

River



To explore the history of an individual, community or organisation.

The characteristics of a river (its changing width, current and direction as well as features such as whirlpools, islands, rapids, waterfalls and forks) can represent changes and events over time. Rivers can also be used in planning, for example to map out the steps of a campaign.

The image of a road (with traffic lights, pot holes and cross roads, etc) can be used in a similar way and might be preferable in some contexts (e.g. in a city or an arid area where there are more roads than rivers).

The process – personal river

1. A useful way to start the process of creating a personal river is for the participants to sit quietly together with eyes closed while the facilitator prompts them to think silently about different moments in the course of their lives, from birth to the present, with suggestions or open questions.
2. Then each person draws the journey of his or her life in the form of a river, sometimes on a large sheet of paper and sometimes on the ground with locally available materials. It is important to state that each person need only include in their river those events which they feel comfortable to share with the group.
3. When everyone has completed their river, they can discuss them in small groups with a facilitator. Each person chooses the level of detail they wish

to share: they may wish to focus on a particular time or current, or take people briefly through the whole journey.

4. At the end of each person's story, other participants can ask questions if they wish, always respecting the privacy of the person.
5. The facilitator may wish to direct discussion and analysis to consider issues of power and control, cause and effect, to draw out patterns or major influences. The aim is not just to hear stories, but to find a link between our personal experiences and attitudes and the ways in which we are influenced by the environment in which we have grown up and live. Comparisons might be drawn between people of different social classes, cultural contexts, sexes or ages in order to uncover influences and analyse the environmental forces that shape us all.

The process – group rivers

Where a river is used to map the turning points and key events in the history of an organisation or community, participants will work together, negotiating the points to be represented and the symbols to be used. In this case, the process of constructing the image will in itself be the cause of much discussion and debate, as different perceptions of the significance of situations and events become apparent.

Suggestions for use

- The river can be used at the beginning of a workshop as a way of bringing the group together and exploring personal journeys.
- A river can be used to explore the history of a school, organisation or community.
- A river can be used to plan an activity, such as a campaign for example, thinking through the possible challenges and opportunities.

References

- [Reflect Mother Manual](#), ActionAid International, 1996,
- Communication & Power, ActionAid, 2003. P. 1004.

