

# EXAMINING RPP AS A TOOL FOR EVALUATION

— THE ACTION ASIA EXPERIENCE

Results from the ACTION Asia Practitioner's Forum  
February 8-9 2011

This briefing paper was written by Patricia DeBoer based on the discussions and output of a two day RPP Practitioners' Forum in Colombo, Sri Lanka in February 2011. The Forum was a joint effort of ACTION Asia and the American Friends Service Committee. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace and humanitarian service. Its work is based on the principles of the Religious Society of Friends, the belief in the worth of every person, and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice.

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# Introduction

In the 1990s, the Collaborative for Development Action [CDA] undertook research on the impact of humanitarian assistance in situations of violent conflict. That research led to the report [Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War](#). The ‘Do No Harm’ methodology was ground-breaking, and has become the international standard for development organizations working in conflict areas.

CDA followed the Do No Harm research with a project called Reflecting on Peace Practice. The research was prompted by the recognition that many organizations at many levels were trying to address peace and conflict issues more directly, but often had difficulty analyzing the impact of their particular work on the conflict situation.

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects are field-based and experience-driven (rather than theory or model-based), developed through a context in which organizations learn from and with each other more than they can learn from their own experience alone. The initial research included 26 case studies from around the world. The case studies collected reflections from a wide variety of agencies and programs working at different levels and with different methods. The report ***Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners*** was released in 2003. ([www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com))

The research challenged peace practitioners to think deeply about the effectiveness of their work, and led to the development of a set of tools and concepts that help to answer basic questions such as:

- **What** should we work on? Which of the issues or conflict factors is a priority?
- **Whom** should we work with? Which actors/stakeholders are more important?
- **Why** should we work on that issue with those people? Is the rationale for our chosen approach solid? [RPP manual 2009].

The process of collaborative learning is an ongoing one, and the CDA RPP project is learning additional lessons in four specific areas that refine

and deepen the previous RPP findings and make them more usable by practitioners:

1. Context Analysis & Program Strategies. Further exploration of factors critical to context analysis and to linking program decisions to context analysis in order to ensure that programming is addressing those factors that are important to the conflict.
2. Adding Up. Elements and processes for enhancing cumulative impacts of programs.
3. Micro-Macro Connections. How to link micro (“peace writ little”) and macro (“Peace Writ Large”) levels in programming decisions in order to enhance the impacts of small, geographically limited programs on the broader peace.
4. Monitoring and Evaluation. How to monitor and evaluate the impact of individual programs on “Peace Writ Large.”

In the Asia region, RPP was introduced to the ACTION Asia (AA) network in 2008, although a few members of the network had been working with the methodology for longer. Trainings in 2008 and 2009 led to the decision of the ACTION Asia network to accept RPP as the network’s planning, monitoring and evaluation methodology for joint work and also to disseminate the RPP tools and knowledge more broadly in the region.

In February 2011, 16 members of the ACTION Asia Leadership Forum met together for two days in Sri Lanka to reflect on their experience with RPP over the past two years. There was a particular focus on the use of RPP for program evaluations – since this is one of the most challenging settings for the application of the RPP tools and methodology. ACTION Asia members who have been involved in using RPP as an evaluation tool – either for their own programs or in the evaluation of the work of others – shared what they had learned from the process. The discussion also raised concerns and questions about RPP based evaluations, related to the role of the outside evaluators, the evaluation context, and the challenges of building an inclusive process.

As a result of the discussion, the group drafted a process outline for evaluations, along with some guiding principles and notes on different

stages and steps. This briefing paper is ACTION Asia's contribution to the larger process of learning and reflection taking place in the region and around the world.

### *Evaluation Processes and RPP – Some General Reflections*

Evaluation processes are inherently challenging. Evaluations can spark defensiveness and fears of judgment and misunderstanding among those most closely involved in the work. They raise issues about ownership and control over a project – how will decisions be made if the evaluation process suggests changes? Will donors agree to those changes? Will the organization board and management? Will the project partners and beneficiaries? Is the evaluation really just the first step in closing down our work?

Using RPP tools in an evaluation process brings a very clear agenda – i.e. RPP asserts that for peace programs to be effective there needs to be linkages between the micro and the macro levels. For organizations that work very much at the community level or that focus on personal change and transformation, this can be a difficult message to hear. RPP asks them to look critically at the impact of their micro-level work within a broader context. The challenge can quickly feel overwhelming to staff and partners.

ACTION Asia members agreed that the RPP emphasis on specifying and developing the micro-macro linkages was one of the great strengths of the methodology. The tools are very useful in helping sort out the dynamics of a conflict situation, and clarifying the linkages and roles – both the actual and the possible – among the various actors. The tools can potentially help an organization understand its own role and its own strengths within a larger context. But the initial process often raises fears and alarm at the idea that programs should be able to show strategic linkages and make a discernable impact on macro-level change. This is especially so for programs that have been operating under a different philosophical framework or set of assumptions.

ACTION Asia members also noted that the RPP methodology rightly emphasizes the need to include views and perspectives from a range of

actors – including other groups or persons who may be working on the same issues in different ways and also those who may be ‘hard to reach’ for political or security reasons. However, the tools which work best in a setting of group analysis and discussion are sometimes being used in places where it is not safe for people to gather in groups of more than three or four persons. In situations where social fragmentation and mistrust are very high, it is difficult for evaluators to do a process of analysis that feels truly participatory and inclusive.

In response to the above concerns, and based on their own experience in both learning the tools and using the tools with others, the ACTION Asia participants agreed to some basic principles that should guide AA members’ use of RPP in evaluation processes:

**Reflecting** is the key word – RPP is fundamentally a **participatory process** in which the outsiders should act as guides and facilitators.

The reflection process should be **empowering** as well as challenging.

It should help people see where they fit into the larger picture, what they contribute and where they can link. It should also be **forward – looking**, reflecting on past and present in order to move forward.

The **RPP agenda** [or bias] i.e. the need to link macro/micro levels — should be acknowledged and explored with evaluation participants from the start.

Peacebuilders using RPP also need to consider **conflict sensitive use of the tools** in constricted or very volatile conflict settings.

# RPP Evaluations – Preparing the Process

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## *Background documentation on projects*

AA members noted that the preparation process for an RPP evaluation was often quite intense. Outside facilitators coming into the context need to prepare themselves as best they can to understand not only the specific project but also the broader conflict issues that prompted the development of the project. However, many peace projects do not have an explicit or well-articulated conflict analysis – or in some cases where such analysis has in fact taken place, it is too dangerous to put it down on paper. This can make it difficult for evaluation partners to provide background documents that clearly show the conflict situation.

Since the conflict analysis is key to assessing whether a project is effective and to seeing how it could be made more effective – the problem of preparation is a serious one. The direct evaluation process itself is often short – two to three weeks at most in the field working intensively with partners and other informants. AA members who have used RPP in evaluations suggested measures that could be taken by evaluators before they enter the direct process. For example, in addition to program plans and reports, special efforts should be taken to try to learn the history of the project – why and how it developed.

Evaluators could also attempt their own ‘proxy’ conflict analysis based on the project documents and information they have been able to gather in the preparation phase. This is not a substitute for a real conflict analysis process

### **Suggestions for Preparations**

- Take care to understand the history of the project – why and how it developed
- Review conflict analysis done by others for the same period
- Draft a ‘proxy analysis’ before going - in order to have some framework for guiding processes and testing ideas with partners

with partners and other informants, but it can provide a place to start, especially in restricted environments where a full participatory approaches to conflict analysis might be difficult. AA members also suggested doing this by reviewing conflict analysis done by other organizations for the same conflict and approximate time period of this program. This can serve as useful background information to the evaluator team in the conflict analysis facilitation process – allowing them to ask more probing and informed questions that can stretch the vision of the participant group.

### *Developing a Common Purpose and Objectives*

Evaluations are planned by many different stakeholders and for different reasons. In many cases they are a requirement of donors or organization boards. RPP methodology may not be appropriate for certain types of evaluations – such as those where donors or boards want to look strictly at the original plan and its implementation. Because the RPP process is challenging, it should only be used in situations where both the evaluation initiator and the participant group agree to undertake the process and to work with the results. This is why AA members felt that it was important to emphasize that RPP is an inherently participatory process which should be empowering and forward looking.

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Because the RPP methodology is not yet widely known, evaluator teams should be prepared to provide orientation to the basic ideas of RPP for the partners in the evaluation process. There will need to be a core reflection team to work closely with the evaluation team at every stage in the process. This would naturally include key people from the implementing partner organization but could also go beyond the partner to draw key beneficiaries or others who are well informed of the program's work and the conflict situation.

One of the most important aspects in preparation is deciding – with the core reflection team – who are the key stakeholders in the process. Beyond the various partner and beneficiary groups, who are the other informants within the local context who can provide background or perspectives relevant to understanding the conflict? Does the process try to include both places

where the program seems to be working well [‘star participants’] and also those where it is not working or where people have dropped out? To what extent is it possible to access representatives from groups that are not normally included in NGO activities – such as key politicians, representatives of armed factions, or media people? The core reflection team also needs to make decisions about what is feasible given the security situation and assess the impact of security concerns on the design and implementation of the process.

## **Conducting the RPP Evaluation**

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The first step in the actual process of evaluation, once the evaluators have arrived ‘on-site’ is to recheck everyone’s understanding of the process. The RPP evaluation process should be one of collaborative inquiry, in which the participants and key stakeholders can own both the process and the results. It should not be extractive but rather a process which encourages self-pursuit of the questions and answers by the largest number of people possible.

ACTION Asia members spent considerable time reviewing the tools, discussing their uses and challenges, and sharing creative ideas of how the tools could be used in varying contexts. The group did not try to establish a template for how and where each tool should be used in evaluation processes because of the evaluation contexts are by definition complex and varied.

They also agreed that while the RPP handbooks present the tools well and suggest a certain order, the actual design of the evaluation and use of the tools has to depend on their appropriateness to the situation. Tools from other sources can also be brought in where useful. In cases where it is impossible to use the tool as recommended, such as situations where it is not possible for groups to gather, the RPP methodology can still provide a very useful framework for developing questions for individual interviews. The following section presents the forum’s reflections and suggestions on four basic RPP tools – the systems analysis, the RPP matrix, the theory of change and the criteria of effectiveness.

## **Systems Analysis**

ACTION Asia members have found the RPP tools for systems analysis extremely useful in building an understanding of the dynamic nature of conflict and the relationships of various subsystems. By gaining an understanding of the dynamics, mapping out cause and effect and noting key actors, the systems analysis tools help to identify possible points of intervention. This allows groups to see if they are targeting their interventions effectively, or if there are other points of intervention where they might have leverage.

### ***Seeing many factors, focusing on one***

AA members noted that the conflict analysis usually revealed many factors and dynamics driving conflicts, but groups often focused on only one. Does this indicate a weakness in programming?

Cambodia participants observed that in these cases the larger analysis was very useful. For example, when an analysis of Cambodia nationalism work identified political manipulation as a driving factor of ethnic and nationalist violence, none of the local NGOs felt they could directly address this issue. It was too difficult and too risky. They focused on youth attitudes and the ways that ideas about history and ethnicity are taught.

However, now that they had clearly identified the issue they found ways to introduce the problems of political manipulations into their discussions and activities with youth. In this way the conflict analysis deepened their work and perhaps laid a groundwork for addressing the issue more directly at some point in the future.

In applying this to the evaluation context, the group discussed the question of where this analysis should start. Does it start with the situation at the time that the program was first conceived or does it start with the situation now? The answer seemed to be that both are useful, especially if there have been major changes in the conflict situation. The three box analysis which lists out forces operating for and against peace as well as identifying key actors can be done for the period before the project began and then

again for the current period – which can help to identify key changes in the conflict dynamic. The concept of project *relevance* is helpful here – the first analysis helps to assess whether the project was relevant to the context when it was first conceived and whether it has been instrumental in bringing about change. The second helps the group determine whether it is *still* the most relevant and needed thing to be doing.

Determining the correct level of analysis is also problematic. If it is too narrowly local, it becomes difficult to see macro-level links. Since the point of the RPP methodology is to help peace practitioners analyse the connection of their program to *Peace Writ Large*, a very narrow systems analysis would defeat the purpose. Yet the concept of *Peace Writ Large* is particularly problematic. In trainings and processes, participants often have difficulty with this terminology, which increases their sense that they are being asked to address problems that are far beyond their capacity. The forum noted that it is important to ask people to ‘start where they are’

- to describe the violence and conflict that they were seeing and trying to address. Then the systems analysis asks them to consider the context of ‘violence writ large’
- what are the larger forces, interest groups or dynamics which affect the situation that the program is trying to address?

Other questions were raised that did not have answers – such as how the conflict analysis can take into consideration the silent majority of people who are neither forces for nor forces against conflict. Determining the scope of the conflict analysis is also challenging in contexts where there is no war, but there is no peace either. Particularly in situations of extreme oppression and repression, even clearly identifying the problem can become difficult.

The tools for doing systems analysis are the three box analysis, used to understand what the conflict is really about and the forces working for and against peace, and the ‘dynamics’ mapping which helps to clarify the cause and effect loops among the key factors driving the conflict. The ACTION Asia members found the three box analysis very useful in the evaluation process, both as a preparatory tool for evaluators themselves and as a way of helping people reflect on why they started this work. RPP members described how they had used that tool to do a preparatory conflict analysis based on project documents and other sources before the evaluation process.

### ***Suggestions for Systems Analysis***

- Asking evaluation participants to do a conflict analysis of the situation *before they started the program* can help them reflect on why they started the program. This also prepares them to look at what they have done so far.
- Doing a ‘proxy analysis’ based on program documents and other relevant materials from the time the program was starting can prepare evaluation facilitators to ask more probing questions in interviews and focus group discussions. This is particularly useful where security concerns make it risky to gather groups together or to undertake explicit discussions of forces working for and against peace.
- Rather than the systems mapping, others have used more familiar NGO analysis tools such as the conflict tree and actors mapping, and then added cause and effect analysis into those by drawing arrows.

Cause and effect tools and systems analysis can be more difficult to use – facilitators need to be very skilled to keep them on track and the ‘spaghetti diagrams’ that result from a systems analysis can feel confusing and overwhelming. In an evaluation setting, evaluation facilitators and the core team will need to determine the usefulness of using these particular tools, or perhaps bring in other conflict analysis tools that can help to answer the specific questions that the evaluation is trying to address.

### ***RPP Matrix***

The four box RPP matrix was the tool most often cited by ACTION Asia members as broadly useful, informative, and user friendly. AA members reported using it in a wide variety of settings and ways, to draw out information that maps the levels of intervention, the actors being engaged, the linkages [or lack of linkages] and the impacts – real or hoped for – of various strategies and activities. The matrix also focused people’s attention on the issue of change – how change happens and where they have seen it happen through their own or other’s work.

## Using the RPP Matrix for Interviews

*One Action Asia member used the RPP matrix for individual interviews. A peacebuilding organization commissioned a group of practitioners to evaluate its four year's programme, which included a media component..*

*One focal group was radio station producers who had developed and transmitted programs to promote peace and harmony in the community and to facilitate the formation of new structures to build peace at the local level.*

*Initially, the evaluators thought they would do a focus group discussion, but then they realized that the programs really covered a wide variety of topics and areas. Instead the evaluator decided to do individual interviews with the producers and to use the RPP matrix to guide discussions to an analysis of outreach and impacts.*

*He carried a big matrix around with him and briefly described the main concepts of key people/more people and personal change/social change. He then asked the producers to describe the development of their activity in terms of who they involved and what changes they wanted to see. He asked them to link their work into the larger peace – the various processes that were also going on at the time.*

*For the interviewees it was a revelation: many of them didn't realize how their work could affect change and were excited to see the impact and the potential. Some saw places where they could do more, and it gave them ideas of what to pursue and how.*

In evaluation processes, AA members felt the matrix was particularly useful in the evaluation of a specific intervention – such as a campaign, training program, or lobbying effort. It was important to try to show all the actors involved in working for this change – and if possible to include them in the process of analysis. This allows organizations to see their work within a larger framework. It allows them to

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assess their own program strategy and its impacts, and to redefine goals and linkages in order to increase the potential to bring about change. Both positive and negative experiences of linkage and impact can be explored through this tool.

In a group setting, where the evaluation process has been able to pull together a variety of partners and stakeholders to look at activities and linkages, the matrix makes it very easy for groups to identify the gaps – the people that are not being reached and the work that is not getting done. The gap still raises the question of how certain types of work can be done. Groups working at key people and groups working at more people levels can be quite disconnected from each other – so that key people cannot even identify who the ‘more people’ might be who could help to influence change and vice versa.

Participants will be challenged by limitations in terms of capacity and resources – and sometimes by a sense of fear. Particularly for programs that are focused at a grassroots level or that operate in very repressive environments, the idea of having to influence ‘key people’ or affect change at a larger social and political level can be daunting. However, AA members have found that the RPP matrix helps people to place themselves within a larger context and pushes them to consider how they could affect other levels and people that are relevant to their situation.

One challenge of using the RPP matrix in evaluation processes is the challenge of attribution. ACTION Asia members were very aware that people involved with activities will often base claims of impact on changes that seem very small or on personal stories. Organizations like to claim the successes for their project and their activities, but if the evaluation facilitators or core team triangulate this information with other sources there often is not agreement on why a certain change or accomplishment happened. In this sense, peace practitioners have difficulty being critical and hard-headed when looking at their own work.

### ***Theories of Change/Programme Design***

The main benefit of investigating theories of change is to make people aware of their assumptions. In evaluation settings, where a group did not clearly

articulate a theory of change in the program design phase, discussing the theory of change can help the group to re-examine their vision and program goals and whether the activities led towards the goals.

However, ACTION Asia members felt that the word ‘theory’ was not useful in many settings and with many groups. It could be intimidating and give a sense that this required a large philosophical discussion. The main point is to unearth people’s Ideas about How Change Happens. This can be done by asking people to reflect on what they have been doing and how they believed that these activities will lead to change. In an evaluation context, facilitating a review of these ideas could help organizations or groups to understand why their impacts may have fallen short of their hopes and expectations.

### *Criteria of Effectiveness*

The criteria of effectiveness ranking tool might seem the most obvious tool for evaluations – since it is a tool that can be used to rate and justify interventions and programs. The five criteria of effectiveness grew out of a long process of participatory case analysis and consultation. As such, they are not abstract or theoretical constructions but come out of action research and practitioner reflection on what effective peace work looks like. Nonetheless, in ACTION Asia members’ experience, these criteria can feel very frightening and challenging and can rouse strong emotional responses when individuals and groups are asked to apply them to their own work.

#### *Suggestions in Using Criteria of Effectiveness*

- It should be used for internal assessment only, not applied as an outside valuation or measurement
- Participants in the process should own the rankings that they give themselves and decide how or whether they will become part of the external report
- Rather than the ranking exercise, the criteria can also be introduced with the matrix, to reinforce participants’ understanding of the quadrants and the linkages

Some AA members felt that RPP evaluations, including criteria of effectiveness, should only be conducted if the original program planning was also done under the RPP framework. But others felt that the criteria and the rating sheet were useful tools. The rating sheet asks whether the impact from the particular effort was 1) fast enough 2) likely to be sustained 3) big enough and 4) adequately linked.

The rating process is 'a humbling experience' as one AA member put it, but it also gives space for people to bring forward the stories of impact and to reveal lack of

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capacities. Effective facilitation is critical in using the tool in an evaluation process. Evaluation facilitators will need to pay careful attention to group dynamics, creating an environment where people are prepared to really listen to each other and to challenge themselves and others. Trust, safety, and openness are needed if this tool is to be used effectively, in a way that empowers and guides the program implementers.

Where this does not exist, evaluation facilitators should think carefully about trying to use this tool. If participants do not feel safe or feel that the evaluation process is somehow an external [or internal] judgment of their work, the ranking tool makes people feel very exposed. It can also open up internal rifts within a coalition or organization. For this reason AA members felt that this tool should always be part of a participatory process – not to judge but rather to help the group move the work towards the next step.

Despite these reservations about use in evaluation processes, AA members agreed that the criteria of effectiveness and the ranking exercise can stimulate a much deeper internal analysis of activities and approaches. Careful consideration of the criteria helps groups to clarify the connection of their work to the conflict analysis and to articulate their role in change process. It helps groups to realize that peace work is not just about program effectiveness, but needs also to influence the context of peace writ large. It also points to measurable, externally verifiable impacts that peace groups or coalitions could aim for and document. In this sense, if it is used as a forward looking tool for considering how efforts can be strengthened, the criteria can add a great deal to the evaluation process by giving participants a clearer sense of shared direction.

## RPP Evaluation Reporting

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ACTION Asia members discussed how reporting on an RPP evaluation should be done. As a participatory process, AA members felt that the evaluation facilitators' role should be one helping to collate, consolidate and synthesize what has been learned by implementers and partners during the evaluation process. This initial synthesis should be done with the evaluation core group before the process ends, and if possible shared back to a broader group of participants for review and feedback. The evaluation facilitation team will then have the responsibility of producing the evaluation report.

AA members discussed whether the final report should reflect only the shared recommendations which emerged from the group in the evaluation process, or whether there was a role for the outside team to also include their observations and recommendations. This is one question that should actually be sorted out at the very beginning of the process and the Terms of Reference should make it clear who owns the report and how it will be used. The recommendations could include both group recommendations and evaluator recommendations, or the facilitation team might give a reflection note that is separate from the main report, which shares their perspective as outsiders on the process and the results.

AA members also suggested that evaluation facilitators should accept accountability on the evaluation results. Too often, evaluation teams are sent in and produce a report that has broad implications for the direction of the work, but then have no responsibility for helping to see those recommendations carried out. Evaluation facilitators should be open to follow-up after the evaluation, to testing the results and being available for planning and monitoring – so that the evaluation is truly part of an on-going learning/reflection process.

## Conclusion

Since ACTION Asia accepted the frameworks of RPP, several network members have been using its various tools either in their own organization's strategic programming or as invited external evaluators for peace programs of other organizations. In using RPP tools whether in designing peace programmes or sharing it through trainings, AA members always highlight the imperative concept of linking the macro and micro level both in the analysis and in the identification of strategic intervention in conflict situations.

This briefing paper is the outcome of a 2-day reflection on the effectiveness of RPP as a tool for evaluating peace initiatives and is not a final product but rather a work in progress. It will serve as a guide for ACTION Asia members who will be called upon by other organizations to facilitate evaluation processes of peace initiatives. AA will continue to solicit feedback and reflection from their experiences and incorporate these into this guideline.

ACTION Asia members agreed during the reflection session in Sri Lanka that RPP tools could be integrated with other frameworks used in monitoring and evaluation processes. RPP should be seen as a flexible tool with benefits in a variety of settings and contexts. ACTION Asia also hopes that its reflections and experiences will contribute to the larger conversation and body of learning related to RPP as it is tested, developed and disseminated around the world.



## **Action Asia**

is a network of individuals and organizations in the Asia continent committed to action for conflict transformation through the sharing of skills, knowledge, experiences and resources.

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