The main reason people do not challenge those with power over them is because of fear of the consequences. If we are to break that we need to build relationships of trust. People have to be confident that acting or speaking out honestly will not lead to negative repercussions”.

We did two linked exercises to start an analysis of power in ActionAid. First we placed a pot symbolising power in the middle of the room and participants were asked to decide how much power they felt they held within the organisation and accordingly place themselves as near to, or as far away from the pot. In the second exercise the “power pot” was placed at one end of the room and participants were asked to make one line leading away from the pot, with the most powerful person nearest the pot and the least powerful at the end of the line.

“Power is not static. Working as a Project Officer I felt more powerful than as a Director because when I was a PO I had more contact with the community and more knowledge.”

Participants found the first exercise easier / more comfortable as it was based on personal perceptions but the second exercise required discussion with others and confrontation around conceptions of power within ActionAid. Many people felt awkward talking about their power and relating their power to others. Some of the observations that followed in a rich debate included:

- **The five most powerful people in the room were all men.**
 - **“Horizontal power” is becoming more significant in the new ActionAid, than the vertical power structures of the past.**
 - **People close to power were joking, unlike those on the margins. This seems to be prompted by nervousness or a sense of embarrassment about having power. People don’t want to be seen as powerful.**
 - **We need to reconcile our self and others’ perceptions of us. Break dishonesty!**
 - **People defined power by hierarchy once Salil was positioned by the pot, but power could be with the regions/countries/field - contact with the poor;**
 - **People are denying their power and this can result in distorting our capacity to deal with communities/people without power.**
 - **There are multiple centres of power within the organisation**
 - **As we build the new AA on knowledge we need to ask which/whose knowledge is powerful and in what languages/mediums it is available? We are complicit if we don’t challenge.**
 - **The participatory tool or method in this case served as a basis for reflection and analysis. The construction of the circle around the pot and then the line of power were the starting points to stimulate debate, not the end point. Too often we treat the construction, using a participatory tool (e.g. a map or matrix) as an end in itself, rather than as the starting point for more detailed analysis.**
 - **Perceptions of power can be different but we must move towards recognising and accepting our own power, especially when dealing with partners and communities.**
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Monitoring Power in the Forum Plenary

“If you don’t monitor you don’t see”

The Gender and Knowledge/Information Working Groups developed a number of tools to monitor the dynamics of the workshop through their particular lenses of power. The monitoring tools that were used most effectively concerned gender and these revealed that our own group dynamics in plenary left much to be desired. Some monitoring of hierarchy in ActionAid was also undertaken but unfortunately there was no systematic monitoring from the perspective of inter-cultural relations so we failed to become sensitive to this dimension.

A **table of participants** was drawn-up by the Knowledge Group, and each time someone spoke they received a tick. The scores were analysed from a gender perspective and from the perspectives of diversity of input - looking at regional interventions, input from the different levels of the organisation (International Directors, Country Directors, DA Managers, Function Managers, Partners, and Field Workers). People were classified as either High, Middle, or Low, according to their placements in the earlier power exercise (though this labelling led to some reactions). They also developed a system of **warning cards** (yellow and red) to warn people against speaking too fast or with too much jargon. Notes were also taken of interventions based on examples or stories to prevent us getting too abstract or detached.

An analysis based on these indicators was presented back to plenary each morning. There were concerns raised that simplistic quantitative indicators on the number of times women spoke were premised on the idea that speaking meant you were empowered (and silence meant disempowerment), which is not always the case. They also missed qualitative factors such as the length of interventions or the seriousness with which different people were heard. Nevertheless *the tools showed that men repeatedly dominated in the plenary and that the “lowest” voices were the least heard*. Only when “gender warnings” were raised, and facilitators became conscious of an imbalance of contributions, was a more equitable spread of voices heard. It was very clear that *we only became sensitive to some serious power issues when we systematically monitored for them on an ongoing basis*.

The Gender Group also developed monitoring tools, most notably the gender mood-ometer which tracked the extent to which participants (disaggregated as men and women) felt that gender issues were being addressed on a daily basis.

Another monitoring tool was used on a daily basis by the planning team to document whether people felt empowered or disempowered within the forum and whether they had a high or low level of control over the process of the forum. These were indicated on an open scale (from top to bottom of a flipchart), with participants placing their own unique mark / symbol to show how they felt each day.

“If we cannot talk about our own power – directly, personally and self-critically – we have no right to encourage others, whether communities or marginalised groups, to use power analysis as an under-pinning of a rights based approach.”

Reviewing these at the end of the Forum some clear trends were observed. After the second day there were no serious lows on either indicator except on day 5 – which coincided with the day on which the planning team itself had its most serious crisis. At first there was a disparity, with participants feeling empowered but acknowledging they had little control over the process of the Forum. Later there was a stronger convergence between the two. There were some concerns that this tool was not used very systematically, so people were mechanical – sometimes being sheep and placing their own marks around the same area as the first mark. Nevertheless, whilst overall trends could be observed the planning team felt that each participant’s individual journey was different and that too much analysis of the trends could hide this. **There are dangerous tendencies in some participatory tools - which lead to generalisation, thus submerging or losing individual views.**

Only on the last couple of days did working groups start to feedback observations on group dynamics using more participatory tools. There was a vigorous plenary debate on culture on Day 7, sparked by a role-play about country programme staff visiting the London office of ActionAid. This exposed a deep level of cultural insensitivity which, though exaggerated in some respects, was true enough to have the plenary captivated. Many issues of cultural insensitivity emerged, such as pressures to conform to specific behaviour or to work long hours; the value attached to being articulate and professional in presentation in English; the ignorance or stereotyping of different cultural norms; the deep silence on issues of staff pay and conditions.

**“We are powerful when we question ourselves ...
when we are self-critical. It is strange, but when we can really
list and face our problems we have a new source of power.
One of the rarest qualities in organisations and one of the greatest
strengths of ActionAid is in its capacity for critical analysis”**

There were passionate condemnations of the way in which ActionAid develops communities at the cost of under-developing its own staff. The breaking of silence on these issues in a plenary discussion was felt to be a major breakthrough. One powerful observation that emerged was that **ActionAid is deeply Anglo-Saxon in its cultural values.**

Power Dynamics – Views from the Working Groups

**“Self-criticism is positive but it can also be a tactic to
retain power and avoid criticism from others”**

Each working group was asked to reflect on its own practice / dynamics through the lenses of each of the other groups, including inter-cultural relations. In the final plenary these reflections were shared.

**“It takes time to build the trust and confidence to
challenge people with power”**

The **Knowledge and Information** WG had a high level of debate that was reflected in a rich level of documentation. However, they received little feedback on their presentations and were frustrated that the planning team denied them time to develop their work in the plenary. They failed to challenge the power of the planning team on this and despite discussing acts of resistance (refusing to do what the planning team suggested) they ended up following the guidelines.

They had a strong sense of identity around the principles they agreed on day one and followed these rather than the plenary principles. Whilst respecting of each other’s views there were some tensions. One person’s tendency to think and write fast was challenged by another (who sought visual alternatives). The group had 3 people from Africa, 2 from Asia and 3 from the UK. Questioned by the plenary it appeared that 3 or 4 voices dominated ... and that these were particularly from London.

One plenary observation from a country programme perspective **compared the excessive productivity of the group to the tendency of AAUK to “churn out documents”**. Control over the computer, whilst a useful division of labour, and an agreed delegation from the group, did affect the documents produced.

Originally there was one large group of 15 people addressing **Institutional Systems, Structures and Hierarchy**, but in the first meeting this group divided into the Splinter Group and the Original group. This separation arose in part from an early “conflict” between two women who had different views on how to proceed.

Whilst created in crisis the Splinter group developed a strong sense of identity (as being somehow marginalised). **Feeling discriminated against they refused to go back and share their work** with the larger group and refused to shift to the other group’s territory when requested to help. They resented the “stealing” of one of their members by the planning team in one key session (to facilitate / referee the planning group’s own dynamics).

The original group meanwhile was dominated initially by one or two people from Asia but Latin American English “contaminated” the group as they began to “vinculate” (link / connect / articulate) more. The initial focus on “defining participation” was not done in a consensual way but most group members felt reluctant to challenge the dominant voices. **The richest debates emerged when the group began to discuss culture and power in ActionAid** – which brought a new level of passion to the group and to the wider plenary.

“Language is one of the most fundamental sources of power in ActionAid. We must have a more serious commitment to translation and interpreting, and key organisational processes must be conducted multilingually if we want to challenge and change this”

In the **Gender Group** women were in a minority but proved to be very vocal. Although the group monitored the plenary for levels of participation by sex, even their own members did not reform their practice in the plenary debates! Indeed, on the whole **the group monitored others but not themselves – which was felt to be a dangerous practice!** All too often we put lots of energy into monitoring what has been done with communities but have not monitored ourselves and our own practice.

Hierarchy was not felt to be an issue in the group though it was noted that whenever one senior person spoke everyone would write it down. One woman was seen by the group as a gender expert and so she had considerable power – and the men were reluctant to challenge her so there was little conflict. But this power brought with it increased responsibility and more workload (not dissimilar to so many projects that intend to empower women but can leave them overburdened). On the whole the group was united most of all in a fight against the planning team and the never-ending imposition of new tasks. But despite this unity in oppression, the group did not directly challenge the planning team.

“All the people who presented feedback from the working groups on their own power dynamics came from the powerful. We are not fully hearing the other version”

The **Planning Team’s** own analysis of its power dynamics is illustrated in diagram opposite. This is open for others to analyse but some key observations were made about the domination by 3 men in the early stages: David, Irûngû and Nicola. David had power from his role as convenor and Nicola/Irûngu initially bonded over the focus on power and later conflicted over how precisely to move forward and when to “give up power”.

There was tension over whether to “give power” or wait until it was taken. Something given can be taken back. Something taken is not so easily taken back. As it was the working groups never really tried to take power and there were some strong feelings that people did not want to take power – and that in fact the **planning role was a responsibility more than a source of power.**

**“We felt comfortable criticising the planning group, the powerful,
but not in criticising other working groups.
It is easy to criticise the powerful and much harder to criticise equals”.**

Later tensions in the group brought Meenu and Dede into the forefront, with Dharitri, Keshav and Martin all integrating further. At different moments over the eight days all the different members of the team were both relatively powerless or powerful. It was noted that all the conflicts that surfaced were either between men and other men, or between men and women, but never between women and other women. By the end, with a functional division of labour around different tasks, a high level of equity was achieved.

By talking very openly about the personal power relationships and dynamics the group was able to break a major taboo.

Linking The Process of The Forum and our Analysis of Power to our Work with People Living in Poverty

**“Now we know what it is like to be participated at.
Participatory processes can disempower people.
They risk wasting the time of people who have less time to waste than us.
We got impatient with the planning team and communities get impatient with us.”**

ActionAid is going through a fundamental process of change from needs to rights based work. This change is not easy. It goes beyond changing documents and discourse. Time and space is needed for people to reflect on and internalise this change. The forum was one space to do this. Although we focused very much internally, we found, in the process of the forum there were many parallels with our work on the ground.

**“In all our work we feel under the pressure of time to deliver –
to produce an output – to write a plan or produce a document.
This always leads us to compromise on the process,
which easily leads to a loss of ownership, to simplification,
to blindness, to diversity and even to falsification.
We need more time if we are to reflect seriously as ALPS expects”.**

At the centre of all our thinking in the new rights based approach should be the question, **“how much have we changed power relations in favour of people living in poverty.”** It is through analysing power relationships that we get to see beyond the symptoms to the causes of poverty and it is in changing these relationships that we can achieve sustainable development.

As in our own forum process it is clear that *we only see what we monitor* and we don't see what we do not monitor. Unless we are looking through lenses that are sensitive to the various dimensions of power in people lives we will not see them. If we are even partially blind we risk reinforcing the powerlessness of some groups.

**“There is pressure to deliver on people’s immediate felt needs.
People came here with a felt need for exposure to new tools and techniques.
Not delivering on that immediate need generated frustration.
Communities expect things of us and if we do not deliver it causes tensions –
and we need to learn how to deal with that. We expected a traditional workshop
– with an agenda, with structured sessions – but we have been told to develop
the agenda together and there was resistance to that change.
Sometimes we have to be able to resist the immediate felt needs
if we are to work on strategic needs or rights.”**

**“Poor people assume we have the knowledge, information and answers and want to be
directed by us – like we participants wanted to be directed by the planning team.”**

**“The planning team denied that it had an agenda. We do that all the time in communities –
starting apparently open-ended participatory processes when really we do have an agenda all
the time. We have objectives and strategies which may be out of synch with communities.
How can we become more open and transparent?”**

**“In all our work we need to create a feeling of togetherness.
It takes time and energy to construct this and for people to open up.
It takes time to organise. We have to actively construct spaces for people to participate.”**

**“Numbers can be mis-leading.
Three women and one man may speak but the man may still dominate”**

**“Working on a needs based approach is easy.
Working on rights is a lot harder.”**

**“Sometimes you need crisis to bring about change.
Without conflict – without challenging the planning team -
we would not have moved forward.”**

**“We are a diverse, heterogeneous group of people and all communities are equally diverse.
We must recognise different voices and different groups in all our work
and stop talking generically about communities.
There is no simple recipe or solution which can be applied to all.”**

“The power is in the analysis. We retain the power to analyse”

“Breaking norms and habits is hard”

“You always need leadership – to give a sense of direction.”

A Rights Based Approach

Koy and Ramesh gave an overview of ActionAid's thinking to date on the rights based approach – particularly drawing on the recent workshop on rights in Thailand. For ActionAid, rights are based on needs. The abdication of responsibility by the State comes into the centre of our frame of reference. The rights with which we are centrally concerned are not human rights but those basic rights which when violated or denied (both active processes) which are the causes of poverty.

ActionAid will put people holistically at the centre of its work on rights – focusing on people rather than specific rights – so our first question is not what rights but whose rights. Our work will thus be grounded with focused groups of people, disaggregated as, for example, women, tribals, dalits. This means we are clear about who is the “rights-bearer” and who is the “duty-bearer” and means we should talk of rights-holders not stake-holders. The primary agent of change for ActionAid will be the rights-holder, not ActionAid itself. We will work specifically on the demand side of the equation rather than the supply side.

Whilst rights are being claimed we may need to address some specific needs with service delivery but only when this is a foundation for enabling people to demand their rights or leverage resources in future. As such we shift from looking at people's “condition” to looking at people's “position”. Linking people upwards in networks or alliances becomes important, so that macro issues affecting people's position can be addressed and we do not just work on the micro level with them.

Debate focused on the challenges in moving to this new approach with existing programmes. Starting new programmes and partnerships is relatively easy but in older projects there is an established mindset of staff and a fixed set of expectations of us from both the poor and from government which it can be hard to shift. Resource intensive DAs may find it particularly hard to make this transition. Changing our discourse may be easy but to change the practice in older programmes may in some cases be impossible. Unless we make difficult choices we are likely to end up with contradictory identities.

There was extensive discussion about the time needed for people to understand and adapt to the rights based approach. We have not, as an agency, invested in any comprehensive process that will help people to build this understanding – and yet some people are already impatient with the fact that things don't change.

The Bangkok workshop, which developed this rights-based framework for Asia, started very much from theory – from an analysis of concepts. Here in Bangladesh in the PMF we have started from an analysis of ourselves and our own context as a basis for understanding power issues which are crucial in the move to a rights based approach.

Section 3: Contradictions

Using their different lenses of power analysis, the working groups identified tensions and contradictions in ActionAid's work. These arose from discussions around the key questions in the original PMF concept note: concerning the design and targeting of ActionAid programmes, the move to a rights based approach, the linking of micro and macro work, and institutional systems/structures/roles. A wide range of other issues emerged in the process. The contradictions from different groups and individuals were gathered and then clustered as below. Participants were then asked to identify individually which five contradictions were the most critical in their opinion and which five contradictions they were best placed to help resolve. A summary list of contradictions is displayed here followed by the top ten of each.

Summary of Key Contradictions in ActionAid

Please note: The sequencing of these is random. Some are expressed as problems or questions rather than contradiction A full list of contradictions identified is in Appendix 1.

A. Contradictions around identity

1. ActionAid's non-political image versus the rights based approach
2. Moving from service delivery to rights: AA's identity needs to be clearer
3. Local identity vs. international identity
4. Contradiction in our desired identity and perceived identity makes us vulnerable

B. Contradictions around gender

1. Demands of a gender sensitive organisation Vs financial drive to be efficient
2. Are we truly gender sensitive?? Gender policy vs. gender practice

C. Existential dilemmas

1. If we are not rights activists ourselves is it not unethical to impose rights on partners and people
2. AA institutional ego, structures, systems, profile and culture make participatory processes which seek to transform power, impotent
3. We place our professional reputation and personal life style above personal honesty.

D. Contradictions in accountability and transparency

1. There is pressure to hand over power to communities increasing control over our budget. If we do that will we end up with very traditional service delivery programmes?? That is, is there a contradiction between real transparency and our strategy?
2. The way we work ... money spent on ourselves and that directly on poor people. Can we really share our financial information and details of spending with the poor??

E. Fundamental tensions

1. Rights approach depends upon capacity of government to deliver and be held accountable BUT our very presence, profile and institutional ego undermines governments (plus we steal their staff).
2. Key drivers – donors/ rights/ needs.... how do we reconcile the demand of these principle drivers of the process?

F. Contradictions around the change process

1. Organisational systems do not allow adequate time for programme effectiveness.
2. We look for external coherence but not internal coherence
3. The power that initiated change does not have the power to continue the change/ inadequate understanding of the power relations and how they need to/ or in effect do change with organisational change.

G. Contradictions with sponsorship

1. How do we balance service delivery and rights based approach (convincing both ends, i.e. communities and sponsors).

H. Partnership contradictions

1. Accountability to partners versus accountability of partners
2. To what extent should ActionAid be influencing the systems of partners – are we creating small ActionAids? Are we now looking for partners in image of old AA (with some rhetoric of new) – so we continue to build water supplies and schools but we feel better?
3. Real partnership versus being seen and treated by partners as a donor.
4. Contradiction between what we say and our ability to “crush” or co-opt our partners.

I. Advocacy tensions

1. Contradictions between pulls, pressures, profiles of micro work and policy work. e.g. Micro = empower partners, indigenous knowledge, use of chemical fertilizers / seeds; Macro = profile of AA, formal knowledge, don't use chemical fertilizer and GM seeds.
2. We want people monitoring the government but not monitoring us. We want people represented in government decision-making processes – but are they in ActionAid?
3. Advocacy by and large should be based upon our grassroots experience but isn't.
4. Oral versus a written culture: AA uses literacy to assert its power, to control knowledge and information – excluding the poor, and through jargon, excluding partners.

J. Organisational development tensions

1. Gap between attitudes and behaviour and whose knowledge and priorities count.
2. Do horizontal functions become a new centralisation of power ‘imposing’ on geographical power?
3. We still don't have internal reward systems/incentives to encourage greater transparency and the sharing of information.
4. Consistency of HR policies/systems with RBA - the staff skills versus new ways of working. Participation versus hierarchy.

K. Contradictions in accounting

1. Despite shifts from old to new ActionAid we are still growth and quantity driven not quality driven – we accept the old and we pursue the new.
2. Contradictions between financial instructions and the principles of ALPs.

Contradictions Which Most Urgently Need to be Changed

1	Gap between attitudes and behaviour and whose knowledge and priorities count	16*
2	Contradictions between financial instructions and the principles of ALPS	14*
3	Are we truly gender sensitive? Gender policy vs. gender practice	12*
4	There is pressure to hand over power to communities increasing control over our budget. If we do that will we end up with very traditional service delivery programmes?? That is, is there a contradiction between real transparency and our strategy??	10*
5	AA institutional ego, structures, systems, profile and culture make participatory processes which seek to transform power, impotent.	9*
6	We place our professional reputation and personal life style above personal honesty.	8*
7	Accountability to partners vs. accountability of partners	8*
8	ActionAid's non-political image vs. rights-based approach	6*
9	Pressures to spend conflicting with grassroots needs/processes	6*
10	Attitudes of senior management in country programmes – are they gender sensitive?	5*

Contradictions Which Forum Participants Can Help to Change

1	Programme-Policy tension	13
2	How do we balance service delivery and rights based approach (convincing both ends, i.e. communities and sponsors).	11
3	Are we truly gender sensitive? Gender policy vs. gender practice	12
4	Key drivers – donors/ rights/ needs... how do we reconcile the demand of these principle rivers of the process.	10
5	There is pressure to hand over power to communities increasing control over our budget. If we do that will we end up with very traditional service delivery programmes?? That is, is there a contradiction between real transparency and our strategy??	9
6	The power that initiated change does not have the power to continue the change/ inadequate understanding of the power relations and how they need to/ or in effect do change with organisational change.	9
7	Contradiction between the old and the new...(old structures and systems) ushering in new ways of working.	6
8	Attitudes of senior management in country programmes – are they gender sensitive?	5
9	Partners understanding of the RBA is a gap, as is AA's understanding of the RBA.	6
10	We may need to develop different system with different partners (in different contexts).	6

Reflections and Analysis of the Contradictions

In reviewing the prioritising of these contradictions it was observed that the most widely prioritised cluster concerned “Organisation Development”. The issues that arose again and again in different guises concerned fundamental tensions in our organisational systems / hierarchy and problems with compartmentalised thinking.

It was noted that many of these particular contradictions / problems have been identified before, by different parts of the organisation at different moments. However, the comprehensive range offered above has perhaps only emerged once before – in “Taking Stock” - the external review of ActionAid conducted by consultants over several months in 1999.

A key question for the Forum was: **does it makes a difference now that we have identified these for ourselves, rather than having them identified for us by consultants?** Certainly one of the key assumptions behind participatory methodologies is that when people arrive at an analysis for themselves it has a more profound impact than having someone else do the analysis for them.

“We looked in the mirror, saw how ugly we were and refused to look again”

“Taking Stock” showed how hard it would be for us to make the organisational change necessary to pursue the new strategy of “Fighting Poverty Together” - but rather than confront this, ActionAid has buried it. “Taking Stock” has largely disappeared from people’s frame of reference in ActionAid: People have changed their discourse and have pursued new activities and partnerships, but have avoided dealing with some of the difficult issues raised by Taking Stock. The organisational change process has been delegated to the HR/OD function – but **“the HR/OD function in most countries is focused on hiring and firing of staff and does not have the status, power or capacity to really drive wider organisational change.”** This leaves us in a position where there is no clear or strong overall change process in ActionAid. Whether change takes place and the pace of that change, is largely left to individual managers / directors in different countries / divisions.

This presents a particular problem given that the recurrent comment that emerged in plenary debate on the contradictions was that **“we don’t have time”**. Unless there are clear priorities set and effective systems to hold people accountable for change processes, people will struggle to find the time.

“The most widely heard comment in ActionAid is ‘I don’t have time’. We all say it. What we are really saying is, I don’t have time for you – or for reflection – or to implement ALPS – or to join a Reflect workshop for 2 weeks – I don’t have time to do something new. We must change this. We need to reduce the demands made by the AA system – but we must also change our personal disposition.”

One working group saw a clear link between ActionAid’s pressurised working culture and its “institutional ego”. This leads us to devalue our staff and means that, through our systems and structures **“we convert partners into small ActionAids”**.

“We collect loads of indigenous knowledge but never use it in our office.”

In analysing the contradictions, the knowledge and information group highlighted the challenges of valuing and nurturing people’s knowledge – and the need to build bridges between our formal systems and people’s informal systems.

“Within ActionAid we collect unprocessed information and data from people and then we synthesise it above and package it as knowledge ... and it returns to people as domination, limiting them. How can we ensure that analysis – that processing of information into knowledge - is done below?”

The gender group welcomed the fact that the gap between gender policy and practice was given high priority by participants and was also considered to be an area in which forum participants could make a difference. However, this should not lead to complacency as our own group dynamics continued to show a serious gap between what we say and what we do in this area. Moreover, whilst we have a new gender policy and a plan for spreading this, it is not clear how this process is linked to other processes of organisational change.

“In ActionAid information is channelled ever upwards and goes into a huge vacuum.”

Section 4: Participatory Methodologies

Personal Experiences

A series of 5-minute personal presentations by Forum participants outlined a range of specific experiences and brought up issues surrounding participatory methodologies. These were presented in three panels – one on “Advocacy”; one on “ALPS and Partnerships”; and one on “Communication, Reflect, Stepping Stones and Participation”.

Some of the methodologies / approaches / tactics mentioned in these presentations included:

ALPs	Reflect
Role-plays	Report cards
Citizens’ juries	Songs / proverbs
Participatory video	Community action plans
Building social movements	Working with voices of the poor
Community Information Boards	Participatory poverty assessments
Expanding not filling spaces in key forums	Tripartite agreements – AA/NGO/CBOs
Identifying pivotal moments / events	Micro-level participatory planning
Budget analysis / monitoring	Community newsletters
Creating ceremonies	Community radio
Codes of conduct	Cultural festivals
Stepping Stones	SWOT analyses
Reflect Action	RILA PRA

There was not enough time in the Forum to draw out the rich wealth of experience on these and other participatory methodologies which participants brought with them. This certainly generated frustration. However, there was also a conscious attempt by the planning team to shift our focus from eulogising specific tools and techniques. Although all of these methodologies may have the potential to be used in the context of a rights based approach, a critical analysis of them shows that the key to success lies not in the fact that they are used but rather in the way in which they are used. No method or approach is a magic bullet. Everything can be distorted or manipulated. The real challenge lies in using participatory methodologies strategically, with sensitivity to power issues and a focus on the process and dynamics rather than on the tools themselves. New tools and techniques can be learnt with relative ease and there is no shortage of publications on any of the above experiences for those who are interested.

Principles and Learnings

Having heard a range of these experiences, participants drew out a set of key principles and learnings around how to use participatory methodologies. Whilst the plenary recognised that **the more principles you have, the less likely are they to be useful**, we did not complete a prioritisation of these collectively. We hope the selection and clustering below (done by the planning team) helps to make them more manageable / palatable to readers (the full list is in the set of Related Papers, section 2) but we are also very clear that the key to principles is not in the reading of them but in their internalisation.

... around participation processes and tools:

- Participation requires skilled facilitation and an awareness of power.
- The use of time must be optimised - but time is needed for serious analysis.
- One-off use of tools and techniques is almost invariably exploitative.
- Tools and methodologies must be in harmony with one another and with community cultures, maximising the use of appropriate forms / media of communication.
- Tools and techniques are neither a starting point nor an ending point. They should be a stimulation for, not a substitution for, reflection and analysis.
- We need to equalise the skills for analysing information because the power is in the analysis and synthesis.

... around understanding of power dynamics:

- We have to work with an understanding of many different sources and dynamics of power.
- We must not deny, but recognise our position of power in any participatory process if we are to transform that power positively.
- Without awareness of power in the process, all tools can be distorted and mechanised.
- When we start a process we must recognise that we become subjects in that process and that new power relationships are created involving us.
- Losing power maybe a good thing. When one person loses power we can all gain in improved human relations, better communication and self understanding
- Language is a source of power and must be managed from that perspective.
- Most success comes from processes which are rooted in the self-identity of groups and individuals and who self-affirm their identity during the process.
- People need access to information if they are to be able to negotiate with those in power.
- In dealing with power, co-operate when you can and resist when you must.

... around institutional context:

- When we take sides, organisational structures and attitudes must be in sync with them.
- Although we draw on similar experiences within ActionAid it is not easy to learn from each other and to learn together.
- We must resist institutional pressures to do things that won't fit with grassroots interests, e.g. pressures to spend money. This must be resisted at all levels in the organisation.

... communities, CBOs, partners:

- Be inclusive! Disaggregate communities and be aware of who is left out, in what ways, when and why.
- Build mechanisms to manage conflict, which is inevitable in the rights based approach.
- Don't relate to groups on a one-to-one basis. We need to let communities and groups articulate (“vinculate”!) amongst themselves and develop linkages within themselves.
- Do not take people’s time for granted. Be conscious of the cost of participation!
- Recognise that each individual is unique and accept differences of opinion, even by those who remain silent.

... self

- Be comfortable with a constant process of asking questions and seeking answers.
 - Don't deny your power! First accept your existing identity and then build your new one.
 - Don't simplify! Humans are complex beings and communities are full of them.
 - Mutual respect is important between all actors.
 - Practice what we preach.
 - Transparency and honesty in all that we do.
-

Section 5: The Way Forward

“Challenge! Challenge!”

On the final two days we began developing personal commitments for taking work forward to resolve some of the contradictions in ActionAid. Each participant developed a personal note about what they would do at a personal and institutional level – and how participatory processes may help them. This focus on the personal / subjective was considered crucial by the planning team as we only truly act upon the things to which we are personally committed. These personal commitments, which appear on the following page, were shared in the working groups and broader commitments developed.

However there was also a strong drive to come out with a coherent overall statement from the Forum. This led us to collectively write a collective statement: on transforming power.

“Systematically identify disempowering elements within my country programme’s system”

“To continue my own personal process of defining my identity and seeking coherence”

“Share critical learning around participation as a principle, not only as a set of tools”

**“Develop policies on partner agreements –
enabling communities to be part of the negotiation process.”**

“We will design all our programmes to challenge gender discrimination”

“Promote alternative and appropriate media of communications using local languages”

**“Monitor and understand ourselves as a basis for bringing about
effective changes in the external environment”**

“Develop systematic budgeting with communities / CBOs”

**“To be aware of our own practice of power at all times through multiple lenses
and to seek to transform it through changes in our attitudes, behaviour and actions.”**

“Promote training for staff on power analysis and awareness of self”

**“Develop a new recruitment and induction policy –
based more on attitudes and behaviour than on professional qualifications”**

“Ensure that ActionAid does not end up being seen just as a donor.”

**“To find ways of challenging and resolving contradictions in an open way,
identifying risks and sharing them.”**

**“I will work with finance to understand their requirements
and identify any contradictions with ALPs”**

**“To learn to work with people with different power, even when we don't agree on every issue
(unity in diversity). Through dealing with our battles we can learn to work together.”**

“We will help coalitions and networks of partners to develop the strength to challenge us”

“create more spaces for facilitated reflection & analysis at all levels in my country program”

“Include management of change processes in all staff appraisals”

“Argue for policies around child care support when staff are travelling”

**“Ensure knowledge management and organisational development processes support the
gender policy”**

Collective Statement: Transforming Power!

Rights are legal or moral entitlements. ActionAid's Rights Based Approach is centred on poor and marginalised people whose rights are systematically denied or violated.

We will cooperate in partnership with those who listen to the voice of the poor and marginalised, and will challenge and resist those who systematically frustrate the aspirations of these people. Without this we will not be able to move from the old to the new ActionAid.

It is therefore important to provide space and time for reflection and analysis of power relationships at all levels. We need to:

- look at ourselves as individuals
- look at AA's own practice of power internally
- look at AA's power in relation to communities, partners, and poor and marginalised people
- look at AA's power/standing in the external environment (e.g. with governments, WB, donors etc)

1. Organisational Development

We need active management of the change process at all levels. Specific indicators of change need to be developed/adapted to different contexts to ensure change processes are completed by 2003 (as specified in FPT).

Corporate Directors should be held accountable individually and collectively for guaranteeing this change. However, it is the responsibility of ALL staff to be an active part of that process, demanding change in line with FPT where it is not happening.

We must be willing to stop, confront the old AA and not ignore it in pursuit of the new.

We must be aware that effective change can be undermined by pressures to grow.

2. Gender

Attitude and behavioural change among ourselves is fundamental in addressing gender issues at all levels.

It is imperative that we create:

- women-led and managed mixed gender fora across the organisation
- open spaces for spouses to participate
- gender sensitive working environments

On the programme and policy front there is a need to develop gender sensitive indicators for appraisal of all staff and partners and provide adequate resources to support activities.

1. Partners

We need to provide space for, encourage and support the emergence of, strong networks of partners (NGOs, CBOs, community groups and poor and marginalised) . These processes should aim to achieve:

- mutual accountability;
- empowerment for upward challenges between all levels and for the control over resources;
- a situation where poor and marginalised people, CBOs, NGOs, and partners are able to negotiate equally and fairly with ActionAid, with others and with each other.
- opportunities and space for the professional development of AA staff - to ensure they have ongoing direct contact with poor and marginalised people.

2. Human Resources

We need to make efforts nationally and internationally to ensure that time, energy and resources are made available to have a clear, transparent and enabling set of policies, which can be put into *practice*. This should be the collective responsibility of the senior management team at all levels.

The system should emphasize:

- attitude and behaviours;
- a commitment to increase the proportion of minorities and marginalised people in staff composition;
- South-South exchange of staff members;
- staff development in relevant skills and capacities.

3. Finance, Marketing And Sponsorship

We must constructively engage with finance, marketing and sponsorship staff at all levels to ensure that their systems are coherent with ALPS.

Programme staff should take some responsibility for finance and strengthen their capacity accordingly.

4. Horizontal Learning

We should foster inter and intra integration of horizontal and vertical groups, aiming for synergy in the transition to the rights based approach. Every effort should be made to avoid working in a compartmentalised way.

We should avoid creating new power structures.

5. Learning

In addition to the documentation and sharing of 'best practices', we need to consciously promote critical sharing and reflection. We can often learn more from mistakes and from “worst practice”. This self-critical process needs to be internalised by AA, partners, and poor and marginalised communities. There needs to be commitment of resources to enable more reflection and learning.

**“Beware of over-confidence.
The moment you think you ‘have it’, is when you lose it”**

6. Communication

We need to challenge the institutional dependency on the English language and on literacy (specifically e-mail). We need to integrate a range of languages and appropriate media into our own institutional work if we are to be culturally sensitive and we are to truly listen to the voices of the poor within ActionAid.

7. Closing Statement

It is important for us to recognise, not deny, our power and to transform our own power positively to achieve the objectives of *Fighting Poverty Together*. Our challenge is to construct equitable human relationships in all our work, both internally and externally.

Without changing ourselves we cannot promote meaningful rights-based change with the poor and excluded. Participatory methodologies will remain constrained or impotent unless we actively pursue this change.

Participatory methodologies must no longer be reduced to tools and techniques, which can be used in manipulative, extractive, inequitable and damaging ways.

All our work (in our respective areas of influence) should be critically analysed with a consciousness of power and a willingness to challenge and be challenged by the poor, by partners, and by each other.