

STEPPING STONES:

LOOKING FORWARD – LOOKING BACK

Highlights of an ACORD conference

London 6th- 7th July, 2006

“ ..no matter who we are in the world, what we believe in or don't, or where we live...we all have a right to define our own path up the mountain and have no right to impose our own belief system or actions on others...” [Alice Welbourn, July 2006]

Introduction

The following are the **Key Highlights** of a 2-day Conference on Stepping Stones, which took place on 5th-6th July, 2006 in London.

The Conference was organised by ACORD in order to share with a wide international audience of policy-makers, practitioners, donors and NGOs the lessons from a 2 1/2 year Comic Relief-funded project using Stepping Stones in Angola, Tanzania and Uganda.

The conference, called “**Stepping Stones: Looking Forward – Looking Back**” looked back at the Stepping Stones experience to date and used this as a basis for looking ahead at strategies for future developments involving Stepping Stones.

This report pulls out the main highlights of the discussions that took place during the 2-day conference. It should be read in conjunction with the full conference report and the report of the ACORD project.

The full conference report can be obtained from can be obtained from: hasap@acord.or.ug and the project report, entitled “**Joining Hands: Integrating Gender and HIV/AIDS**” can be ordered from hasap@acord.or.ug in Kampala or mariea@acord.org.uk in London and/or downloaded from ACORD's website: www.acord.org.uk.

These Highlights and the Conference Report are dedicated to Alice Welbourn, author of Stepping Stones and as a tribute to the memory of Ben her 18-year old son who died unexpectedly only weeks before the conference.

Outline of the Report

- o **Stepping Stones and 'gender'**
- o **Stepping Stones – an effective tool for community mobilisation?**
- o **How and Where can SS be used: Implementation and Adaptation Issues**
- o **Assessing impact: Key Challenges**
- o **Future Directions**

Annexes

Annex 1 ***Message from Alice Welbourn***

Annex 2 ***Conference Programme***

Annex 3 ***Conference Participants***

Stepping Stones and Gender

Most traditional approaches to HIV prevention, based on the so-called 'ABC' formula – Abstain, Be faithful and use Condoms – fail to take into account the power inequalities that characterise gender relations in most societies around the world. One of the key characteristics and aims of Stepping Stones is to provide men and women in communities with the tools to discuss and analyse their relations and how these affect and influence the spread of HIV/AIDS and/or their ability to protect themselves and others.

How effective is Stepping Stones in transforming unequal gender relations? What are the kinds of changes in gender relations brought about by Stepping Stones? What factors/strategies help to enhance such changes in gender relations?

These are some of the questions that guided the design of the ACORD project and were addressed during the conference. The key points raised/conclusions reached during the discussion, include:

- ⇒ **Stepping Stones does help to improve gender relations:** the kinds of improvement include increased respect for women, more sharing of resources and decision-making and better sexual relations. Improved communication - the cornerstone of the Stepping Stones approach – is the key to such improvements in gender relations.
- ⇒ **Stepping Stones does not result in radical transformation of gender relations, but can help to set in motion the process of change in the longer term:** Gender relations are based on deep-seated cultural norms and patterns of behaviour. Changing such patterns and norms is a long, slow process. Stepping Stones should be viewed as the beginning, rather than the end of such a process, which, if sustained and nurtured, can eventually lead to radical, lasting change.

Factors/strategies that have an influence on the potential for changing gender relations:

- ⇒ **The level of gender understanding and internalisation of the Stepping Stones process by the facilitators:** the potential for influencing participants is largely determined by the approach of the facilitators: if the facilitators have a good grasp of gender issues and have internalised the message and spirit of Stepping Stones, the chances of having such an impact on participants is greatly enhanced and conversely, if they fail to grasp the true essence of Stepping Stones, then participants are unlikely to change their attitudes and behaviour. Gender understanding must, therefore, be included in the criteria applied for facilitator selection, as well as in the training they are given.
- ⇒ **The involvement of women's organisations:** through raising women's awareness of their rights and the provision of legal support, women's organisations can help to reinforce the process of changing gender relations by for example, making women aware of their right not to tolerate domestic violence and helping them challenge abusers in court, if necessary.
- ⇒ **Men and women working together:** while feminist organisations often play a critical role in promoting women's rights, within the African context, feminism is often viewed as an alien approach and it is considered more effective to work with both men and women at the community level.

Stepping Stones: an effective tool for community mobilisation?

Another of the alleged strengths of Stepping Stones is its capacity to mobilise communities to take matters into their own hands and, together create a force for change and improvement at the local level. This potential is built into the Stepping Stones process itself, which culminates

in the formulation of a 'special community request' that is performed at an open community meeting in the presence of other SS participants and other representatives of the local area.

How effective is Stepping Stones in mobilising community action? Should SS be introduced into resource-poor areas without the capacity to provide back-up services in response to new demands from communities? What factors enhance the community mobilisation potential?

- ⇒ **Stepping Stones galvanises communities to respond to and/or demand a local government response to HIV/AIDS and linked problems:** The experience of ACORD in the 3 project countries (Angola, Tanzania and Uganda), which is also mirrored by the experiences of other organisations working with communities across the globe, is that Stepping Stones has a strong galvanizing impact and generates enormous energy and enthusiasm at the level of the individual and the community. Individuals have become advisers and counsellors within their communities; and others have formed groups to continue spreading the process, providing care and support to other community members and/or participating in advocacy initiatives.
- ⇒ **Raising awareness and demand for services constitutes the first step in the process of empowerment:** Stepping Stones can and should be applied even in localities where HIV/AIDS-related services, such as voluntary counselling and testing, access to ARVs, and so on, are not available, because community activism can help to increase the responsiveness of local government to community demands for services.

Factors that enhance the community mobilisation potential include:

- ⇒ **Involvement of local leadership:** in all 3 countries, where local leaders were involved, either as participants or facilitators, or on Policy/Advisory Committees, the degree of participation and community engagement in the process was enhanced.
- ⇒ **Facilitator commitment and capacities:** as in the case of gender above, the facilitators have a considerable influence on the outcome: their personal commitment is likely to be transmitted to participants, whilst if their approach is dull or didactic, participation is adversely affected. Facilitator training should include building facilitator capacity to empower communities to take action for change.
- ⇒ **The group dynamic:** The Stepping Stones process functions, both at the individual and group level: changes in the individual are reinforced by the group and vice-versa.
- ⇒ **Working in partnership with other organisations** to provide complementary services and/or exert pressure on local government to meet the demand for services.

How and Where can SS be used: Implementation and Adaptation Issues

Stepping Stones is an elaborate process that can be implemented in different ways depending on the setting and approach of the implementing organisation and/or individual facilitators. The Stepping Stones manual and approach was first developed in Uganda and has been criticised by some on the grounds that it is culturally biased and can not easily be adapted for use in different cultural contexts. Some have modified or 'adapted' the process in an effort to reflect their own socio-cultural milieu. In other cases, the process has been cut down to make it shorter for cost-saving or other purposes.

Which aspects of implementation are most critical? How easy is to adapt Stepping Stones for use in different settings? When does Stepping Stones stop being Stepping Stones?

- ⇒ **With a flexible and creative approach, Stepping Stones can easily be adapted for use in a wide range of settings:** within the basic framework provided by the manual, there is plenty of scope for drawing on local culture and forms of expression to discuss the various topics covered. The problem arises when facilitators are too rigid in their approach, treating the manual as a 'bible', rather than a guide. However, while some flexibility is permissible and, even desirable, the incorporation of religious and/or other kinds of didactic messages run counter to the spirit of Stepping Stones,

which is based on respect for individual opinion and choice, and should not be allowed.

- ⇒ **Minimum implementation standards should be established and adhered to :** these should covers areas, such as the training and supervision of facilitators; the level of attendance; continuity of participation; facilitation style; adhering to the number and sequence of sessions; and so on. For example, it is not acceptable to omit the sessions dealing with condoms on religious grounds as this would undermine the principle of choice. Besides these substantive considerations, there are other pragmatic issues, such as ensuring adequate time and resources are devoted to the process. Without adhering to minimum standards, both in relation to the content and delivery of Stepping Stones, quality can not be assured and one cannot refer to the process as a Stepping Stones process.

Assessing impact: Key Challenges

Lack of systematic recording and documentation of Stepping Stones has been found to present serious problems in terms of evaluating the effectiveness and impact of Stepping Stones¹. The lack of such evidence has threatened future funding for Stepping Stones, as in the case of the review of a SIPPA² project that advised DFID to suspend all further funding for SS on the grounds that there is no 'hard evidence' of impact.

How should the process be monitored and evaluated? What are the major challenges involved for small voluntary organisations?

- ⇒ **Setting impact indicators and collection of baseline data are critical:** In order to assess impact, you need to be clear about what kind of impacts you are interested in. You also need to have a baseline against which to compare changes at the individual/community level.
- ⇒ **Mix of quantitative and qualitative data:** Stepping Stones outcomes are mainly linked to the personal and emotional domains – love, improved communication, sexual satisfaction – and so on. These are difficult to measure and quantify. Thus, qualitative methods are required. But, such evidence is often not taken seriously and needs to be backed up by quantitative data as well. While it is generally agreed that you need a mix of both quantitative and qualitative data, there are different views on the best instruments to use and the right balance between the two. This is an area where there is still a need for further refinement of instruments and sharing of experiences.
- ⇒ **Community involvement** is essential at all stages of the process to ensure the validity of the findings for the community, as well as the implementing organisation. Feeding back findings to the community is also critical and reinforces the empowerment process.
- ⇒ **The process, as well as the outcomes should be documented :** As earlier noted, the process itself can also have a critical impact on the outcome and should, consequently, also be fully documented.
- ⇒ Key **challenges** faced by small NGOs, include:-
 - **Material and human resource constraints:** the development and implementation of a well designed impact assessment process is costly and requires fairly sophisticated research skills. Processing and analysis of data is also timely and costly. It is important to ensure that these costs are included in the initial budget. To

¹ This issue is fully discussed in the recent Actionaid report, also launched at the ACORD Conference, called 'Evaluating Stepping Stones: A review of existing evaluations and ideas for future M&E work' by Tina Wallace, June 2006.

² International Partnership Against AIDS in Africa

keep costs down and facilitate the analysis of findings, data collected should be kept to a minimum.

- o **Limitations on data available in resource-poor settings:** Data, such as records on treatment of sexually transmitted infections, use of VCT services, distribution of condoms by sex and age groups, etc. may not be routinely collected by the relevant service sectors and can not, therefore, easily be accessed to provide information on key indicators, such as treatment-seeking behaviour, stigma, condom use, etc. Capacity-building, including training for staff in these structures should be part of the intervention strategy.

- ⇒ **Need for further in-depth research:** to fully understand the dynamics of the Stepping Stones process and its impact on individuals and communities, there is a need for in-depth qualitative research. In complex areas, such as attitudes to and trends in domestic violence in different societies, such research is far better suited than large-scale, quantitative research, such as randomised control trials, to provide a clear picture of the trends at work.

Future Directions:

a) STAR

In recent years, Actionaid, the original promoter of Stepping Stones, has shifted its emphasis from Stepping Stones to STAR – a new methodology that combines Stepping Stones and REFLECT. REFLECT is a participatory literacy training process linked to grassroots empowerment. The intention behind the 'merger' of these two methodologies is to address gaps and combine the strengths of each, respectively. STAR covers a far wider range of community concerns from agriculture, to education, to health, while still retaining a strong focus on HIV/AIDS. STAR retains the participatory approach and emphasis on female empowerment of both methodologies, but STAR sessions take place in mixed groups, as contrasted with Stepping Stones.

Is STAR the right way forward? What are the potential dangers and/or opportunities offered by STAR?

Threats:

- ⇒ **Will focus on gender be watered down?** A key concern expressed by conference participants was that the emphasis on challenging gender relations that is fundamental to the Stepping Stones approach will be watered down or lost in STAR. Assurances that women's rights issues remain at the forefront of Actionaid's strategy did not allay this concern.

- ⇒ **The progression of the Stepping Stones process is lost:** STAR does not build on itself step by step in the way Stepping Stones does. Thus concerns were expressed that it would not have the same impact as Stepping Stones in terms of building up awareness and the ability to challenge existing norms and practices.

Opportunities

- ⇒ **Enhancing sustainability:** STAR is an open-ended process and continues for as long as communities want it to. Sustainability is also enhanced by the fact that facilitators are recruited from within the community.

- ⇒ **Learning from Stepping Stones:** The lessons from Stepping Stones, in particular, the need for greater attention to be paid to implementation standards, as well as support for effective monitoring and evaluation processes should be applied to STAR to ensure they are not repeated.

b) Scaling Up: the Gambia Experience

Stepping Stones was first introduced to the Gambia in 1997. An evaluation was carried out showing very positive results, particularly the reduction of domestic violence, which was widespread. On that basis, a decision was taken to scale up Stepping Stones country-wide in a series of phases. In the first phase (2003-5), SS was implemented in 120 villages and in the second phase (2006) it is planned to implement SS in a further 225 villages.

What lessons can be shared from this experience? What strategies can be applied for successful scaling up? What are the main challenges and/or threats?

- ⇒ **Scaling up is cost-effective:** Owing to economies of scale, the cost of implementing Stepping Stones in many villages decreases progressively, making it highly cost effective.
- ⇒ **Developing alliances inside and outside the country:** In the Gambia, a large number of organisations, both national and international were involved in promoting the scaling up strategy and this helped in terms of access to resources and clout.
- ⇒ **Quality versus quantity?** Fears were expressed that such rapid expansion must entail a loss of attention to the quality of the process itself. So long as a commitment is retained to ensure high quality and adequate follow-up, this does not have to be the case.
- ⇒ **Documentation and dissemination of the experience:** The Gambia experience should be documented and widely disseminated to enable others to learn from it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was generally agreed that the 2 day conference had provided a unique and greatly appreciated opportunity to share lessons and delve into some of the more thorny issues surrounding Stepping Stones and that a report should be produced and widely circulated for the benefit of a wider audience. Further thought should be given to the development of a set of guidelines drawing on the experiences of ACORD and others for the benefit of all those planning to implement Stepping Stones as part of their work with communities in Africa and elsewhere.

Annexe 1: Message from Alice Welbourn

4 July 200

Dear Stepping Stones friends and colleagues, new and old

Angela Hadjipateras has kindly invited me to say a few introductory words for this meeting about Stepping Stones, hosted by ACORD as it launches its important report of its action research findings from Uganda, Tanzania and Angola.

I am very sorry not to be with you in person, but I have just lost my 18 year old son, Ben, suddenly, from a massive unexpected brain haemorrhage, probably caused by a congenital weakness in an artery leading to his brain, and so I hope you understand that I need to be at home with the rest of my family.

When something enormous happens like this we consider ourselves immensely fortunate that my husband daughter and I received fantastic information, palliative care and support from the doctors and nurses in our local hospital, for the last few hours of Ben's life. We have since been surrounded by incredible warmth, love, care and understanding from all our friends and neighbours, both in our local village and around the world, over the last three weeks since his death. We feel hugely comforted by the faith that this support will continue in the days, weeks, months and years to come.

This is in stark contrast to the millions of people around the world for whom the fears, sickness and death of their children, grandchildren, parents and siblings caused by HIV status and AIDS-related illness, are associated with the traumas of cold shoulders, silence or malicious gossip, physical as well as psychological violence and totally unaffordable, unreachable or judgmental health services.

If Stepping Stones and related programmes anywhere in the world have contributed in any small way to alleviating the suffering related to HIV transmission, or to easing the trauma, devastation and grief faced by millions as they watch more and more of their relatives endure a slow, deeply painful and agonisingly isolated death, then there is much that we all need to learn, donors, researchers and practitioners alike, to see how such programmes can be supported, improved and adequately funded.

Over the past 3 weeks, in order to make sense of my own son's death, I have been re-reading many texts, which I first read in 1992 and '93, when I was coming to terms with the shock and grief of learning that I am HIV positive, and the loss of the unborn child I was expecting then. I have been drawn to many such books since. One which has stayed with me particularly is one by Satish Kumar, child monk of the Jain faith, peace pilgrim, ecological activist and educator. In this book, entitled "You Are, Therefore I am: A Declaration of Dependence", he declares

"science deals with what is measurable, and spirituality with what is immeasurable. Everything has these two dimensions together. How can we divide them?"

His premise in this book is that much of Western thinking is based on the Cartesian principle of "I think, therefore I am" (cogito, ergo sum). Kumar prefers instead to hold "You are, therefore I am" as his own principle of existence.

Kumar is concerned about Descartes, writing as follows:

This one phrase (cogito, ergo sum) describes the direction of Western science, philosophy, politics and the social order. When I first heard it, I was puzzled by Cartesian logic; in India we have been speaking of the dissolution and even the non-existence of the self for many centuries. But here was an eminent European philosopher basing the very foundation of existence on the self!

As I learnt more about Western culture, I realised how Cartesian dualism was an essential feature of a thought process which divided mind and matter, separated soul and body and

looked at the world as a collection of objects to be analysed, compartmentalised, classified, and controlled.. This Cartesian subject-object dualism or mind-matter split has become the dominant paradigm of Western culture..

Descartes attracted everybody's attention because he was the first philosopher to bring scientific methodology into philosophical investigation. The starting point of Cartesian enquiry is doubt, which was a useful tool at a time when questioning was quashed and blind beliefs imposed. But Cartesian doubt went too far – the baby was thrown out with the bath water. My upbringing was rooted in faith and in trust. Descartes discarded trust altogether, and a new dogma of doubt and then disillusion became the dominant paradigm of his thinking, and later of Western culture.”

So that was what Satish Kumar has written. I am no philosopher and so I can't judge how accurate his analysis of Descartes is or isn't. But Kumar's writings have meant a lot to me over the years, when coming to terms with my own grief in my life. A lot of these and similar thoughts from philosophies much older than ours in the West influenced me as Stepping Stones was created, between 1993 and 1995.

I do appreciate that it is important and right that Stepping Stones programmes should be 'properly' and rigorously evaluated, so that others may decide for themselves whether or not they have had the desired outcomes; and so that we can all find out how to build on its useful elements and discard its unhelpful or negative elements.

But, throughout this week and in all your future work, I would also like to hope and to make a request of us all – that we somehow hold on also to that spirituality which is at the essence of Satish Kumar's belief system – and which is the essence, I hope of all of us, whether we subscribe to a particular religious faith or none. I believe strongly and fundamentally in the universal nature of the human condition, no matter who we are in the world, what we believe in or don't, or where we live – and that universality includes a common spirituality. As a part of that universality, I also believe that we all have a right to define our own path up the mountain and no right to impose our own belief system or actions on others, particularly if these harm them in any way. I hope this universality comes through in what Stepping Stones is and what Stepping Stones tries to support people to learn about themselves and their own lives. To, Stepping Stones was perhaps about trying to help us all to understand our interconnectedness in the world and our inter-dependence. It was designed to try to help both myself and others to face the really big questions in all our lives, such as What is love? What is death about? What is our sexuality about? What are our relationships about? I would like to hope that it is these elements of Stepping Stones, more than any other, immeasurably though they might be, which appeal to people from many different walks of life and might make it of some use to them in some small way, around the world.

In this sense, therefore, Stepping Stones, was designed not at all as a public health response to HIV. It certainly includes some key aspects of public health responses, but it was also trying to address rather more than such responses normally provide. I suppose, therefore, that I wonder what evaluation methods there may be out there that enable us to address these *other* elements, since we all appreciate that you can't compare apples with oranges. I don't have any answers to that. I just offer these thoughts as you meet together to share all the important work you are doing in evaluating Stepping Stones – not least to offer some accountability to all those communities who agree to give up so much of their time to take part in it.

With warmest best wishes to you all

Alice Welbourn

Annex 2: Conference Programme

Stepping Stones

LOOKING FORWARD - LOOKING BACK

ACORD, July 2006

Conference Programme

Wednesday, 5th July

9.30	Introduction and Welcomes	Tina Wallace
10.15	Conference aims and programme	Tina Wallace
10.30	Overview of ACORD Project	Angela Hadjipateras

11.00 C O F F E E / T E A B R E A K

11.30	Angola	Fatima Dendo, Dr. Willy Vete Emmanuel - Angola
12.00	Uganda	Geoffrey Omoney, Ellen Bajenja - Uganda
12.30	Tanzania	Celestina Nyenga, Donald Kasongi

1.00 L U N C H B R E A K
video showings

2.00	GROUP WORK – Building on Critical Issues raised by ACORD presentations	
3.00	GROUP REPORT BACKS	

3.30 C O F F E E / T E A B R E A K

4.00 Group reportbacks contd

4.45 Summing up

5.00 C L O S E

Thursday, 6th July 2006

9.30	Launch of Actionaid Stepping Stones Evaluation Review	Jemal Ahmed, Actionaid International, Kenya
10.00	Monitoring and Evaluation of ACORD Project	Angela Hadjipateras
11.00	GROUP WORK	

11.00 C O F F E E / T E A B R E A K (group work continues over coffee)

11.30	GROUP REPORT BACKS	
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1.00pm L U N C H B R E A K
video showing

2.00	Scaling up Stepping Stones in the Gambia	Momodou Conteh, Worldview The Gambia
3.00	STAR (Stepping Stones and Reflect): Uganda	Elizabeth Nakiboneka, Actionaid International, Uganda

3.30 C O F F E E / T E A B R E A K (group work continues over coffee)

4.00	Looking Forward: Plenary Discussion	
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5.00pm E N D

Annex 3: List of Conference Participants

**STEPPING STONES
LOOKING FORWARD- LOOKING BACK
An ACORD Conference
5-6 July 2006
PARTICIPANT LIST**

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