

# Guiding Framework



## **STAR Action Research** **{Comic Relief & ActionAid International}**

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## **ANNEX 1.**

# Introduction

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## Project Background

While African governments are now encouraged by the global community to invest in primary education, there is no equivalent encouragement to invest in the education of the youth and adults who missed out on primary schooling. Globally about one billion over-15 year olds are unable to read and write and present projections suggest that this will only reduce by 7% by 2015 – despite global commitments made in the World Education Forum in Dakar (2000) to halve adult illiteracy by that date.

The limited education provision that is available for young people and adults tends to be very traditional and technical in approach, failing to relate learning to people lives or to a wider empowerment process. Yet this is the population most at risk from HIV/AIDS. And this is also the population that needs to adjust almost every aspect of their lives to the new reality of living in a world with HIV/AIDS. Women fall dis-proportionally into this group, being most likely to have been excluded from accessing school and more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection.

There is less explicit evidence of the impact of adult learning programmes (rather than schooling) on sexual behaviour. However, field testimonies suggest that the impact can be even more dramatic and immediate, especially where the learning process uses participatory approaches that strengthen people's capacity to communicate. This presents new challenges and places new responsibilities on us all to strengthen learning processes, particularly ones that are linked to empowerment and that reach young people and adults. These challenges are not yet being met.

One of the strongest reasons for the development of the STAR initiative is the desire to break down barriers between sectors in order to mount an effective, integrated response to the HIV epidemic. Our community partners have increasingly found that it is ineffective to try and implement parallel adult education and HIV programmes, because people do not live their lives in separate boxes. That is why we are taking the strategic decision to combine the strengths of Stepping Stones and Reflect into a single participatory empowerment framework called STAR.

With a particular emphasis on gender equity, STAR aims at empowering communities faced by HIV.

## **STAR Summary & Rationale**

STAR combines the best of both *Stepping-stones* and *Reflect* approaches to enable communities to analyze and tackle issues that affect them; from basic agriculture to war, in the context of HIV. It draws together all the relevant participatory tools from both approaches to facilitate a process of exploring how these issues link with HIV/AIDS and how to take effective action to improve or solve them.

Early indications from experiences show great potential for mutual reinforcement and enrichment of Reflect and Stepping Stones. There is a remarkable convergence of basic principles. The weaknesses of each of the approaches can be overcome by linking with the other; the strengths are complementary. Whilst there are tensions between some of the differing emphases or ways of working, there are no fundamental contradictions. There are of course some significant differences and some issues need to be resolved in any context. The Pilot experiences and outcomes shall be used to influence the policies and practices within the 3 countries and across Africa through existing Stepping Stones, Reflect, HIV and education networks

### **Action research partnership**

All the country-level partners who are involved in this project share commitment to equal opportunities, working with the most marginalized and vulnerable people. In other respects these partners represent a huge diversity of varying levels of familiarity with either Reflect or Stepping Stones or both – save for one of the partners where both approaches are very new. The partners range from a small CBO through to a large NGO and on to a government department. They range in focus also, from being concerned centrally with youth, to focusing on women living with HIV; from being focused on schools to being committed to integrated development processes.

Each partner also works in a very different context – whether in an area of high or low rates of HIV/AIDS, and high or low awareness, being very remote to accessible or urban, one is Muslim, another Christian, one has good levels of health provision, another very poor services. This ensures that the partners represent an interesting diversity and that their locations offer different challenges - and that their styles or priorities of intervention are also varied. The one thing they will share is that all will be piloting the STAR approach over the same timeframe, collecting baseline data in similar ways, tracking agreed indicators (as well as supplementing these locally) and exchanging their learning with one another openly. Worth noting here is that the choice of diversity in this project implementation shall be a stepping stone from which lessons shall be

built-on for scaling-up of STAR in the varied contexts of Africa and other parts of the world.

## **Purpose of this Framework**

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Like other action research projects, the STAR research project destines to identify, describe and understand locally adaptive strategies, and to make policy recommendations to foster an enabling environment, for communities in the face of HIV/AIDS. The need for careful and systematic implementation of this pilot research project has led to the preparation of this guiding framework. Meticulous implementation of this project shall surely strengthen its objectives, and in particular:

- This framework should provide the Action Researchers with simple, qualitative and quantitative information against which we can measure the effectiveness of the STAR approach.
- It shall guide information collection on the STAR implementation process that will be of great use to all managers and programme staff where such similar approach intends to be replicated.
- It shall guide the process of carrying out the STAR trials that would benefit the local communities to develop new and practicable options to the HIV/AIDS related problems.
- The framework shall guide the Action research to study resultant behavior changes among communities with the use of STAR in various contrasting contexts.
- The framework shall also guide the process monitoring and reporting to the donor and provide information for learning and sharing. It should also provide guidance to generating information that will feed into the similar programme planning and budgeting exercises for the STAR elsewhere.
- It will help to gain an aggregate picture of progress at the regional/international level on a comparable and transparent basis.

It is also worth stating what the guide-framework is not intended to be the “Bible” of this research project. It is not a detailed enough manual on how to undertake what is called Participatory Action Research (PAR), policy research, or people centered surveys. It assumes that the project research team has or can access expertise in these techniques. The central concern is to ensure that teams select an appropriate mix of available research methods, particularly those based on participatory methods, so as to link meaningful field studies with policy research and thus achieve both practical results in the field, and policy reform for building an empowered community.

# Basic Concepts & Principles

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## Participatory Action Research

“Participatory Action Research” is an activist approach, working to empower the local community, or its representatives, to manipulate the higher-level power structures. This approach can empower a community, entrench a local elite, and right a wrong or totally mess things up. It depends on the extent of awareness and social-political skills of the supporting organization.

As with all research methods, its merits vary with the research situation and the practitioners. At its best, the process can be liberating, empowering and educative, a collegial relationship that brings local communities into the policy debate, validating their knowledge. At its worst, it can degenerate into a process of co-option of local communities into an external agenda, or an exploitative series of empty rituals imposing fresh burdens on the community's time and energy and serving primarily to legitimize the credentials of the implementing agency as “grassroots oriented”. While participation must be integral to the research process, it must be understood and practiced as a genuine process.

## Project Principles

The following principles should guide the way we implement the Action Research:

1. Perspectives and experiences of marginalized and excluded groups in the various communities should be valued, assessed and documented.
2. The most appropriate participatory study methods should be used; Stories, songs, proverbs, local art, photography, video, diagrams, etc from multiple perspectives should be included in the methods of data collection and documentation, to produce context specific information and people's own interpretations of what happens.
3. The Action research study process should enable us to clearly define what STAR can help to achieve and not achieve globally, but be flexible enough for countries to reflect their own local realities.
4. All participants should negotiate meaning from the data and contribute to the selection of further intervention strategies.
5. Data collection should be kept to a basic minimum, respecting partner agency capacity.
6. Country-based specialists in *Reflect* and *Stepping Stones*, should be involved in entire process of the action research

7. The Action research study shall be clearly related to the originally envisaged process, outcomes and impact.
8. The study shall among others, create private time and space for both men and women with their peers to explore their own needs and concerns about relationships and sexual health.
9. The linking Adult education to HIV and sexual reproductive health (even to many other issues) shall be assessed as an independent issue. The drive under this principle is the potential of a single approach but with underlying multi-sectoral impact.
10. The contribution and role played by ActionAid and the implementing partners should be particularly assessed, as it is important to learn about the process involved in achieving the impact.
11. Lesson learning and dissemination, including from challenges, should be promoted.

## **Research questions**

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While these are guiding action research questions, they by no means make up a definitive list. When working with community groups on action research, it probably would make sense to build onto this list further. The questions for this research study shall ultimately establish what in STAR, works and what does not, how to adapt the approach effectively to different contexts and to ascertain what sort of outcomes and impact might be expected in diverse contexts. Below are the broad research questions by category:

### **Process questions**

1. How best can STAR be used to transfer basic knowledge and skills on HIV to poor and vulnerable people to make them better placed to handle the challenges of this epidemic?
2. What are the general and specific requirements for the effective implementation of STAR in the various contexts; Material resources, time as a resource, human expertise, financial resources, etc.
3. What training and financial resources are needed to increase the use of STAR by individual development organisations?
4. How can training and resources be most effectively coordinated across implementers of STAR?
5. What can be done to adapt the approach to ensure full access for people with diverse social, economic and political situations?
6. What is the manifested effectiveness of STAR when implemented in culturally diverse, contexts; in areas of high or low rates of HIV/AIDS, and high or low awareness, being very remote to accessible or urban, in Muslim, and

Christian areas, good levels of health provision, and those with very poor health services?

## **Outcome and Impact questions**

1. To what extent can STAR enable women and girls to voice their concerns and make decisions affecting their lives; in the household or the public sphere
2. How effectively can STAR facilitate the process of people accessing and using information and services on HIV/AIDS and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights; and how this impacts on sexual behaviour.
3. How efficiently can STAR strengthen literacy and other communication skills of vulnerable people and how these skills are used / to what ends.
4. To what extent can STAR empower people living with HIV to engage constructively to influence the design and implementation of policies and practices (of local and national governments and NGOs) tied to the fight against HIV/AIDS.
5. To what Level can STAR promote reduction of prejudice and discrimination, despair and stigma around HIV/AIDS yet promoting care and support for local people living with HIV/AIDS and children who are orphaned?
6. To what extent does STAR enable local communities to appreciate HIV/AIDS as a critical issue that influences other sectors; e.g. Education and Agriculture

Note: Also link these research questions to those in the Comic Relief reporting guidelines – Annex 1 below.

## **Data collection and analysis**

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Participatory research does not consist of persuading people to undertake a series of predetermined exercises. The point here is that the data collection and analysis this time shall consist of exercises to tease-out information with the aim of demonstrating that community members can communicate their own wisdom and understanding in metaphors that are meaningful both to them and to the researcher, to bridge a communication barrier, and to promote techniques that can generate a lot of information quickly, efficiently, and enjoyably. A balance shall be struck between quantitative (i.e. numbers) and qualitative study information collection – both are important.



## Tools of inquiry

Several Participatory learning and appraisal tools shall be of assistance in gathering information that both identifies the project's success in particular communities as well as help to ascertain the project's overall contribution to empowering communities infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. The listing of sample tools include:

**Village health resource maps;**  
**Household maps;**  
**Health Seasonal calendars;**  
**Health flow diagrams;**  
**Local drama;**  
**Songs and poetry;**  
**Personal testimonies;**

**Focus group discussions;**  
**Health time trends;**  
**Household surveys;**  
**Semi-structured dialogues**  
**Body mapping**  
**Memory Book (etc)**

<sup>1</sup>  
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The manner in which these tools are used is similar to the normal PRA exercises (i.e., team formation, involvement of peers and both genders in discussion groups, etc.). A key difference, however, is for the research coordinator(s) to keep in mind the sensitivity of the HIV/AIDS discussions among different community categories when using specific tools.

These participatory tools can then be complemented with carefully structured conventional tools such as **Literature review**, **key informant interviews**, **administered questionnaires**, **observation**, **semi-structured household interviews**, or **focus group discussions** to ascertain how the achievements can be attributed to STAR and probably how STAR could be adopted for further HIV / empowerment interventions.

## Reporting the results

Each action research progress document {monthly updates, case studies, quarterly and annual reports} will measure progress against strategic objectives, which are pertinent to the entire project but taking into account specific issues unique to each pilot location.

Impact and progress are likely to be outcomes of a complex range of factors. It is important that the annual report document gives particular sense of scale and importance of the STAR approach in contributing to significant community changes. Other significant contributing factors should be briefly described and where possible, the sources of information and the rationale for claims explained. Such could be best documented in case studies and other forms of

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<sup>1</sup> A brief description and illustrations of these techniques is in the STAR guidelines.

documentation; photography and photo stories etc. Creative documentation and capture of learning will be the ultimate score of this process as well.

The Progress Documents should also include unexpected outcomes, new community initiatives, and lessons learnt. We should particularly learn more about the approach; its strengths, weaknesses, potentials, implementation mistakes so as to document and share all experiences that shall have been encountered. See Annex 1 for particular detail on Comic Relief Reporting guidelines - however note that whereas the guidelines emphasize annual reporting and the final evaluation, for proper project management we shall continue providing monthly updates (1 to 2 pages) and quarterly reports (3 to 5 pages) for keeping close track of the progress made at each stage and our learning of the process. Note that Case studies should be documented and shared as and when there is interesting and/or critical evidence of outcome or impact to capture {not to wait for submission with the other reports}

## Conclusion

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It is of particular importance that the pilot country projects build the ability to share information and experiences, so as to assist each other in the evolution of project outcomes and policy issues. The potential of each pilot project and institution to learn from the others, and to expand its intellectual horizons, is significant.

The conducting of a series of related pilots in different countries provides the opportunity, once a sufficient volume of quality results has been achieved, of examining the international experiences, and policy implications around HIV/AIDS and how to address them in a meaningful and favorable approach for poor and marginalized communities. The publicity and sharing of best practice in the pilot projects can help to direct the world's development efforts on HIV/AIDS to a more productive outcome.

## **ANNEX 1.**

### **COMIC RELIEF REPORTING GUIDELINES ON AFRICA GRANTS 2003-2005**

#### **1. WHY WE ASK FOR REPORTS**

Comic Relief is interested in learning about how the projects we fund make a difference to the lives of people in Africa. Reports help us to tell all those who raise money for us, use our education materials or watch our TV programmes how the money was spent and why it's really important to continue to support Comic Relief. It is also an opportunity for everyone working in development to learn from their experience and share information with one another.

Our experience after thirteen years of funding in Africa is that the most useful and interesting reports come directly from people who are benefiting from the work, or from project workers. **It's their voices we'd most like to hear.** Written reports might be accompanied by video or audio material, photographs, publications, newspaper articles or personal testimonies from individuals involved in the project.

#### **2. WHEN WE ASK FOR REPORTS**

When we confirm a grant we agree a reporting timetable with you. We require one report each year and we try to fit our timetable into those of other grant makers. Reports should be clear and concise, and accompanied by accounts of expenditure. If you have any difficulties in keeping to the reporting schedule, please contact us promptly to explain why and to rearrange the timetable.

#### **3. WHAT WE ASK FOR FROM REPORTS**

##### **3.1 Annual Reports**

These should be relatively brief (5-10 pages) and should include:

- A review of progress against the aims and objectives of the project. This should include:
  - Achievements
  - Problems encountered and how these are being addressed;
- Are there wider political, economic, and social changes which have affected the project and its aims over the reporting period;
- How many people have benefited from the project over the last year;
- How are women, disabled people, ethnic groups and other distinct groups participating in and benefiting from the project;
- If you are not reaching some of the groups identified above, why do you think this is so and how do you plan to address this;
- What is the role of partner organisations and how are they involved in the project;
- Progress made on any conditions or matters raised when the grant was made;
- How have people benefiting from the project been involved in reviewing the year's progress;

- How will the review of the year inform next year's project management and planning;
- How have you shared the experiences and lessons from your work with interested parties?

### **3.2 Final Reports and Evaluations**

At the end of its funding, Comic Relief expects a final report, which covers the whole lifetime of the grant. A comprehensive evaluation report may address most or all of the issues we'd expect to see in a final report. Where an evaluation is planned, Comic Relief would like the opportunity to feed into the terms of reference.

Final Reports should be a more substantial document describing:

- Wider political, economic, and social changes which have affected the project and its aims over the period of the grant;
- What were your original objectives for the project when you first received funding from Comic Relief;
- In what ways have the original objectives changed during the period of the grant;
- Which objectives have been most successfully achieved and why;
- Which objectives have been least successfully achieved and why;
- Who has been involved in assessing the project's work, and how are users/beneficiaries involved.
- What impact/outcomes has the project had in the local community or how has the work changed the lives of people you are supporting. Are there other changes that have occurred which were not envisaged at the beginning of the project;
- How have women, disabled people, ethnic groups and other distinct groups participated and benefited from the project;
- If you have not been able to reach some of the groups identified above, why do you think this is so;
- Describe how your work has been used to influence changes in policy or practice, within your organisation, other organisations or within government;
- Will the project continue after Comic Relief's funding ends? If so, how will the activities be sustained;
- If another phase of the project is planned, will there be significant changes in the way in which the project is planned, managed and implemented.

### **3.3 Financial Reports and Accounts**

We expect financial reports to accompany all annual and final reports on each grant.

- Accounts of expenditure should match the budget headings used in your application and be in pounds sterling;
- Accounts should show the total budget and spending and should indicate the use of Comic Relief's contribution. Any changes against budget should be explained.