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## Are workshops useful?

by Margaret Hill

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In a certain African country, a workshop was arranged to teach the treasurers of local NGOs how to keep records that would satisfy their donors. 20 people came, very enthusiastic to learn these new things. The teachers came from outside the country and were all Westerners. They came with a course drawn up but after the first day they rapidly realized that they would have to modify the material and keep it basic and simple. The teaching was participatory and well done, and at the end the teachers felt that at least 18 of the 20 participants had understood and could put their new skills into practice. They had also emphasised the need to teach the material to others, especially to the various NGO committee members.

One year later, one of the teachers, John, was able to visit that country again, and he decided to travel around and visit some of the participants from the course. The first person he visited seemed very embarrassed when asked to show how he was keeping the accounts. Finally, he produced a scrappy notebook and showed a list of expenses that had been paid in the last few months, but there were no records of receipts or of cash coming in or going out. Finally the man said "I enjoyed the seminar so much, but when I went home I had other things to do for some weeks. By the time I sat down again with the NGO accounts, I'd forgotten what we had learned."

The teacher moved on to the village of the next participant, and this time he was very happy to see that the woman student, Mrs Nga, had a neat tidy accounting system going. However, later that day, the chairman of the NGO committee came to him and asked him to teach the committee members to understand the accounting that Mrs Nga was using. "Well, have you asked her to show you how it works?" asked John. "Yes, but she says she can't explain it," said the chairman of the committee. John returned the next day to talk with Mrs Nga. After a long, long discussion, he finally realized the problem. Mrs Nga felt that if others understood the system, they might not need her anymore, and she might lose her job, and also lose the prestige of being the only one with this knowledge.

John arrived at the third village and asked where the participant, Peter, could be found. 'He's out farming' said some people. That evening John was able to talk with Peter. After a long explanation, John understood that Peter had never actually worked as the treasurer of the local NGO. He wondered why Peter was sent to the workshop. Finally, the pastor of the local church was able to explain to him that the previous chairman of the NGO didn't really want anyone learning a good system to keep the accounts because he had been taking money out illegally. So when the invitation came, he sent a junior member of the NGO who would have no authority to control the accounts when he came back from the seminar.

As John left to go home, he wondered “What could we have done differently to ensure that the workshop had an ongoing useful effect?”

Here are some of the problems reported after workshops:

- Lack of mentoring and follow-up after the workshop
- Wrong choice of participants
- Lack of political/social support for the participants means they are not able to put into practice what they learn at the workshop.
- One lonely individual in an African community is very unlikely to be able to be innovative all alone.
- People sometimes like coming on workshops in order to get certificates without any expectation of using the new knowledge.
- Lack of funding locally to put plans made at the workshop into practice prevents anything happening.

There are some possible solutions to these problems, though these will vary according to the local situation.

### **1. Keep the workshop participatory**

It has been proved over and over again that people do not learn by sitting and listening to long lectures! The more the participants are involved in the learning process, the more they will remember. As much as possible, help the participants to put into practice what they are learning during the workshop. Use of drama, role play, music, small group discussions are all helpful ways of getting the message across.

### **2. Take time to help leaders chose the right participants**

One important key to a successful workshop is the right choice of participants. This often requires more than just sending out letters. Someone must visit the leaders of the churches or organizations concerned and help them understand exactly what type of participant should be sent. An initial letter should also spell out exactly who is invited, and may need to include information like level of knowledge of national language, position in church or NGO, gender and so on. It may be helpful when visiting the relevant authorities to ask “What exactly do you hope this person will be able to do after the workshop?” Generally speaking, you need to encourage any group or language project to send at least two people rather than one.

### **3. Set up a reporting and mentoring system**

Every person or group of people leaving the workshop should know who they will report to. That person needs to contact them after a couple of months, both to encourage them to carry

out their plans and also where necessary to help them in areas they might find difficult. For example, it may take a high level person to approach the local bishop on their behalf.

#### 4. Have workshops in pairs

It works well to have a second workshop 9-12 months after the first. Firstly, most participants are not able to take in all the information at once that may be given at the first workshop. It is as they put what they have learned into practice that they start being aware of holes in their knowledge. At the second workshop, their learning is consolidated and new material added as needed. Ideally, the participants should come with questions that will lead to more teaching. On a second trauma healing workshop, one of the participants said at the end: "I thought I understood the book at the first workshop, but now I know I really only had scratched the surface. Now the new ideas have sunk into my mind and heart."

Secondly, the second workshop serves as both carrot and stick! It should be made clear at the first workshop, that only those participants who put into practice what they have learned in their local area can return for the next workshop. This also involves them reporting to a specific person. This does add an extra motivation for them to put their plans into practice.

#### 5. Make clear feasible plans for action at the end of the workshop

At the end of the workshop, there should be a time to make specific plans. We have found it is good to have the groups write these on large flip chart paper and take the sheet home at the end. A quick way of keeping track of their plans for the future is to take a digital photo of the sheet. The plans should follow the following for each separate event or course:

- What are you planning?
- Where are you planning it?
- When are you planning it?
- Who will be involved?
- How will you fund it?

Usually it is best to encourage the groups to make only 2-3 initial plans. Often the participants should not be making decisions about these plans without consulting others, so this should be noted.



## **6. Try to have some small funding available to supplement local funding**

Sometimes quite small amounts of funding will help the participants get their plans off the ground when they return home. The amount offered should not discourage local initiative. For example, when organizing some seminars in DR Congo, outside funding provided sugar and a goat. All the other food for the participants came from the local churches.

Funds to print literature can also be very useful if it is set up as a revolving fund. The outside money is used to print the first edition of the book, then the book is sold and the proceeds used for the reprint. This works best in countries with a stable currency.

Sometimes funds can be provided with specific conditions attached. In a West African country, funds were provided to help run local Scripture Use seminars only where all the local churches and denominations were involved. This strongly encouraged interchurch cooperation!

In conclusion, workshops and courses can indeed be very useful, but they can also be a waste of time and money. Planning is needed to make the best possible use of the time when people come together for a workshop.

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