

# Timelines



To track changes or document the history of a community or organisation. By capturing the chronology of events as perceived and recalled by local people, a timeline provides details of historical landmarks or events. This tool provides an excellent opportunity for older people to participate and contribute.

A timeline is an effective way of tracking changes in relation to a particular issue over time and predicting future events on the basis of past experience. It can bring out powerful associations between cause and effect, and can be used to improve planning and preparedness, looking ahead and determining small steps that, over a period of time, might lead to a large change. A timeline can help to:

- learn about past events that the community consider to be important
- understand historical perspectives of current issues
- generate discussions on changes that have taken place locally and the impact these have on a community's lives
- learn about common disasters and the impact they have on a community

## Steps in the process

Explain to the participants that the objective is to outline the history of the village/community/organisation.

1. Agree a starting point. When discussing the history of a community you might choose to go back to the date of a particular event that most of those in the group remember. It may be a flood or a drought, a fire, the building of a mosque/church, or the arrival of a family into the area. If discussing the history of an organisation, the starting point might be the year when it

was set up. Ask them if they know the date or if not to estimate it. Ask one participant to write the date down on a card and another to write what happened, maybe just using a single word (such as 'fire' or 'drought'), depending on their ability.

2. Agree on the time unit/s to be used. Depending on the issue or situation to be analysed, different units of time will be appropriate; whether days, months, years or decades.
3. Draw a horizontal line on a piece of paper or on the ground starting at the point you have chosen and ending either in the present day or in the future if you also want to discuss future events and plans. Divide the timeline according to your timescale, using locally appropriate symbols or words for the different units of time.
4. Keep asking for major events from the past and moving gradually towards the present, focusing on what they consider to have been important events. Ask different participants to write each one down on cards with dates and lay them in a sequence from past to present.
5. They may recall more things as they construct the timeline and they can change the order at any time.
6. Group analysis and discussion of the resulting timeline can help the group to understand the factors underlying the current situation, or form the basis for drawing up strategies for coping with, or preventing, regularly occurring problems.

## Questions to deepen the discussion

- What events/changes have been most significant and why?
- What major events might happen in the next 10 years?
- What major events would you like to happen in the next 10 years?
- To what extent can we plan for change? Which of the events/changes in the timeline were controlled or controllable?

## Issues to be aware of

It's good to have elderly people participate in this exercise, but it may be impossible to pinpoint the accurate year of events. The facilitator may have to lead discussions that help the group agree on the most accurate approximation of the time. It is important to ensure that older women are consulted as well as

older men and to triangulate all information received. People may get nostalgic about past events and digress into discussions around this. The facilitator must therefore keep the conversation focused on the topic.

## Ideas for literacy and numeracy

**Literacy** - Ask the participants to copy the timeline into their books, adding the dates of major events in their own lives – such as when they were born and when they were married, when they gave birth to children or when family members or close friends died etc. Help the participants who need help and get those who finish first to help others. Then ask participants to write a few lines about an important event in their lives. Read all these out and write some of them up on the board for others to copy. With some, you could ask the participants to read them out very slowly, word by word and see if the others can write them down. Other literacy activities might include: interviewing elders in the village and writing oral histories (perhaps borrowing a tape recorder to help), writing oral histories, planning an annual day to commemorate a major local event (or person) which might otherwise be forgotten, making plaques to mark the places where significant things happened.

**Numeracy** - Some calculations based on dates can be introduced. Try to develop mental arithmetic skills to begin with by asking participants how many years there are between various events. In some cultures, translation from the local calendar to the international calendar could also be the basis for various calculations.

## References

- [Reflect Mother Manual](#), ActionAid International, 1996, p. 204-206.

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