

Section 1: Note to Users

These tools aim to help you to develop foundational skills such as listening, asking probing questions, managing conflict, and so on.

It is useful to engage with these tools before, during, and after the training workshop to prepare you for facilitation in a community-led approach. Extensive practice with reflection is needed in order to master the skills that these tools seek to develop.

The tools may be used individually or in small groups. This section enables individual reflection by providing space for reflective writing, using a workbook format. Each tool in this section requires 60–90 minutes to complete.

On an ongoing basis, it is useful to think about which skills you need additional practice on, which challenges (internal or external) make it difficult for you to use a particular skill, and how you will take steps to improve. In small groups, you may want to reflect with three to five colleagues, with group discussion of the questions posed in these tools and of what can be done to deepen particular skills within your agency.

FAC 6. Asking Probing Questions

Probing questions are open-ended questions that invite the participant to provide additional information about what they have said or implied. Probing questions may vary by context but often include items such as, “Could you please say more about that?”, or “Could you please give an example to help me understand what you mean?” Asking such questions sounds simple enough, but in fact the systematic use of probing questions entails a different way of working and requires new skills.

Probing questions are among the most important tools for any facilitator (or learner) since they enable empathic learning about the participant’s views, values, and feelings in regard to a particular topic. Probing questions are key in learning about participants’ views about harms to children, possible actions for addressing those harms, how to implement an action in a community-led manner, and how to evaluate the community action. Thus, probing questions are relevant to facilitators’ work in all phases of a community-led process.

Orientation of the Listener

In interviews or group discussions, facilitators, and also data collectors, frequently feel that they have to follow a pre-defined script. This tendency is particularly visible in data collectors who have been trained to adhere to a research protocol and standardize the administration of questionnaires. Although this approach has value, it is limited by the fact that our pre-defined questions may not ask about the things that the participant sees as most important and that we might not have thought of. Also, a participant may attach different meaning to a term such as “child” than do facilitators and data collectors.

A useful approach, then, is to ask open-ended questions that create a space within which the participant can move in whatever directions they see fit. The participant can raise the topics to be discussed and chooses how to use various terms such as “child,” “harms to children,” etc. The job of the listener is not to impose structure but to follow the participant’s lead, asking questions that will help to clarify exactly what the participant means.

To use this approach, the listener must adopt an open, empathic, inquisitive, and nonjudgmental stance. If a participant said, “The big harm to children here is witchcraft,” the listener should not question or challenge that idea (or, feeling uncomfortable, move to the next question) but should seek to learn more about it. What does the participant mean by witchcraft? What forms does it take? Are children themselves seen as witches? Why is that seen as such a big harm? How does witchcraft affect children and families?

Taking this orientation requires pushing one’s own beliefs, preferences, and understandings into the background. For example, you might think that witchcraft is not one of the main harms to children but is a backward, harmful practice that is quite rare.

However, the point of the interview or discussion is not to impose your views but to learn about the views of the participant or participants. To do this, it is best to adopt the role of a student who

is there to learn as much as possible about the views of this participant. The point is not to judge, correct, or counsel the participants but to come as close as one can to entering their subjective world.

In essence, this orientation assumes that “we don’t know what we don’t know.” That is, we don’t know what a participant means by the term “witchcraft” since they might think of it in very different ways from how we might understand the term. Also, there may be dimensions of the term that we cannot imagine since it is beyond our world view and experience. In this respect, we don’t even know that we don’t know about these things. By following one’s curiosity and asking respectful questions, we begin to learn many things that we might not have thought of otherwise.

In short, we can learn by asking respectful, open-ended questions that aim to zero in on the meanings that the participant assigns to a term such as witchcraft and on their views of how it affects children.

The Power of Probing Questions

At the most basic level, probing questions invite the participant to provide additional information that clarifies their views. Here is an example of what can happen when probing questions are not asked or are poorly focused. In the following dialogue, the statements by the participant are marked “P” while the statements from the facilitator are marked “F.”

F: What are the main harms to children here?

P: A big problem here is children coming back from the bush after they have killed people with armed groups.

F: What happens to such children?

P: People avoid them and fear them.

F: What other problems or harms to children occur here?

In this exchange, the facilitator did not ask why it is a big problem to have children coming back from the bush after they have killed people with armed groups. Perhaps it seemed obvious to the facilitator that such people would be seen as killers and as dangerous. Yet it is possible that that was not what the participant had meant. In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, children who have killed or been around dead people in the bush are viewed as spiritually contaminated, that is, as carrying bad or harmful spirits. The local beliefs are that if such a child returned to his family and village, the bad spirits could cause deaths, illnesses, famine, and other problems.

Unfortunately, the facilitator in this example did not probe into what the participant saw as the problem of such children. Thus, he lost the opportunity to learn about the local cosmology (or world view) and what the actual problem was seen as. The follow-up question about what happens to such children is of limited usefulness without having an understanding of the nature

of the problem. For example, people might avoid and fear the child because they see the child as a killer. Or, they may avoid the child because they fear the angry spirits carried by the child.

Below is an example of how the same dialogue might have gone if the facilitator had asked an appropriate probing question.

F: What are the main harms to children here?

P: A big problem here is children coming back from the bush after they have killed people with armed groups.

F: How do you see such children?

P: They are feared because they carry bad spirits.

F: In what way do they carry bad spirits? Could you please tell me more about that?

P: You see, in my culture, when people are around the dead, they pick up bad spirits that follow them. The bad spirits can cause many problems—illness and even death—for anyone the children come into contact with.

F: How do people react to such children?

P: They fear them and stay away from them. Bad spirits are so powerful.

By asking an appropriate probing question early on in the discussion, the facilitator learned very rich information and probably came much closer to understanding what the participant had actually meant.

If this dialogue continued, the facilitator might learn that the local cosmology or world view is highly spiritualistic. Local people see the spirits as real and as determining whether one is healthy or not, and they may see people as being well when there is harmony between the living and the spirits of the ancestors.

Asking Useful Probing Questions

It is important for you to learn about and reflect on what are appropriate probing questions. Imagine that you are talking with an adult man about what he sees as some of the main harms to children in his neighborhood. The initial exchange is as follows:

F: What do you see as some of the main harms to children?

P: One big harm to children here is early marriage.

Is there a need to ask a probing question here? Why or why not?

Write below:

Consistent with the preceding example, we cannot assume that we know what the man means by “early marriage.” Nor can we assume that we know what the man understands by the term “children.” If we thank him and move forward by asking what are some other harms to children, we miss an important opportunity to learn what he means and what exactly he sees as the problem.

After all, one could define early marriage in many different ways, and one could see it as a problem for diverse reasons related to considerations of child health, law, family responsibilities, education, etc. The only way we will know what the participant really means is by asking good probing questions.

Next consider what could be appropriate probing questions after the participant says, “One big harm to children here is early marriage.” Please write two possible probing questions below.

Write below:

Did you ask what the man meant by “early marriage” or to give an example of early marriage?

Now let’s see how probing questions can help the facilitator to zero in on what exactly the participant means. Consider the following dialogue:

P: One big harm to children is early marriage.

F: Thank you for that. Could you please tell me more about what is early marriage?

P: Here many girls are married off by their parents when they are 14 years of age, or even younger.

F: How much younger?

P: Well, I’ve seen 12-year-old girls getting married and heard of even younger girls getting married.

F: How do you see early marriage as harming children?

P: One thing is the girl drops out of school.

F: Why is that important?

P: You see, being in school keeps the girl on a good track. If she is serious, she has hope for the future and brings honor to her family. If she drops out of school, she may not be able to support her children and has to get involved in sex work.

In this exchange, the facilitator asks multiple probing questions. Please take a moment and circle all the probing questions that the facilitator asked.

If you noted that each of the facilitator's questions asked above are probing questions, you are correct. By asking multiple probing questions, the facilitator succeeded in learning something about what the participant sees as "early marriage" and about how early marriage harms children. But this is hardly the end of the exchange, as the participant has presented multiple ideas that the skilled facilitator would want to learn more about. Think for a moment about and list what else does the facilitator need to ask about in order to learn more fully about the participant's views.

Write below:

Hopefully, this list includes items related to the age of girls involved in "early marriage." We know that the participant sees the marriage of 14-year-olds or 12-year-olds as harmful, but does that mean that he sees it as fine if, say, a 16-year-old girl got married? In other words, we don't know what the boundaries of the category "early marriage" are.

Asking appropriate probing questions could help to define these boundaries. For example, one could ask:

F: You said that 14-year-olds getting married counts as "early marriage." How old can a girl be and still have it count as early marriage?

Alternately, you might pose the question as:

F: What makes a marriage a regular marriage rather than an "early marriage"?

The latter question helps to probe how the participant defines "early marriage," allowing for age-based or other kinds of answers.

Hopefully, your list also included something related to how early marriage harms children. It is useful to know that the participant saw the main harm as being the disruption of education. But early marriage may have a host of unwanted effects. Thus, it could be useful to ask follow-up, probing questions such as:

F: Earlier, you mentioned that early marriage harms children because the girl has to drop out of school. Does early marriage harm children in other ways as well?

Furthermore, it is not clear whether the harms to children are, in the eyes of the participant, harms to girls only, or whether early marriage harms boys, too.

To summarize, probing questions enable one to learn more deeply about the views of a participant or participants. As we listen to someone, we should naturally be curious about what the participant means and ask questions that respectfully invite them to explain their views more fully.

Good probing questions are open-ended and yet are topically focused. They are open-ended in that they give the participant room to move in many directions. For example, the question “How is early marriage harmful to children?” enables many different responses and leaves the participant in control since the participant chooses which direction to go. Such a question is focused since it delves more deeply into why or in what respects is early marriage harmful to children. In addition, good probing questions are respectful—they do not challenge or imply disagreement with the participant. After all, the aim is to empathize deeply with them.

A key point is that good probing questions are nonjudgmental. To judge the participant by asking potentially threatening questions such as: “How can you say that?” or “How can you be so sure?” signals that we are judging or taking a position against what the participant is saying. Taking such an oppositional stance undermines our ability to empathize and likely makes the participant feel that their views are not respected.

Over time, people who do not feel respected are unlikely to speak freely around us or even to talk with us. In asking probing questions, then, we need to have an appreciative tone and control any unintended body language that could signal our discomfort or disapproval of what is being said.

Before continuing, please write briefly, in your own words, why we ask probing questions.

Write below:

Then read the questions below and circle which ones could be useful probing questions. For the items that you do not circle, think about why that question is not a good probing question.

1. Could you please give me an example of that?
2. How could that possibly be accurate?
3. Doesn't this harm children and violate children's rights?
4. Could you please explain what you mean by that?
5. Are there other ways in which this harm to children affects children negatively?
6. Have you checked your views against the data published by the government?

Did you notice that the second and third questions are not good probing questions because they have an accusatory tone and are not intended to explore fully the participant's views? Item 6 is also not useful as a probing question since it tacitly questions the accuracy of the participant's views.

Timing

Exercising good timing is a key part of asking effective probing questions. If we ask probing questions prematurely or ask too many in a row, we may disrupt the participant's train of thought or even make the conversation feel like an interrogation. Rather than coming into an interview with a great readiness to pose many probing questions, we first need to "read" the participant by observing them and asking ourselves, "Are they really passionate about what they are saying?" or reflecting that "Instead of me asking a lot of questions, it seems this person really wants to speak and 'pour it out.' Maybe it's best to listen carefully as the participant speaks for a few minutes, and to ask probing questions later." This is part of respectful learning, as it can be seen as disrespectful to interrupt an impassioned speaker to ask questions that might seem distracting to them.

This point applies even more strongly to dialogues. If two community members were discussing with great energy the question: "What are the main harms to children?", it is probably better to listen and take good notes, saving probing questions for later. With experience, one learns to ask probing questions in a manner that fits the rhythm of the speaker and helps them to explain their views fully.

Ethical Considerations

Imagine a hypothetical exchange in which the facilitator seeks to learn about a particular harm to children mentioned by a teenage girl.

P: A big problem for girls here is rape. Rape is horrible and really hurts people. [She begins sobbing]

F: Could you please tell me more about that?

Please reflect for a moment on this scenario. Did the facilitator do the right thing in asking a probing question?

Write below:

In this scenario, asking a probing question could easily cause unintended harm to the girl. Since the girl is upset, the asking of a probing question could “pick her open” and leave her feeling highly vulnerable. There are some key things we do not know. For example, could the girl be crying because she herself has been raped? Also, we don’t know anything about the girl’s history of mental health. Although she may have presented herself as feeling good and being stable, she may in fact have a history of depression. To ask a probing question could add significantly to her emotional burden, possibly leaving her feeling overwhelmed or even thinking about killing herself. Thus the asking of a probing question in this context is ethically unacceptable because it potentially causes harm.

Before asking probing questions, then, it is important to take stock of the participant or participants and the potential emotional burdens associated with what they have been discussing. If a participant starts to cry or seems upset or is withdrawing a bit, the interview or discussion should be gently suspended or ended, with patient accompaniment and psychological first aid² or even referral to more specialized treatment used to support the participant.

² World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation and World Vision International (2011). *Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers*. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO.

Also, it can be inappropriate to ask probing questions when the participant or participants are “on a roll” and saying something that seems very important to them and needs to be expressed fully. In such situations, it is valuable to give the participants space to speak and express themselves without interruption. The facilitator can come back later to ask follow-up questions and learn more fully about exactly what is needed. To use probing questions in an appropriate manner, then, requires sensitivity, presence, patience, and “using one’s antennae” to take stock of the situation.