BRITISH COUNCIL

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP
THE YOUTH CONNECTION

Tales from Activists: Tools for Practitioners

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Dr. Adil Najam, Vice Chancellor, Lahore University of Management Sciences

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PREFACE

Any state requires territory, people, sovereignty and a government. Yet, while each of these prerequisites is important, people are the centrepiece of any state. Without people, a territory means nothing, a government as a political entity cannot be formed, and sovereignty cannot be achieved.

In a democratic polity, citizens are considered the source of all state power. Ownership gives citizens certain rights and privileges, and alongside those, a range of duties and obligations. These obligations call for citizens to be assertive, engaged and to take nation-building action. Without citizen action to assert their rights and meet their obligations, a nation cannot reach its full potential.

At birth, a nation is often in a state of shell-like frailty. Its people can, at times, be as vulnerable and as disjointed as sand. Rabindranath Tagore once wrote that nothing can grow in sand because it lacks the ability to hold water. And in any state, diversity of language, religion, culture and values usually exist, each of which is a potential cause of tension and dissent, which can easily mutate into instability and conflicts. However, citizen activism and action can, to a great extent, help reconcile them and meet the challenges they present.

Citizen action can help define the identity of the people (that is, who they are as individuals), specify their roles in the community, facilitate the acceptance of differences between them, foster dialogue, bridge religious differences, promote inclusiveness and partnership and, in the process, contribute to the forging of cohesion among them. Action brings people together and builds unity amidst diversity. States where citizen activism successfully focuses on easing these potential threats tend to move forward, as citizens are able to concentrate on achieving their shared vision, rather than fighting one another.

Citizen activism and action for the common good can take on different forms, including both individual actions and collective engagements to address specific socio-economic, political or cultural issues. Collective engagement can also take the form of advocacy for public action. Citizen action can come from people from all walks of life and from different age groups. In fact, citizen action that involves many individuals and diverse groups, and is based on voluntarism is likely to lead to greater success.

Thomas Jefferson once said: “Every citizen should be a soldier. This was the case with the Greeks and Romans, and must be that of every free state.”

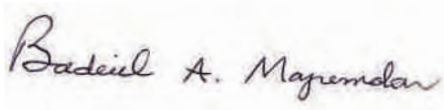
What Jefferson called for was collective action for common security. A nation's security and even its survival can be jeopardised if difference and cultural plurality in society is allowed to become divisive. Collective citizen action is as important now as it was in ancient times.

Youth engagement and activism is particularly important. Young people are often more idealistic than others, and frequently see social action as a true labour of love. They can also afford to be true volunteers. The more that young people are engaged in social action, the better it is for the future of the nation.

Over the last decade, the British Council, in partnership with local organisations, has promoted social action by young people in many countries worldwide. As a result, many social action projects have been initiated which have had an enormous impact on communities from Dhaka to Durban, and from Madrid to Mombasa. This handbook offers a window on the experiences of facilitators and young activists from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and the UK who have been part of the Active Citizens programme. It also captures the lessons learned from their work through a series of expert commentaries.

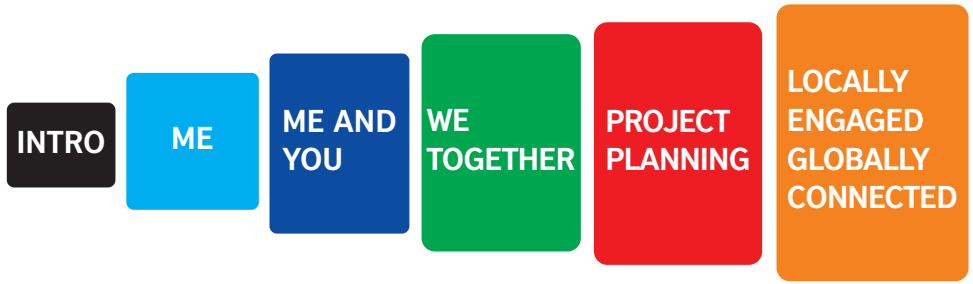
Global Citizenship - the Youth Connection: Tales From Activists, Tools For Practitioners is organised around four modules: Understanding identity; Sharing and learning with others; Understanding our place in society and the world; and Social action projects. These modules are designed to help readers and the people they work with follow a clear path towards becoming an active citizen. Each section of the handbook focuses on one of these modules, in turn, and includes two in-depth case studies as a starting point for discussion and action.

Above all, *Global Citizenship - the Youth Connection: Tales From Activists, Tools For Practitioners* is a how-to book. It contains a series of practical exercises and questions, which will be helpful for a better understanding of how to become an active citizen. I strongly feel that this book will be useful for those who want to replicate such initiatives in their own communities.



Dr. Badiul Alam Majmudar
Country Director,
The Hunger Project, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION



Global Citizenship - the Youth Connection: Tales From Activists, Tools For Practitioners has been produced for use by NGOs, community organisations and development practitioners, as well as youth and social workers with an interest in teaching and learning more about youth activism, and social action projects. It has been designed as a practical handbook, featuring real case studies from four countries, and a range of exercises for readers to use with the young people they work with.

The inspiration for the publication came from an international symposium, hosted by the British Council in Islamabad in January 2011. *Youth in Action for Global Change* brought together a wide range of young people from across South Asia and the UK to discuss their experiences of working as community activists. The group produced the following manifesto for change:

"We are unique, yet have common interests
We believe in shared humanity and valuing diversity
We want to be part of the decision making process
We should consider the long term impact of our actions
We will stand together for change and will empower others and ourselves"

The British Council believes one of the main ways it can help young activists deliver on this ambition lies in helping them share their experiences and inspiration with others. We have therefore identified a group of young people, and the facilitators and organisations they have worked with as part of Active Citizens, the organisation's global programme for youth leadership and community engagement. These inspirational people have formed the nucleus of this handbook.

Global Citizenship - the Youth Connection: Tales From Activists, Tools For Practitioners has been structured around the learning journey that participants in Active Citizens follow during their induction to the programme. It is divided into four main parts, each of which focuses on one of the four main steps of the journey.

1. Understanding Yourself: This section includes two case studies from the UK and Pakistan with a focus on identity and culture respectively.
2. Sharing & Learning With Others: This section includes two case studies from the UK and Pakistan with a focus on intercultural dialogue and encouraging new viewpoints respectively.
3. Understanding Our Place in Society & the World: This section includes two case studies from Pakistan and Bangladesh with a focus on citizen rights and responsibilities and advocacy respectively.
4. Social Action Projects: This section includes real case studies from Bangladesh and India with a focus on project leadership and engaging with decision makers respectively.

Each case study is supplemented by a series of short commentaries on key learning points from the featured story. These have been contributed by experts with a long standing academic or practical interest in social activism, ranging from Alex Wilks, Director of Campaigns at Avaaz, the online campaign group, to Dr. Adil Najam of Lahore University Management School (LUMS).

We encourage you to see this handbook as a resource, rather than a reference, and as a source of inspiration for your work.

MODULE ONE:

UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF

ONE: UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY 3-6
Knowing Me, Knowing You

TWO: UNDERSTANDING CULTURE 7-10
The Power of Plurality

KNOWING ME, KNOWING YOU

For the past five years Tanveer has worked with ADAB, a community organisation based in the north of England, on developing community cohesion, fulfilling his personal ambition to give something back to his community. “I grew up here, and I’ve seen lots of changes, and challenges. There are so many people that services just aren’t reaching. What ADAB does is to try and work with some of those hard to reach groups, on issues like unemployment or lack of education.”

Tanveer is passionate about getting different sections of the community to talk to one other, focusing on the things that they have in common, rather than what makes them different. He believes that getting groups of people together who previously had no interaction often makes a real difference to the way they think about their neighbours: “It’s about who you are as a person, and knowing how you can get involved. It creates confidence, and helps people see that they can start working together.

They are more open, more accepting - and it gets them thinking about their own identity.”

The Active Citizens programme has played a major part in the development of ADAB’s work, and Tanveer still uses many of the programme’s core concepts and activities, such as the material on democracy and interaction, in his own workshops with the local community. “Active Citizens gave me so many ideas about how I could work with people back home. And I have seen the huge difference that getting

“It’s about who you are as a person, and knowing how you can get involved.”

"Young people from the black and minority ethnic community have learned that other groups... are experiencing the same levels of deprivation... and they are now working together to do something about it."

people to think about their own identity can make, how it can encourage them to interact with others. You can see what Active Citizens has done for our participants: it has achieved so much more than we originally envisaged."

Getting involved in Active Citizens has also had a profound effect on Tanveer himself. "I'm a British Muslim, and I had no idea really about the variety of cultures that exist in Pakistan. But when I visited Azad Kashmir with Active Citizens, it completely changed my understanding. I learned a lot about myself as a result, that you can work together no matter what background you come from. And, I have friends now - good friends - that I would never have interacted with before."

The workshops that ADAB runs sometimes have a profound effect on deeply embedded attitudes. Tanveer recalls one session in particular: "We got people talking, and created a safe space for them to say what they needed to about the way they felt. One participant came up to me at the end of a session, and told me he'd learned more in the past two hours than he had in his entire life. This guy was over 50, and he'd never before spent time with some of the people who had lived in the same neighbourhood as him for more than three decades. He'd never even met anyone from the black and minority ethnic community before the workshop." Two years on from their involvement in Active Citizens, ADAB is finding that people from different communities are increasingly coming together to solve collaboratively some of the problems in their neighbourhoods. "Young people from the black and minority ethnic community have learned that other groups, such as single parent families, are experiencing the same levels of deprivation that they face, and they are now working together to do something about it. Changing people's attitudes and behaviours was tough, but it happened. Everyone wanted to see it work."

COMMENTARY

Radha Nair

Director, Active Citizens & Global Xchange, British Council

Understanding identity has such a vital role to play in everybody's lives, especially in a digital world where national borders are no longer barriers to communication. I think young people today are developing a sense of global identity far earlier than they used to, and in an increasingly interdependent world this should be encouraged. By helping people unpack their different identities, Tanveer has been able to show the people he works with that they have more in common with different ethnic or social groups in their community than they perhaps realised. Understanding what makes up your own identity is important, because it enables you to empathise with others, and this is made easier by working through face to face meetings and community projects like those organised by ADAB. Going through life with the opinion that one single identity defines you can be dangerous, and make you resistant to engage with anybody different. Thankfully, Tanveer's work is showing people the benefits understanding identity can bring.

Meenu Venkateswaran

Director, Pravah

People are starting to realise that they have many different identities, and that they can have a lot in common with someone who appears to be very different from them. This is something we often talk about with the young people who we work with at Pravah. We encourage them to think about how they can negotiate and move beyond given identities like caste, class, gender or ethnicity, and how their friendships cross these artificial 'borders'. Some programmes only think about the tip of the iceberg. It's easy to have a superficial dialogue. To reach a much deeper level, participants must begin by exploring their identity and examining their own values and assumptions. Once you understand yourself, then you can begin to understand others, and ADAB seems to have got this balance just right. Direct dialogue is also important because, while the internet has lots of positives, it doesn't give you that immediacy that comes from meeting someone face to face. Getting different groups together, in the way that ADAB does, is vital in building this understanding.

Andy Thornton

CEO, Citizenship Foundation

The balance between people's given identities, such as ethnicity or family, and the identity they choose or construct for themselves has been changing over the past thirty or forty years - partly because we're exposed to so many influences from around the world. People identify with multiple personal and cultural options which don't always fit someone else's presumptions and may even look inconsistent. Projects like Tanveer's have a major role to play in allowing people to get beyond stereotypes and prejudice. Part of the power of what he does is that it creates face to face contact. That's very different from using the internet. Actually meeting people from different groups or cultures can have an immediately reassuring effect, and help us make sense of what we see as a confusing and alienating difference. Coming face to face with difference triggers change in all of us - one encounter at a time. It's like ripples in a pond, spreading out and affecting more people from a simple first drop, and the Active Citizens programme creates a safe environment for that to happen.

GETTING STARTED

Now you've read about Tanveer's experience of working with young people to help them understand their own identity as a way of understanding other points of view, try to answer these questions about your own situation, either on your own, or in a group:

1. Many of the people that Tanveer has worked with have identified common issues with social groups in their town that they did not previously mix with. Can you think of examples of problems or priorities that are shared by separate groups in your home city, town or village?

2. How common is it for people from different ethnic, religious or other groups in your home country, province or town to spend time with one another? If there are some groups that don't mix with other types of people, why do you think that is?

Organise participants into different groups or roles according to a range of characteristics such as ethnicity, nationality, faith, or gender. Encourage the group to talk about what they felt when they were assigned to each role.

Next, tell the group that they are to imagine being passengers on a plane that is about to crash. Assign members of the group to a range of specific roles, for example: a young doctor, a Christian priest, a Muslim imam, an older man who is HIV positive, a Baloch tribal chief, or a Pashtun business man. The group should also include four 'ordinary' men and women.

Ask participants to discuss who they would choose to save (they can only choose seven passengers), before putting their collective decision to a panel of executives that has final approval. As part of this discussion, you should encourage the group to explore the reasons behind their choices, and how this relates to their sense of identity.

THE POWER OF PLURALITY

Living and working in Balochistan has made Najeeba Syed passionate about offering young people opportunities to test their attitudes to cultural difference. When she first got involved as a facilitator at the College for Youth Activism and Development in Quetta, Najeeba found that diversity had gone from being an accepted part of life in the city to being a point of conflict. Ethnic tensions were running high and young people were caught in the middle. “Things were getting worse day by day. Young people were becoming very vulnerable to extremist groups - and they were starting to believe the things they were being told.”

CYAAD is one of the British Council’s partners for the Active Citizens programme in Pakistan, and Najeeba has worked with many young people over the last few years. She always puts a strong emphasis on the importance of understanding culture as part of the learning journey that shapes the training.

Najeeba remembers in particular one young man who talked about his plans to carry out a suicide bombing in Afghanistan during a workshop at the College. Over time and with exposure to different views about cultural plurality, his views on religious and ethnic divides began to soften: “He was so hard to talk to in the beginning - so rigid in his beliefs and his views. But, as the workshop went on, he gradually started to open up and re-examine his way of thinking. He realised that he had been misinterpreting what his religion told him. Now, a couple of years later, he has identified other young people who could benefit from the training. We still hear from him - now he is working for his community, instead of against it.”

One exercise Najeeba often uses is to ask a group to divide themselves up according to ethnicity, then according to religion, language and gender. “They are all moving around the room, swapping between the different groups - and they start

“Young people need to celebrate diversity instead of making it a point of conflict.”

"There has been a big impact on female empowerment. It has been a slow process, but things are changing."

asking "Why are you dividing us up like this?" This exercise helps them to see that they have more than one identity, and that they aren't as different from other young people as they thought." Najeeba believes it's vital to set participants thinking about their perceptions, and to give them a clear opportunity to discuss their fears. "Some of them say 'If I start talking to a Hindu, if another Muslim sees me, I will be called Hindu,' but by the time they have completed the training, most of them no longer see these differences as a threat."

The training Najeeba provides offers an alternative path from the cultural uniformity that has become so prevalent in cities like Quetta. She finds it's not just the young people themselves who benefit. "They go back and talk to their parents about what they have learned, and we can already see positive effects." This impact on the broader community is also extending to views on the position of women in Balochi society, an issue close to Najeeba's own heart.

A few years ago, when she applied to take part in the British Council's Global Xchange programme, she was the only female short-listed. "A lot of girls - their families won't even let them go to school or work outside the home. When I applied for the programme, lots of my family members told my father not to let me go. I was lucky, though: my grandfather was very supportive. But that was an unusual situation - most girls don't get those opportunities."

Encouragingly, the number of girls applying to CYAAD has risen steadily in recent months, and there are now roughly as many women as men enrolled. "There has been a big impact on female empowerment. It has been a slow process, but things are changing. The parents trust us, they bring their daughters along and they see what we are doing is good, that we're not preaching, so they let them come back. We see it in the workshops too - the girls are more confident, and the boys are more respectful."

COMMENTARY

Dr. Bernadette Dean

Principal, St. Joseph's College for Women

Exposing people to the idea of cultural pluralism is vitally important, especially in very divided societies like Pakistan where people are constantly trying to marginalise other identities. It was really exciting to read about people like Najeeba tackling these issues. We tend to think of culture as something fixed and unchangeable, when in reality it is just something we have invented. When we define others on the basis of how they differ from us, rather than the things we share, we can feel as if we are working against people when we should be working together. Once people start to understand that they cannot be defined by a single identity, they start to realise where the common ground is, where they can work together. Informal networks are particularly important in Pakistan for spreading this message. Change happens slowly this way, as there can be a lot of resistance in local communities, but if you do manage to get your message through it can be doubly powerful and you can start tackling some really entrenched issues, like gender inequality and power relations within families.

Adil Najam

Vice Chancellor, Lahore University of Management Sciences

Identity is not just a question of being comfortable in your own skin - you have to be comfortable in all your skins. In many ways, identity has become less about defining who you are, and more about who you are not. This is why the workshops Najeeba runs are important. They can help counteract the trends of identity isolation, and stop people feeling defensive. People become afraid that cultural pluralism will mean losing their identity or compromising it in some way. Najeeba's project is effective because it is so simple. Take the plane exercise. It recognises people's fears, but equally tries to show them that even though they have more than one identity - say as a Muslim, or a Pakistani, or a student - it doesn't necessarily have to be a problem, or a threat. In fact, it is a strength. And when young people take that message back to their communities, the message can become even more powerful. They're showing others that it really can be done. Change happens when you stop putting up walls, and start building bridges.

Elisha London

UK Country Director, Global Poverty Project

Reading about everything Najeeba has achieved is a powerful reminder that we should respect and learn from the different cultures around us. We often carry with us preconceived ideas about unfamiliar cultures, which have an impact on our attitudes towards people we do not know, almost without our realising it. What Najeeba has been able to do in her workshops is to break through these ideas and teach people about the importance of cultural plurality. Having this understanding is crucial for anybody who wants to make change happen. An activist needs to have a sense of common ground with others. We need to find ways to communicate the message we are campaigning for in a way that others can relate to, without compromising our core message. This is why we have tailored the Global Poverty Project's *1.4 Billion Reasons* presentation, for a range of different audiences. We worked with the fact that not everybody is going to look at a problem in the same way, and we need to respond to different perspectives.

GETTING STARTED

Now you've read about Najeeba's experience of working with groups to help them understand their culture and how it impacts on them and the people around them, try to answer these questions about your own situation, either on your own, or in a group:

1. Is there a dominant culture in your city, town, or village? If there is, try to describe it in a single sentence. If not, try to make a list of the main cultures that co-exist, and the main differences between them.

2. The young man in Najeeba's training decided not to go ahead with the suicide bombing he had been committed to. Why do you think that is? Can you think of a time when you changed your mind about a closely held belief? What were the factors that made you think differently?

Thinking more critically about the culture in which you live, work and study, and those of people around you helps you take better decisions as an Active Citizen. Here is one fun and easy way in which you can work with a group of people to explore the complexity of human culture:

Ask your group to call out their suggestions about different types of culture.

Encourage as many different answers as possible, making suggestions to stimulate more thoughts (for example: "What about different cultures in different parts of the country? Or different groups at school?").

Ask each person to think about what sorts of cultures they are part of, and to write down at least two. Then ask the group to get up and circulate around the room, looking for people who are part of the same kind of culture.

Finish the session with a discussion of who shares what with whom, and the number of different combinations in the room.

MODULE TWO:

SHARING & LEARNING WITH OTHERS

THREE: INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE 12-15
Strengthening Societies

FOUR: ENCOURAGING NEW VIEWPOINTS 16-19
Talking Shop

STRENGTHENING SOCIETIES

James Edleston of the British Youth Council has spent much of the last few years working in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal, training facilitators to work with young activists. He believes strongly that building trust and understanding, and particularly the skills that people need for successful intercultural dialogue, is a vital aspect of the Active Citizens programme. “This project is about something more profound than simply fostering individuals as leaders. It’s about coming together and working collectively to build stronger societies. For this reason Active Citizens has had two distinct aims from the very start - building trust and understanding, alongside encouraging community action.”

According to James, fostering intercultural dialogue can be a complex process, and is not without risks. “Dialogue can be a uncomfortable thing, and there’s also the danger that it can be superficial. You can’t just sit people in a circle and expect them to talk. The real challenge for intercultural dialogue is in providing participants with the right tools for the job.” He finds that people taking part in Active Citizens workshops are often resistant at the start of the process, sometimes seeing intercultural dialogue as a threat to their own identity and culture.

James believes that too often work on enabling intercultural dialogue is either superficial, or considered too difficult to tackle. “One real challenge is that it is much easier to bring together people who belong to different cultures, but share the same economic status, or are well travelled, or have been to university. But does that really tackle the reasons why we think intercultural dialogue is important. We need to ask ourselves,

“Dialogue can be an uncomfortable thing....You can’t just sit people in a circle and expect them to talk.”

"I have definitely engaged with people with very different perspective from my own during this programme. People who I really respect sometimes have some very challenging views for me."

with which groups can this kind of work make the most difference. And we have to avoid just taking the easy road."

Careful investment in the early stages of the Active Citizens programme to support participants in thinking critically about their own identity, their motivations, and how different groups interact with each other, has really paid off in terms of results, according to James. "Giving sufficient space to discussions about identity, culture and intercultural dialogue in a training course that is very practically orientated can be a challenge. However, it's definitely worthwhile. With Active Citizens we've found that the time we take on intercultural dialogue is one of the reasons why the programme spreads quickly and engages people, and people volunteer a lot of time later on."

In Pakistan in particular, James has seen at first hand how a focus on intercultural dialogue is helping to ease regional tensions, and is starting to change attitudes within some communities, tackling gender inequalities or hostility between different faith groups. "The potential is massive, and many of the things I hear, particularly from the northern provinces and tribal regions in Pakistan, are real success stories. For example, there are examples of families who have been persuaded to let their young girls join the programmes, and even encouraged them to take part. That's something quite new."

The young people he meets at training sessions have told him how intergenerational and gender relations in Pakistan are starting to change, and he sees real potential for young women in particular to start making a difference within their communities. But as James points out, there is still work to do: "The need for dialogue within Pakistan is especially strong. I want the programme to be able to reach more and more people who are then able to learn about each other's beliefs, almost like a movement. It's not a case of us trying to impose values, but helping people talk to each other."

The challenges of intercultural dialogue continue, even after involvement in Active Citizens training. James himself continues to learn new things every time he works with a group of facilitators. "I have definitely engaged with people with very different perspective from my own during this programme. People who I really respect sometimes have some very challenging views for me. So I'd say I've probably learned a lot more than I have shared from the programme!"

COMMENTARY

Thayaparan Tharma
National Coordinator, Peace and Community Action (PCA) Sri Lanka

I agree with much of what James is saying here. Intercultural dialogue is very complex and shouldn't just focus on one area, be that nationality, gender - or faith. To achieve successful intercultural dialogue you must encourage participants to recognise their differences, as well as the things they have in common. People can be quite resistant initially. They cling to their identities. You can't rush people and just throw them together expecting them to talk. Intercultural dialogue takes time, and it's all about creating the right environment for people to share their views, honestly and openly, without fear of judgment. You have to see it as a long-term investment and offer consistent, ongoing support. Faith identity is particularly strong in Sri Lanka. We might spend a month working with a Tamil community, and then another month working separately with a Singhalese community. Only then do we bring them together. With such deep-seated differences, you can't expect change to be quick.

Radha Nair
Director, Active Citizens & Global Xchange, British Council

Intercultural dialogue is of great importance and can prove extremely rewarding but I agree with James that we must make sure it is coordinated thoughtfully. We need to avoid jumping in at the deep end and forcing the issue; we have to show people the value of dialogue first and then give them the skills for it. I realise that people can find intercultural dialogue a challenging topic, and looking back at human civilisation and the ways we have developed as a species, it is understandable that these ideas may not occur to us naturally. At the British Council, when we discuss intercultural dialogue with groups we tell people to hold onto their assumptions lightly. This subtle approach encourages people to open up to us as they realise we are not there to force an agenda. Once people are comfortable in sharing their thoughts with other cultures it can open up great channels of communication and encourage whole cultural shifts. There is clear evidence of this in James's story, when he talks about young girls from more traditional families in Northern Pakistan being actively encouraged to attend Active Citizens programmes.

Dr. Bernadette Dean
Principal, St. Joseph's College for Women

Of course it's important to get people talking in this way, and there has been a lot of success in this area. However, I don't believe it's really necessary to explore issues around identity, culture and intercultural dialogue before embarking on a social action project. In my experience, these questions tend to emerge naturally as groups start working together. There's certainly no set formula. In many ways, the term intercultural dialogue can seem a bit artificial, and it's not normally an approach I would use. Groups come together because an issue - whether it be climate change, or domestic violence - is important to them, and needs tackling. When people share a common interest in an issue, you will automatically get a very mixed group. During the course of the project, they start talking about identity, about what inspires them. As they work together, they start to build relationships and to understand their own and each others' identities a bit better. The impact is much longer-lasting. It's very different from some of the interfaith work I have been involved in - there, people are polite to each other for a few hours, but when they leave they go back to their own world. Nothing has changed.

GETTING STARTED

Now you've read about James's experience of working with groups to help them understand what intercultural dialogue is, and why it's important, try to answer these questions about your own situation, either on your own, or in a group:

1. James believes it's important for people to act collectively across cultures, rather than simply relying on strong leaders. Do you agree with him? What do you think are the main strengths and weaknesses of acting as part of an intercultural group?

2. Is it easy or difficult for you to talk to people from different cultures than your own? What do you think are the main obstacles to intercultural dialogue?

Taking part in intercultural dialogue is a cornerstone of becoming an Active Citizen. Here is one fun and easy way in which you can work with a group of people to think about what intercultural dialogue means, and why it's important:

Ask your group to think about the sorts of qualities someone would need to engage with a person from a different culture, and write them down on flashcards, which they should then place on the floor.

Go through the responses with the group and ask them to sort them into responses that are exactly the same (for example, all the responses that say 'common language' or 'tolerance'), and then those which fit together (this should result in approximately three piles, grouping together skills, knowledge and attitudes).

Lead the group in a discussion about the importance of each category for successful intercultural dialogue. Conclude with an exploration of the possible reasons why the attitudes category is significantly larger than the other two.

TALKING SHOP

"You can't change how someone thinks overnight, but you can get them to start questioning their views."

Momal Mushtaq had always dreamed about setting up her own blog, but never really worked out what it would be about. Then in 2010, her involvement in the Active Citizens programme came together with her strong belief that Pakistan needs to unite to celebrate its ethnic and religious diversity, rather than seeing it as a source of division and violence. "Before, I didn't have enough motivation or courage to implement my ideas. But working through the learning journey helped me focus on what I wanted."

Realising that people need encouragement and a safe space in order to express their views and debate effectively with one another, Momal chose to establish the *Voice of Youth* as her social action project for Active Citizens 2010. Since then, she hasn't looked back. The site now has a readership of over 20,000 across the world, with almost 400 active contributors. "The fact that we now have more than 300 people who are able to say whatever they want is amazing to me." In 2011, Momal's achievements were recognised at the World Summit Youth Awards and the British Council's National Social Action Project Awards.

Voice of Youth has allowed young people from across Pakistan to openly discuss topics that would be taboo on a face to face basis. The blog has a philosophy of encouraging open dialogue on a wide range of issues, which Momal argues previously went unnoticed in Pakistan, including HIV/AIDS, child abuse, sexual health, and gender violence. For example, as part of 2011's sixteen days of activism against gender violence, *Voice of Youth* started the 'Youth Diaries' where young people were encouraged to post their own experiences. Momal found the site was flooded with responses.

Similarly, the murder in March 2011 of Pakistan's federal minister for minority affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, prompted a lively debate on *Voice of Youth*. As Momal points out, the 'normal' response in Pakistan would have been

"We are creating a non-violent platform where people can meet, and discuss, and realise that unity is not about finding something common between us. It is about accepting our differences."

to argue that the killing was justified - and indeed, some contributors voiced this view online. However, many others were against the killing, and were initially afraid of expressing their views openly even online. Eventually, one contributor pointed out that the murdered minister should have been free to express his views, and Momal found that opened the floodgates: "Once someone finds their voice, it gives others the courage to say what they wanted to say. We started it, and others joined in."

Momal believes strongly in the power of the internet to bring people together, and to help spread a message of diversity. "We are creating a non-violent platform where people can meet, and discuss, and realise that unity is not about finding something common between us. It is about accepting our differences." She believes her own mixed heritage, as a Balochi with a Sindhi name, living in South Punjab, has been instrumental in her focus on breaking down barriers between the different communities within her home country: "I believe I have a little bit of all the provinces in Pakistan. Yes, I feel I can truly call myself a Pakistani."

Momal also sees plenty of potential for tackling some of the world's misconceptions and myths about Pakistan through her blog. While *Voice of Youth* was originally aimed at young Pakistanis, they were quickly joined by contributors from India, Nigeria and the Philippines, who are now regulars. "We realised that maybe we could somehow connect these people to the youth of Pakistan and create a society where people accept each other for their differences. People need to have a better understanding of what Pakistan is actually like."

Momal's excitement when she talks about her future plans for her blog, and the way in which social media could transform people's ability to share, and accept one another's points of view, is infectious. At the moment only a small proportion of Pakistanis have internet access at home, and of these approximately 20 million users, she estimates that only 10% know how to blog. To help spread the word, and the tools, Momal is currently planning a webinar section on *Voice of Youth*, with sessions on how to use social media to raise awareness. "I would love to teach people how to use the internet constructively, to get their message across. Think of what we could achieve then."

COMMENTARY

Meenu Venkateswaran
Director, Pravah

There are many advantages to using online forums like Momal's. The anonymity of the internet encourages people to start talking about what are often very contentious issues, such as domestic violence or sexual abuse. It can also give previously excluded groups, like women who come from very conservative backgrounds, new opportunities to participate in debates. That can be incredibly liberating. There are limitations too, of course. Anonymity means people can choose to stay in their comfort zone, and eventually you have to ask how much internet activism actually changes things. To achieve truly transformational change, you need to combine the online work with some sort of action in the real world. It is also vital that any online space you create for these discussions is totally non-judgmental. That is the only way to build the trust needed to get people talking. This means you need careful facilitation to encourage everyone to feel that they can speak up, and ensure that aggression is not tolerated, and Momal seems to have been successful in creating that culture.

Andy Thornton
CEO, Citizenship Foundation

Young people are often the ones who ask life's difficult questions like 'Why are things this way?' They are often unsettling; often challenging the power-brokers. Momal has recognised this, and her blog is naturally supporting young people in asking those questions. Add to this the potential of the internet to turn fresh connections into new networks, and the project becomes doubly powerful. People are able to recognise forums like this one as a safe space to exchange views, partly because of the initial anonymity they offer. They know that they can stick their neck out and say 'This is what I believe', and that they won't get shot down in flames. If one person speaks up, then it gives others the courage to join in. Then people give other people the freedom to speak about what they care about, they listen and they build up something new. Discovering other young people with similar questions and experiences can be so powerful, sparking off the small changes that form the basis of all new movements. This can be creative - not just subversive. Positive people talking and exchanging ideas will lead to positive outcomes.

Alex Wilks
Director of Campaigns, Avaaz

Often it takes a few people to be bold enough to break long-standing taboos and say what they really think. The great thing about the internet is that it builds people's confidence and gives them a sense of safety when discussing potentially contentious issues with strangers. Now, with access to computers or even mobile phones, everybody has an opportunity to make a difference. You don't have to go along to a meeting or a rally any more - and there's a certain freedom in that. We have found at Avaaz that when people begin to recognise a community as their own, they start to take action and contribute comments. They grab hold of an idea and move it forward, rather than just contributing passively. Women in Pakistan have often not been able to speak up, so it's fantastic that there are projects like Momal's giving them an opportunity to do just that. Of course, online communities like this one need skilful facilitation, so that people aren't excluded simply because they hold a different viewpoint or speak a different language. But there is huge potential for change here.

GETTING STARTED

Now you've read about how Momal was inspired by Active Citizens to set up her own blog to encourage young people to debate freely with one another, try to answer these questions about your own situation, either on your own, or in a group:

1. What are the topics that it is difficult for people in your city, town or village to discuss freely? Why do you think these things are taboo where you come from?

2. Momal is excited about the potential that Voice of Youth has to get people to think differently about Pakistan. In what ways is your country, province, or home city, town or village misunderstood by other people? How does that make you feel?

Seeing things in new ways is crucial to helping Active Citizens identify the priorities for social action in their area. Here is one fun and easy way in which you can work with a group of people to stimulate new viewpoints:

Divide people up into groups of five. Ask each person in each group to tell a short story (5 minutes) about something real that happened to them that made them feel angry, ashamed or sad.

Once all the stories have been shared, ask groups to list out the things from each story that 'match' with other people's experience and those that are different.

Ask groups to spend time focusing on the things that are 'different', asking the story tellers about why a certain thing made them angry, ashamed or sad.

Ask groups to summarise back to the rest of the room their discoveries, focusing on what they have learned from one another's stories.

MODULE THREE:

UNDERSTANDING OUR PLACE IN SOCIETY & THE WORLD

FIVE: RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES 21-24
Giving Something Back

SIX: THE ROLE OF ADVOCACY 25-28
Calling the Shots

GIVING SOMETHING BACK

Throughout 2011, Pakistanis experienced the second sharp spike in food prices in four years. For many of the country's very poor, the result has been catastrophic, with even basic items priced increasingly outside their reach. Adeel Kapasi, a student from Karachi, has committed himself to tackling the problem, believing that it is his and his fellow citizens' collective responsibility to ensure that everyone in the city gets enough to eat.

Adeel started to think seriously about the rights of Karachi's poor when he took part in an Active Citizens workshop in 2010. "The training made me realise that it was not enough to say that it's wrong that there is a whole chain of people out there profiting from the poor. We all have a responsibility as citizens to ensure there is equality in our society." Adeel had always worked in his family's businesses, and decided as a result of his training to put his understanding of buying and selling commodities to good use, helping families access food and basic necessities at an affordable price.

He worked out that if he bought goods like flour, rice, pulses and oil direct from the factories and wholesalers at a heavily discounted rates, he could sell them to the poor in his community on a not for profit basis, cutting out middlemen to keep prices affordable. Within months he and his friends had set up the Al Qaim Resource Centre in Karachi, with the aim of helping some of the poorest families in the city. Originally targeting just 20 families, demand for AQRC's services quickly spiralled and within two months they had more than 50 families on their books, putting real pressure on Adeel's funds, which came mainly from friends, family and colleagues.

"I know we can't change the whole system in one night. But that shouldn't stop us. We need to think what we

"It is not enough to say that it's wrong that there is a whole chain of people out there profiting from the poor. We all have a responsibility as citizens to ensure there is equality in our society."

"Every Sunday morning, there is a call for local volunteers to go and collect supplies, and then take them out to the community. The vehicles are never empty."

can do to support people who are suffering." Adeel has used this philosophy to tackle problems like managing rising demand among poor families for reasonably priced food. Today, Al Qaim operates in another six neighbourhoods in Karachi, and reaches an estimated 9,000 people. While the centres still rely heavily on the generosity of local people, there have also been some larger donations, such as the 400,000 rupees given by a local businessman during Ramadan. "We've been able to harness the Islamic tradition of giving - *zakat* - to keep the project going."

Building a motivated team of volunteers prepared to go out into communities every week was initially difficult, but news of the project travelled fast. Adeel is proud that his friends and neighbours are so responsive to their responsibilities to other citizens: "Now we have one of the strongest teams possible. They know how important it is to do this for people. Every Sunday morning, there is a call for local volunteers to go and collect supplies, and then take them out to the community. The vehicles are never empty."

Adeel's passion for his project is inspiring, and he is constantly searching for ways to expand AQRC's work even further. His ambitions stretch far beyond the thousands of people he currently works to help, to the whole city of Karachi, and then to the poor of the whole of Pakistan. "Sure, it's a lot - but we have to target even more people. Our vision is to make a more just world, and to eliminate suffering - and not just in Pakistan."

Adeel also has ambitions beyond providing basic nutrition to his neighbours at a price they can afford. "We're not stopping here. We already have the trust of 1,500 families, and we can use this as a way to do so much more. Take education, for example. We want to work with communities to improve the quality of education, and help them make a better future for themselves. We can't do it all for them, but we can help."

Health is another basic right which Adeel also sees being denied to many ordinary Pakistanis; "When you cannot afford food, how can you afford health?" He already has plans to educate communities about health issues, including the risks of drinking tap water, and even to set up health stalls staffed by volunteer doctors. "Our vision is not just for Pakistan, but the whole world. This is a strong idea - it could work anywhere. There's so much we could do."

COMMENTARY

Andy Thornton

CEO, Citizenship Foundation

Stories like this have so much to teach us about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. It's breathtaking, really, a whole other way of doing welfare. One small group in the community is sharing the benefits that life has brought them through the opportunities and skills they have been given: and discovering how rewarding that is. Al Qaim is doing more than just meeting poorer communities' basic needs, though. It is opening their vision for the future, bringing an opportunity to re-imagine their lives, because they are no longer struggling to simply survive. It also suggests that there is room for different types of activism: responding to basic needs, like Adeel, but also asking questions about why people are caught in a poverty trap? Of course you need campaigners to challenge those in power. But equally, until somebody like Adeel acts, even on a small scale, and shows us that something can be done, nothing will ever change. Projects like Al Qaim can prompt other people to act. They have the potential to bring about wider changes, as those who have been successful in life discover what it takes to help those with very little systematically, and then pass the message on to yet more people like themselves.

Elisha London

UK Country Director,
Global Poverty Project

Adeel's dedication to his community is remarkable. Stepping in to help where you are able to is not only commendable, but can save lives, especially in countries where communities cannot rely on a welfare state. Although direct action of the kind he has taken is not going to bring about immediate change at an advocacy level, it is the perfect first step towards doing something about this, and, reading about Adeel's ambitions, he is clearly thinking about how to take his work further. The idea of individuals recognising that they have responsibilities to their community and volunteering their time is often less well developed in my home country than in places like Pakistan, although ideas like the UK's 'big society' are beginning to show people some of the benefits that thinking in this way can bring. It takes individuals like Adeel, who have the courage of their convictions, to really address the challenges facing communities every day. In this case Adeel had access to resources that helped him start the Al Qaim Resource Centre, but even people without these advantages can take inspiration from his direct style of activism.

Adil Najam

Vice Chancellor, Lahore University
of Management Sciences

There is a powerful message here. It's not just about getting food to people - that could be done more easily or cheaply. The message I got was much more about the impact of activism on activists themselves. Activism gives people a sense of collectivity and builds bridges between them. That's especially important in a divided society like Pakistan. For me, this story demonstrates a clear understanding of what active citizenship involves, and the key balance of rights and responsibilities at the heart of that social transaction. Yes, we need campaigners too, but projects that focus on providing direct assistance are just as important. There is space for *all* types of activism to bring about change - not just giving people the fish but also getting people to catch the fish themselves. You have to match the act to the actor. We shouldn't shy away from celebrating smaller acts of giving by individual actors, because a hundred small things together build the major change. Besides, you might only take a small step to begin with, but your next move will be bigger.

GETTING STARTED

Now you've read about how Adeel came to set up the Al Qaim Resource Centre with the aim of ensuring poor people in Karachi can afford to eat, try to answer these questions about your own situation, either on your own, or in a group:

1. What do you believe are the main rights a citizen should expect - and do people where you live get all of these? How about the main responsibilities that a citizen has to others?

2. Adeel used his understanding of how the wholesale to retail chain works to make sure that at least some poor people in Karachi do not starve. What kind of talents and knowledge do you have that you could use to help people around you?

Thinking about your rights and responsibilities as a citizen, and those of people around you, is a great way to identify the kind of social action you could get involved in. Here is one fun and easy way in which you can work with a group of people to think about this topic:

Divide people up into groups of five. Ask each group to imagine they have been granted three wishes by a genie. The only conditions are that their wishes must:

1. Benefit as many people in their locality as possible
2. Not require people to change their nature or beliefs
3. Not involve making people richer

Ask each group to agree a list of three wishes.

Next, ask each group to choose the one of their three wishes that they believe they have most power to fulfil using their own abilities and work, help from others, the support of sympathetic people in power, and anyone else they can persuade to get involved. Ask each group to devise a realistic story about how they make the wish come true, and share it with the other groups.

CALLING THE SHOTS

The Hunger Project has been working with the British Council to implement Active Citizens in Bangladesh since 2009. Poroma Kanya believes the success of the partnership lies in the strong overlap between the programme's emphasis on local social advocacy and action, and the Hunger Project's own philosophy of equipping and encouraging ordinary people to figure out, and tackle, the issues facing their home towns and villages. "Empowering individuals to solve problems in their own communities is crucial. And a central part of that is about giving people the skills and confidence they need to speak up."

Active Citizens in Bangladesh has focused on a number of issues, including both education and nutrition rights. One of the most successful areas of work has been a range of projects on early marriage, designed and carried out by young people in their local communities. "Early marriage is still quite prevalent in Bangladesh, particularly among girls, many of whom are also denied their right to education. This is an especially big problem in rural areas."

Poroma has worked with several facilitators to help Active Citizens in Bangladesh work out the best strategies for advocating for an end to early marriage. "Understanding how to communicate effectively is a key step towards successful advocacy. We have seen many young people from small towns and villages taking part in the training grow in confidence as they learn how to develop their arguments, and win the support of people with influence. So many of the people we work with are surprised that they have it in them to speak up on an issue that they feel passionately about."

In addition to learning a range of communication and persuasion skills, Poroma believes it is crucial for all activists to think carefully about the people they choose to advocate with on early marriage, like any culturally sensitive issue. "Weighing up different

"So many of the people we work with are surprised that they have it in them to speak up on an issue that they feel passionately about."

"Empowering individuals to solve problems in their own communities is crucial. And a central part of that is about giving people the skills and confidence they need to speak up."

strategies and choosing the right path is the difference between success and failure. With some groups, including the families of children at risk of early marriage, advocacy may not be the best tool. In fact we have found that community campaigning, using tools like posters, rallies and courtyard meetings is much more effective."

Active Citizens in Bangladesh working on early marriage have found that advocacy on this issue is most successful when it is used with audiences with the power to act in the community. "People organising social action projects have found that the best approach is to advocate with local authorities, and to harness their power to prevent the marriage of children. Some groups have had considerable success in their community by talking to the police, the chair or commissioner of the local council, or even to head teachers. All these authority figures have the influence to intercede with families where children are at risk."

The Hunger Project is finding that the successes of many of the people it has trained in advocating for change on this, as well as other topics, is creating an appetite for more training and development. "Over the four days of the training we offer, it is almost shocking to see the way some people are able to transform themselves into confident, passionate activists, ready to communicate clearly and cogently on the things that matter most to them. And once they are out working in their towns and villages, they inspire other people too. They see that you don't need lots of money or other resources to make things happen, as long as you are a powerful advocate for change."

COMMENTARY

Alex Wilks
Director of Campaigns, Avaaz

Projects like this can really help participants channel their frustrations into something more constructive. When you get people together to talk about the issues that matter to them, it's almost as though you can see a light bulb coming on inside their heads as they realise that they can actually do something about it. It's something I've seen many times when I've been facilitating workshops, and it can be electrifying. People become really bold in their demands. Yes, you need a clear strategy in place. You have to work out who your audience is, get yourself heard, and then make sure your message lands. Think about who you should be talking to, who the people are that will actually take the decisions - what they care about and what will influence them. Couch your message in the right sort of language. The Hunger Project seems to be successful here - they are thoughtful and targeted in their advocacy, rather than just crying out in the wilderness.

Thayaparan Tharma
National Coordinator, Peace and Community Action (PCA) Sri Lanka

The most important thing about advocacy is that you have to equip people with the skills they need to speak up about the issues that are important to them. There's no point in speaking on their behalf; that is actually disempowering. Building capacity within local communities is the approach we have always tried to adopt. We've been working like this with communities in the south of Sri Lanka for the past five years, encouraging them to take ownership of the problems they face. Originally fishermen, the community was relocated as a result of the war, to a mountainous area with no access to water or electricity - meaning people couldn't work, or live comfortably. Their anger at the government initially spilled over into aggression. But we helped give them the tools they needed, to talk to government officials, and some of their issues have now been resolved. The community told us later how our work had helped them realise the power of communication and built up their self-confidence. All this takes time, consistency and ongoing investment; we worked with this group for over a year. You also have to have a clear strategy because, without it, you'll achieve nothing.

Meenu Venkateswaran
Director, Pravah

It's really inspiring to see projects like this that encourage local people to speak up about the issues affecting them. Like Poroma's participants, the young people we work with are often surprised that their voice can make a difference. People aren't used to hearing them talk about issues like domestic violence, and they aren't used to being listened to. For advocacy to be effective, you have to work out what the dominant discourse is on that particular issue, and who the key stakeholders are. You also have to bring solutions to the table. This is why the recent campaign in India on the right to education was so successful. People had been talking about issues like illiteracy and the dropout rate for a long time without getting anywhere. But because the campaign offered alternatives by lobbying for an act giving children the right to free and compulsory education, the politicians were more willing to listen. It's also important to link learning to experience. You can't just limit yourself to giving people the skills they need, you have to show them how to use them so they can really start making a difference.

GETTING STARTED

Now you've read about how Poroma has observed Active Citizens in Bangladesh working together to advocate on the issue of early marriage, try to answer these questions about your own situation, either on your own, or in a group:

1. Think of a situation when you really wanted something (anything). Can you make a list of the approaches you used and the different people you had to convince to get what you wanted?

2. Why do you think Poroma believes it is important to advocate with authorities, rather than directly with families on the issue of early marriage? Do you agree with her? Why?

Advocacy is a core skill for Active Citizens seeking to make a difference through their social action projects. Here is one fun and easy way in which you can work with a group of people to work out exactly what advocacy involves:

Explain to your group that they will be planning a live concert to raise awareness for an issue. You should choose this in advance, picking something that will be of interest (for example HIV/AIDS awareness, or ensuring that parents send their children to school).

Tell them that there will be a budget of just £100 (or equivalent) available to them to put on the event (including venue, performers, etc), and that their target is to attract 500 people, and as much publicity as possible. Encourage them to think big.

Give the group an hour to come up with a clear, costed plan of action. Discuss with them as they work things they should consider, from encouraging performers to give their time for free, to publicising the event online.

MODULE FOUR:

SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS

SEVEN: THE ART OF LEADERSHIP 30-33
Contagious Conviction

EIGHT: ENGAGING DECISION MAKERS 34-37
Collaborative Campaigning

CONTAGIOUS CONVICTION

Speaking to Ashraful Islam, it is easy to understand how this young social work student from the Mymensingh district of Dhaka has already managed to achieve so much. His deep conviction that universal education is vital to Bangladesh's future is contagious, a quality that he now uses every day to benefit poor people in his local community.

Rather than politely waiting to be asked about his work, Ashraful seizes every opportunity he can to expose the extent of adult illiteracy in Mymensingh, and what this means for his neighbours and their families. He points out that a quarter of all men, and a third of women in the district have no education at all - and that another third of the population dropped out of primary school, mainly as a result of poverty. "If you can't read and write, then it's almost impossible to earn much money in today's world. We are determined over time to make sure that every man, woman, girl and boy in Bangladesh learns to read and write. Literacy is the cornerstone of every successful nation."

But Ashraful's passion for education reaches far beyond talking about the issues faced by poor people with no education, or even his vision for the future of Mymensingh and ultimately the whole of Bangladesh. In just a couple of years, he and a group of other students have established a flourishing adult education college, as well as a public library. Both are located at Ananda Mohan College, where he himself is studying. "I've discovered that if you really believe in something, it is actually simple to inspire other people and get them involved. I have lost count of the number who have helped us so far. And I am confident there will be many others in the future."

While gaining the active support of his college solved the important problem of premises, Ashraful's leadership skills have also brought him and his team material assistance and valuable publicity from a national newspaper. He says he's learned to make the most of every opportunity: "We got the chance to meet the founder of one of Bangladesh's leading papers, and I thought we

"When I see what happens to the people we have been able to help, I know I am doing the right thing."

"Now I understand that conviction and boldness are the keys to making things happen....I am convinced that we will be able to overcome any obstacle."

might get an article written about what we are doing. But he was so interested in our projects that he's given us books for the school, newspapers for the library, and made a cash donation too."

In fact, Ashraful's successful social action project has been made possible exclusively though donations and in kind support. He and his team did not receive either a grant or seed funding as part of their involvement in Active Citizens, and in his view, the programme offered him something far more valuable than money, which he has learned he can raise from the community himself, either as cash, or in kind support. "The leadership training that the British Council organised changed me forever. Before I would not have been confident enough to go out and ask people to help me make a difference, however much I cared about education."

"But now I understand that conviction and boldness are the keys to making things happen. We are only a small group at the moment, but I am convinced that we will be able to overcome any obstacle and continue changing people's lives and job prospects across Bangladesh." Nor is Ashraful daunted by the size of the challenge he has set himself: "This is what I want to do with my life, to make a positive difference to the people and place where I come from. When I see what happens to the people we have been able to help, I know I am doing the right thing."

Ashraful explains that in just 45 days it is possible to transform students' literacy, and with it, their ambitions and prospects for a better life. Jainundin, a former rickshaw puller from Ragabhpur village, and one of the first graduates of the new college, is a shining example. His story is typical of many poor people. Forced to take any work he could find to support his family after his father died, school was not a possibility. Jainundin struggled at first to read and write, but today he is not only literate, but also has a job as a computer operator, with the result that his own and his family's economic prospects have been transformed.

"People like Jainundin are my inspiration," says Ashraful. "They take what little we can offer them, and they make the most of it. A single opportunity is all that most of us need, and it is my job to make sure that the people of Mymensingh receive that."

COMMENTARY

Elisha London

UK Country Director,
Global Poverty Project

The ability to turn ideas into action is a sure sign of a great leader. Ashraful has more than shown he is capable of this through the transforming work he has done in adult education in Mymensingh. Having an idea is just the first step towards a solution; the hard part is putting your idea into action, and showing people around you that it is working. Getting your message across takes perseverance, but as soon as one person sees the benefits, others will quickly follow suit. Some of the most successful initiatives I have run seemed impossible to begin with. But if you have a good idea, and can convince one person of its power, then often this is enough to begin the momentum that brings others on board. 'Campaignable' ideas like Ashraful's explanation that 45 days is all it takes to transform someone's literacy, and therefore their economic prospects are often extremely effective, although it's important that there is clear evidence to back them up. The real art of leadership is about showing that a campaign is achievable, and being able to communicate this to as many people as possible, two qualities that Ashraful clearly has in abundance.

Dr. Bernadette Dean

Principal, St. Joseph's College
for Women

It's important to have the same kind of passion as Ashraful in order to become a successful leader. But leadership is about much more than passion. To be a successful leader, you also have to be able to envision the possibilities, and then do everything possible to translate them into reality. You have to be prepared to take risks, and back up your ideas with action. I've seen it many times with young people that I work with: they start a project with lots of enthusiasm, but that isn't enough to carry them through. You have to support them to develop their ideas, and make sure that those ideas are deliverable. I was surprised by just how successful Ashraful's project has been. If people see projects enjoying that much success, it can help trigger their own involvement. And informal networks can help spread the word here. If a community sees one of their own benefiting as in Ashraful's project, they may well think "Well, if he can do it, then so can I."

Thayaparan Tharma

National Coordinator, Peace and
Community Action (PCA) Sri Lanka

Of course this sort of conviction is important. However, I think leadership is about much more than simply persuading people to follow you. You don't simply take leadership. It's not a case of walking in front of people, of taking their problems on and tackling them yourself. You should be supporting communities and empowering them to take the lead independently. Ashraful's 45-day theory sounds attractive, and I can see why it has been popular. It's certainly useful to come up with an idea like that at the start of a campaign to gather support. But the same approach wouldn't suit our work with young people in Sri Lanka so well. We spend 15 days with them, starting to develop their understanding. It's never enough. We can never do more than touch on some of the issues they are facing. Developing their advocacy is a continuous learning process, not a one off activity like building a house, or a well. It doesn't fit within a fixed time-frame. All we can do is to give people the skills during the time we work with them - after that, the rest is up to them.

GETTING STARTED

Now you've read about how Ashraful has led a group of people to set up a significant resource for adult learners in Dhaka, try to answer these questions about your own situation, either on your own, or in a group:

1. Ashraful says that he has learned that if you ask people clearly to help you, they usually do. Think of an instance where someone asked you to do something and you followed him or her. What was it about the way they asked that convinced you?

2. Successfully leading a project over time involves spotting opportunities to build on what you've already achieved. How many instances of building new things onto an original idea can you spot in Ashraful's story?

Good project leadership among Active Citizens is crucial to keeping social action going over the long term. Here is one fun and easy way in which you can work with a group of people to try their hand at planning a project:

Divide your group into teams of five. Ask each group to think of a community in their area that they believe has a shared need of some kind (for example, local children, a religious group, or people with a shared problem).

Ask each group to go and carry out research with the community they have identified, to find out:

1. Whether or not the shared need exists
2. How the shared need is currently affecting their lives
3. What they have tried to do about their shared needs
4. What resources they have at their disposal
5. How they feel about the prospect of someone helping them with their shared need

Ask each group to create a short needs assessment as a result of the research, and present it back to the rest of the participants. Finish with a group discussion about findings and next steps.

COLLABORATIVE CAMPAIGNING

Pratham has been working for more than 15 years to improve access to high quality education for poor children across India. Shailendra Sharma, who heads up the NGO's activities in Delhi, explains that it has always adopted a strategy of positive engagement with decision makers. "Our role as citizens is to support government in filling those gaps, rather than trying to introduce a whole new system. You can't go in just pointing the finger, saying 'I know better', because the other side will become defensive and dialogue will break down."

Pratham believes it is especially important to focus on supporting state and federal governments on issues as significant as the work India still has to do to ensure all its children can go to school. While it is easy to protest about the lack of opportunities available for poor girls and boys, Shailendra argues that the true role of activists is much more complex. "You have to ask, can we work together, instead of just seeking to hold someone responsible for our problems."

"The sort of changes we want to see happening can't be brought about by just one individual or organisation. It takes a real collective effort. As an active citizen, you have to identify what your objectives are, what the change is that you want to see, and then understand who the key decision makers are, the people you need to try and work with. You need to take a flexible approach, rather than going in with a fixed idea of what you want to happen."

Pratham is the British Council's main partner for the Active Citizens programme in India, where it has been working with trainers and young people for the past year. The organisation puts a great deal of emphasis on helping the people it supports to understand and develop

"You have to ask, can we work together, instead of just seeking to hold someone responsible for our problems."

“We strongly believe that collaboration is key to achieving positive change, and want to share that philosophy with Active Citizens in India and elsewhere.”

techniques for advocating and seeking to partner with decision makers. As Shailendra points out, Pratham’s own experience is that by working with, rather than protesting against, those in power, Active Citizens can expect their social action projects to have wider and more sustainable impact in their communities.

This constructive strategy has won Pratham a great deal of respect from ministers and decision makers in India, and given the organisation bargaining power when it comes to effecting change. As a result, Shailendra and his colleagues work with a broad range of stakeholders at different levels. State and federal governments are important for Pratham, but so too are local authorities, individual schools and headteachers, as well as parents and children. “There is no single decision maker where education is concerned, and it is important that we engage with everybody - because it is such a complex issue.”

Rather than simply demanding improvements from India’s elected representatives, Pratham has got directly involved, launching an extensive community education programme, where it works with schools to help their pupils learn better. Last year Pratham had partnerships with around 700 municipal schools in several states, and has worked with a further 200 schools since the start of 2011. Shailendra puts the success of these partnerships down to the organisation’s cooperative approach:

“We don’t get teachers thinking we are sticking our noses in, because they have seen what we can do, and they value that. We strongly believe that collaboration is key to achieving positive change, and want to share that philosophy with Active Citizens in India and elsewhere.”

COMMENTARY

Adil Najam
Vice Chancellor, Lahore University of Management Sciences

Engaging decision makers doesn't always have to be about confrontation; there's plenty of room for the sort of collaborative approach that Pratham takes. Why should it be either/or? You need more than one way of working to bring about change and influence policy. My own experience in the environmental sector has shown me that these two ways of working can complement one other, with more outspoken groups paving the way for others to work closely with governments. Each of these actors makes the others strong, and together, their impact is enhanced and multiplied. Active citizens should be ambitious for change, but they also need to focus on what is achievable. While we aspire to the perfect, we must never let it become the enemy of the good. It's not really a question of finding the perfect approach. What you should be thinking about is what you, as the active citizen, can do. If that means providing food, or fighting for girls' education, then that's what you should focus on. Active citizenship comes not so much from an analysis of the most important things needed, but from a deeply felt passion for making change, however that is expressed.

Radha Nair
Director, Active Citizens & Global Xchange, British Council

The way we engage with decision makers can vary dramatically, depending on the situation an individual or community finds themselves in. Where Pratham has really succeeded is in identifying an area where the government needed to improve and suggesting a way they could help achieve this. By taking this approach they have made themselves an invaluable partner to Indian policymakers. But sometimes a more active approach, like a demonstration or campaign, might be a more effective way of engaging decision makers. In countries like the UK the population can trust the government, generally speaking, to deliver their requirements with minimal engagement. However in countries where decision makers have assumed a role of authority, possibly unelected, and are not delivering, it is amazing to see how communities can fill those gaps. This kind of constructive action can often force the hand of decision makers into engaging with individuals. Although Pratham is a large organisation, what it has achieved and the respect it now commands is quite remarkable. People should take inspiration from the work of people like Shailendra, and apply some of Pratham's ideas about cooperative engagement in their own communities.

Alex Wilks
Director of Campaigns, Avaaz

There's clearly a role for civil society groups like Pratham in filling some of the gaps left by the state, but equally we need other groups that remain vigorously independent of government, and condemn abuses of power and position where they see them. The positive approach isn't always right. That said, there is also plenty of scope for insider groups - like this one to work alongside outsider groups, and the two approaches can really complement each other. For example, while more radical education activists in India condemn the failures of current legislation promising universal provision (and it's important that the government hears that message) they'll probably be more prepared to work with groups like Pratham, who they see as taking a more constructive approach. Education and health are good examples of areas where activists should be able to collaborate with decision makers, where you're arguing over implementation rather than the underlying principles. That's part of why Pratham's approach seems to be so effective.

GETTING STARTED

Now you've read about how Shailendra and his colleagues at Pratham focus on working with, rather than against, decision makers in India, try to answer these questions about your own situation, either on your own, or in a group:

1. What do you believe are the main obstacles in your country, province, city, town or village to engaging with decision makers about the things that matter to the community? Note down as many as possible, and how you might overcome them.
2. Pratham has a philosophy of working with decision makers. Where does the responsibility of those in power end, and the responsibility of the community begin in your view?

Engaging with decision makers is critical for Active Citizens who want to take their social action to the next level, and help more people. Here is one fun and easy way in which you can work with a group of people to think about dealing with people in power:

Encourage your group to call out their suggestions about the types of people they might want to influence, by asking them about people with power who affect their lives.

Organise everyone into groups of six. Assign one of the decision maker categories to each group, and ask them to choose a topic where they believe they could influence that decision maker. For example, a team that was assigned 'high court judges' might decide they could persuade this group that sentences for a particular crime were too harsh or lenient.

Ask each group to divide in half, taking on the roles of decision makers and influencers respectively. Give the influencers ten minutes to agree a strategy for persuading the decision makers.

Give the influencers five minutes to set out their argument. Decision makers are not allowed to speak.
Now give the decision makers ten minutes to confer on the argument they have heard, and how persuasive it is.

Give the decision makers five minutes to set out their response, and the reasons for it. Influencers are not allowed to speak.

Finish the session with a group discussion on which negotiations worked best - and why.

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