

REFERENCE GROUPS IN ACTION RESEARCH

This information sheet was developed out of experience in working with reference groups in action research. It is not meant as a list of commandments or instructions but rather tries to summarise some things which we have found useful.

STARTING OUT.

1. Begin with a large consultation meeting with people who might be interested in the project. Use this to establish interest by participants in being on the reference group. This is not the only way that people should come onto it.
2. Making sure that all the people who should be involved are on the reference group. What provision has been made for participants in the projects to be on the reference group?
3. It is okay and indeed important to add new people to the reference group as you go along. The project and its needs will change.
4. Don't worry about the size of the initial group. A core group will emerge but you will have contacts and networks with other people.
5. Make sure people know the information about the project. Keep the information short and plain English (but not patronising).
6. Work out clear goals and terms of the reference for the reference group. These should be discussed and owned by reference group members.
7. Regular meetings: About every 6 weeks but not more than 2 months apart. Sometimes this will vary depending on the needs of the project. Once meetings are too far apart people stop coming or forget.
8. Being a reference group member should not be tokenistic. Participants in projects should have a strong voice on any reference group. They need to be there as a small group. Sometimes they may need support. But they should be seen as the experts through their experience in the project. It will usually not work very well without them.
9. Unwaged workers on the reference group should be paid. Salaried workers may gain a lot from membership of a reference group but they are paid to be there too. Often participants in projects are expected to be voluntary members of reference groups. It is work and should be valued as such.

MEETINGS

1. Make sure agendas and minutes are kept in plain English, or in other languages if this is relevant and are sent out well before meetings.
2. Make sure that the contact person for the agenda is known and that people can add agenda items if they want to.
3. Organise for one key person in the project to be available half an hour before each reference group meeting to answer questions from members (people who were not at the last meeting or people who have difficulty in accessing written material)

4. Make sure that all meetings have regular spots for information sharing and for reporting back by groups or individuals.
5. Make sure each meeting has a REAL purpose. An issue or concern which needs resolution.
6. Not all meetings have to be formal and held as a whole group. Sometimes structured activities or discussions about difficult issues may be good. You can also use small groups and pairs to generate ideas or come up with solutions.
7. No meeting should go longer than two hours. And it should be broken up into interesting ways of working.
8. Chairing and minute taking should be shared whenever possible. Giving someone the chair for two meetings helps continuity.
9. Provide refreshments and a little time to informally network

KEEPING A REFERENCE GROUP OVER TIME.

1. Some people will always drop off. But if this happens with too many people someone needs to follow up. This is especially important if participants stop coming.
2. people will keep coming to reference groups if they:
 - Feel they are heard and their input is valued.
 - Take something away from each meeting that is useful.
 - Develop links as a group.
 - Own the project.
3. Reference group members roles will change over time during a project. They may become. Some things which reference group members have done in past projects in which I have been involved are:
 - a. Develop the design of the project.
 - b. Help recruit people to it.
 - c. Work on questions and ideas
 - d. Write material or prepare other resources eg audio-visuals etc.
 - e. Initiate, plan and evaluate activities.
 - f. Some members may remain useful people to whom to talk but may not wish to play a strong role other than attending meetings.

Kelley Johnson.