

## Annex 2 - What is a Facilitator?

### What is a Facilitator?

Most adults learned in teacher-centered classrooms: teachers talked, students listened, except when called on to ask or answer questions about what the teacher had said. This traditional model assumes both the authority of the teacher and the ignorance of the students.

Fortunately these methods are increasingly being replaced by teaching techniques that relate to the learners' life experiences and appreciate what they already know. Increasingly the learners, not the teacher, is at the center of the experience and share "ownership" for their own learning.

In this collaborative context, the word facilitator is more appropriate than teacher, for all concerned should be peers, engaged in a common effort towards a shared goal. Together they examine their own experiences and seek to come to individual conclusions. The goal is not some "right answer" or even consensus, but the collaborative exploration of ideas and issues. However, mastering the art of facilitation requires both practice and a clear understanding of the goals and methods involved.

### A facilitator -

- establishes a collaborative relationship with participants, in which the facilitator is "first among equals," but responsibility for learning rests with the whole group;
- helps to create and sustain an environment of trust and openness where everyone feels safe to speak honestly and where differences of opinion are respected;
- ensures that everyone feels included and has an opportunity to participate;
- provides a structure for learning, which might include setting and observing meeting times, opening and closing sessions, and keeping to an agenda;
- makes sure the "housekeeping" is done, such as preparing materials, setting up the meeting space, notifying participants, and seeing that necessary preparations are made.

### A facilitator is not -

- "the person in charge": The whole group is responsible for learning. The facilitator's role is to help that learning happen more effectively. Nor does the facilitator have sole control of the agenda. Participants should have a voice in determining the topics to be covered.
- a lecturer: The facilitator is a co-learner, exploring all subjects as an equal partner and contributing individual experience to that of others.
- necessarily an expert: Although preparing each session, the facilitator may not know as much about a subject as some other members of the group.
- the center of attention: A good facilitator generally speak less than other participants; instead she or he draws them into the discussion.
- an arbiter: In collaborative learning, no one, least of all the facilitator, determines that some opinions are "correct" or "more valid."

### What Makes a Good Facilitator?

Some qualities of a good facilitator, such as personal sensitivity and commitment, depend on the individual personality. However, experience and awareness can improve everyone's skills at facilitating.

**Sensitivity to the feelings of individuals:** Creating and maintaining an atmosphere of trust and respect requires an awareness of how people are responding to both the topics under discussion and the opinions and reactions of others. Most people will not articulate their discomfort, hurt feelings, or even anger; instead

they silently withdraw from the discussion and often from the group. Sensing how people are feeling and understanding how to respond to a particular situation is a critical skill of facilitation.

**Sensitivity to the feeling of the group:** In any group, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and group "chemistry" generally reflects shared feeling: eager, restless, angry, bored, enthusiastic, suspicious, or even silly. Perceiving and responding to the group's dynamic is essential to skillful facilitation.

**Ability to listen:** One way the facilitator learns to sense the feelings of individuals and the group is by acute listening, both to the explicit meaning of words and also to their tone and implicit meaning. In fact, facilitators generally speak less than anyone in the group. And often the facilitator's comments repeat, sum up, or respond directly to what others have said.

**Tact:** Sometimes the facilitator must take uncomfortable actions or say awkward things for the good of the group. The ability to do so carefully and kindly is critical. Furthermore the subject matter of human rights can evoke strong feelings and painful memories. The facilitator needs particular tact in dealing with emotional situations respectfully and sometimes also firmly.

**Commitment to collaboration:** Collaborative learning can occasionally seem frustrating and inefficient, and at such times every facilitator feels tempted to take on the familiar role of the traditional teacher and to lead, rather than facilitate. However, a genuine conviction about the empowering value of cooperative learning will help the facilitator resist a dominating role. Likewise the facilitator needs to be willing to share facilitation with others in the group.

**A sense of timing:** The facilitator needs to develop a "sixth sense" for time: when to bring a discussion to a close, when to change the topic, when to cut off someone who has talked too long, when to let the discussion run over the allotted time, and when to let the silence continue a little longer.

**Flexibility:** Facilitators must plan, but they must also be willing to jettison those plans in response to the situation. Often the group will take a session in an unforeseen direction or may demand more time to explore a particular topic. The facilitator needs to be able to evaluate the group's needs and determine how to respond to it. Although every session is important, sometimes a facilitator will decide to omit a topic in favor of giving another fuller treatment.

**A sense of humor:** As in most human endeavors, even the most serious, a facilitator's appreciation of life's ironies, ability to laugh at oneself, and to share the laughter of others enhances the experience for everyone.

**Resourcefulness and creativity:** Each group is as different as the people who make it up. A good facilitator needs an overall program and goals but may also adapt it to fit changing conditions and opportunities. For example, the facilitator may call on the talents and experiences of people in the group and the community, or participants may suggest resources.

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