

**DFID** Department for  
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**IISD** INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
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DÉVELOPPEMENT DURABLE

**MYRADA**

# The Positive Path

USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN RURAL INDIAN COMMUNITIES

**Graham Ashford and Saleela Patkar**





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The **International Institute for Sustainable Development** contributes to sustainable development by advancing policy recommendations on international trade and investment, economic policy, climate change and energy, measurement and indicators, and natural resource management. By using Internet communications, IISD reports on international negotiations and brokers knowledge gained through collaborative projects with global partners, resulting in more rigorous research, capacity building in developing countries and better dialogue between North and South.

IISD's vision is better living for all—sustainably; its mission is to champion innovation, enabling societies to live sustainably. IISD receives operating grant support from the Government of Canada, provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Environment Canada, and from the Province of Manitoba. The institute receives project funding from the Government of Canada, the Province of Manitoba, other national governments, United Nations agencies, foundations and the private sector. IISD is registered as a charitable organization in Canada and has 501(c) (3) status in the United States.

**MYRADA** is a non-governmental organization working in the areas of micro-credit, forest and natural resource management, micro-watershed development, poverty alleviation, empowerment of women, and community development. MYRADA works directly with 5,000 community groups representing 75,000 families in three southern Indian states. MYRADA's activities are undertaken through collaborations with state and national level government agencies, institutions, banks, other NGOs and international aid agencies. MYRADA is recognized as a leader in participatory community empowerment methodologies and arid eco-zone development strategies. As a result of their achievements in these areas, they are regularly invited to provide training and exposure visits to government and private institutions in various parts of India and abroad. MYRADA's approach to community development and natural resource management through capacity building in village level institutions has been recognized and adopted by development organizations in India, Myanmar, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

This publication was commissioned as part of a project titled *Beyond Problem Analysis: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Design and Deliver Environmental, Gender Equity and Private Sector Development Projects*. The DFID-supported project was undertaken by MYRADA and the International Institute for Sustainable Development. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect official DFID policies. This document is the basis for discussion with interested parties.

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- Graham Ashford and Saleela Patkar

# Foreword

Achieving sustainable development not only requires development professionals with technical and managerial skills, but also local people with a vision of a sustainable future in which all will benefit. It requires collective thinking and effort. While much has been debated about sustainable development at the macro-level, development practitioners have only limited and often antiquated tools to advance it at the micro-level. Keeping a focus on global issues while addressing current priorities at the local level remains a balancing act.

This publication is intended for development practitioners who are looking for methods by which local people can consider long-run issues of sustainability while addressing immediate deployment priorities. It will be of particular interest for those seeking to move beyond deficit-based approaches, to project planning and implementation, to methods that identify and build upon local strengths, values and visions. The guide introduces and explains the use of appreciative inquiry, an approach to organizational and social development that identifies peak moments within a community, then discovers and reinforces the conditions that made past achievements possible.

This document is not intended to be a comprehensive reference source for appreciative inquiry, but rather a synthesis of our experiences using appreciative inquiry for community development projects in rural India since 1999. Appreciative inquiry has been widely praised for its effectiveness in helping corporations become more competitive by aligning their structures and activities with employee and client values. Yet, since it was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastava at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland in 1980s, it has remained largely unknown to those working outside the corporate sector. However, as remarkable accounts of its applications in community development projects emerge, interest in the approach is growing. Still, few references are widely available about how the approach can be used in the world's poorer areas where innumerable development challenges exist.

After testing the approach over a two-and-a-half-year period with nearly 500 community groups in the most disadvantaged villages in southern India, we have been convinced of the value of this process. The production of this guide results from our desire to document our experiences and share material that will enable the more rapid adoption of appreciative inquiry in community development.

A final note: we consider this book to be a work in progress. As MYRADA and IISD further explore the use of appreciative inquiry, we will undoubtedly discover new

opportunities for applications and the need for refinement. Nonetheless, the absence of material on the use of appreciative inquiry for community development and repeated requests for a consolidated guide prompted us to publish our experiences. We hope that this guide will provide development practitioners with additional tools and a more positive mindset, both of which are necessary on the bumpy road to sustainable development.

**STRUCTURE OF THIS GUIDE** > Appreciative inquiry is proving to be a very robust process for promoting positive change. Its success has been confirmed with individuals, families, small groups, large corporations and even entire cities. Remarkable results can be seen in as little as a day, with widespread transformations occurring over years. Our experiences in appreciative inquiry are primarily with small groups that participated in exercises that took between two and five days to complete.<sup>1</sup> It is this approach that we have refined, documented and now present. For other applications the reader is encouraged to look to additional resources, including those outlined at the end of this publication.

The guide is divided into three sections:

**Section 1** presents a summary of the project including its objectives, strategy, participants and outputs.

**Section 2** presents the rationale for an appreciative approach, a step-by-step outline of the four stages of appreciative inquiry, including the exercises that we found particularly useful, and illustrations of their results. In addition we explore possible applications and limitations of appreciative inquiry and its relation to “participatory rural appraisal” (PRA), a set of learning and action tools.

**Section 3** provides a summary of the theory behind appreciative inquiry and a selection of resources on appreciative inquiry that the reader may find useful.

The guide concludes with an extensive bibliography of appreciative inquiry resources and references.

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# Section One

## ABOUT THE IISD/MYRADA PROJECT

### SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT

This book is one of the outcomes of a two-and-a-half-year partnership between Canada's International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and MYRADA, a south Indian development organization. Funding was provided by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development. The purpose of the project was to provide governmental and non-governmental organizations in India with a method of designing and delivering programs that build on a local strengths, achievements and vision to advance sustainable development and facilitate sustainable livelihoods.

**THE PROJECT'S OBJECTIVES** > The goal of the IISD/MYRADA appreciative inquiry project was to advance sustainable development and facilitate sustainable livelihoods by providing governmental and non-governmental organizations in India with a better method of designing and delivering programs—one that identified and reinforced a community's strengths, achievements and vision, rather than focusing on its problems, deficiencies and needs.

Project activities were designed to build capacity in the use of appreciative inquiry within a network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in southern India. Through fieldwork in three southern Indian states (Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) with hundreds of individuals, families, community groups and other organizations, IISD and MYRADA tested appreciative inquiry as a methodology for assisting local people design and implement projects.

**PROJECT STRATEGY** > The project team consisted of a core team of project managers and training staff from IISD and MYRADA as well as outside appreciative inquiry experts. Its strategy was to conduct training programs for NGO staff and fieldwork with community groups. By working in three diverse regions, the project was able to identify and document the most effective methods of applying appreciative inquiry under different circumstances.

**NETWORK PARTNERS** > The project worked directly with numerous non-governmental organizations that are involved in community development activities including the promotion of women's and children's rights, micro-enterprise, environmental rehabilitation, health, education, etc. While the project originally intended to involve only a

network of 11 NGOs directly involved in two of MYRADA's projects, many other organizations from around the country and indeed around the world took part as the project progressed.

**COMMUNITY GROUPS** > During the project, IISD, MYRADA and the network partners had an opportunity to apply appreciative inquiry with hundreds of community groups. These included self-help affinity groups (SAGs),<sup>2</sup> self-help group federations,<sup>3</sup> teachers associations, watershed development associations,<sup>4</sup> watershed implementation committees, village forest committees, village health committees, children's clubs, farmers associations, community health groups and others. We also had an opportunity to use appreciative inquiry with numerous individuals and families.

**EVOLUTION OF THE PROJECT** > The project originally intended to provide training only in three of MYRADA's 18 project sites. After field-testing the usefulness of appreciative inquiry for two years, a decision was to be made about whether it would be incorporated into the remainder of MYRADA's work. However, after only the second training program, the project team and the community groups were convinced of the value of appreciative inquiry. Consequently, the project work plan was revised to enable a more rapid scaling up of the training program to include every MYRADA staff member regardless of their position. As the project progressed, it became difficult to separate project activities from other programs that MYRADA was implementing. Appreciative inquiry quickly became a core training component in all MYRADA projects.

<sup>2</sup> Self-help groups or self-help affinity groups are small groups of up to 20 poor men or women who undertake thrift and credit activities. The groups are a major component of MYRADA's strategy for empowering poor women and men in India.

<sup>3</sup> Close network of self-help affinity groups who mainly look at issues that individual SAGs are unable to achieve, i.e., lobbying, common services for SAGs, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Associations of farmers and other people who live on or own lands in a small, geographically contiguous area. The association is usually involved in planning for soil and water conservation/natural resources management activities, agriculture development and non-farm-based livelihoods.

**A**ppreciative inquiry modules were included in other MYRADA training manuals and the staff began using the approach not just with community groups, but with their own families and friends, too. MYRADA itself undertook a full organizational review using the approach. Indeed, it seemed that MYRADA staff were willing to try appreciative inquiry in a full range of applications from budgeting, to staff evaluations to the development of job descriptions. Widespread success was reported which led to ongoing experiments with the approach.

In total, 28 training workshops were conducted in which about 500 staff from at least 70 organizations took part. The fieldwork within MYRADA's projects alone involved almost 500 groups for a total reach of over 10,000 people. This does not include applications by partner organizations or with the staff's families and friends. Numerous other presentations on appreciative inquiry were made to organizations and individuals that were interested in the approach. Copies of the project video were widely distributed and the web site received considerable attention. MYRADA intends to continue to extend the use of the approach to the rest of the 5,000 community groups with which they work directly.

**OUTPUTS >** To document the project's results and to assist in the progressive transfer of appreciative inquiry skills to the participating NGOs, the project team produced the following outputs:

**Progress Reports:** Six-month reports detailing project activities were produced and made available through the project's web site at <http://www.iisd.org/ai/myrada.htm>.

**Training Video:** The first training program in Kamasamudram was filmed and a 35-minute video on appreciative inquiry was produced. Titled *Appreciative Inquiry – A Beginning*, the video captures the first training session, which was led by Mette Jacobsgaard, an appreciative inquiry specialist. By filming the training, IISD and MYRADA hoped to maintain the integrity of the approach while the progressive transfer of skills and associated experimentation occurred.

**Field Guide:** This field guide was produced to share the results of the project and assist other organizations experiment with the use of appreciative inquiry.

**Web Site:** The project also established a multi-media web site at <http://www.iisd.org/ai/myrada.htm> which allows users to access progress reports, clips from the video, and a downloadable version of this guide.



A woman creates a symbolic pattern or *Rangoli* by spreading chalk on the floor. Such skills give illiterate members the confidence that they can draw their dreams even if they cannot write them.



# Section Two

## USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

### AN OVERVIEW OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Appreciative inquiry is a strategy for purposeful change that identifies the best of “what is” to pursue dreams and possibilities of “what could be.” It is a cooperative search for the strengths, passions and life-giving forces that are found within every system—those factors that hold the potential for inspired, positive change.

There are four stages to appreciative inquiry that form a continuous cycle. The first stage, **Discovery**, involves storytelling about peak experiences within a group and the community in which it exists. Through an analysis of their stories, people identify their strengths and the conditions that existed when past achievements occurred. They then enter the **Dream** Stage in which they challenge themselves to imagine a future in which their group functions at its absolute peak, achieving their goals and contributing to the development of their larger community. They form specific action plans to reinforce their strengths and achieve their dreams in the **Design** Stage. With a better understanding of their strengths and core values, a clear vision of the future they desire and specific strategies about how they will get there, they move on to the final stage, **Delivery**, in which they implement their action plans. Since it is a cycle rather than a linear process, a new round of discovery, dreaming, designing and delivering can happen at any point in the cycle.

By using questions to discover the strengths and successes that exist in every individual and community, a sense of hope is generated through which people begin to anticipate a better future.

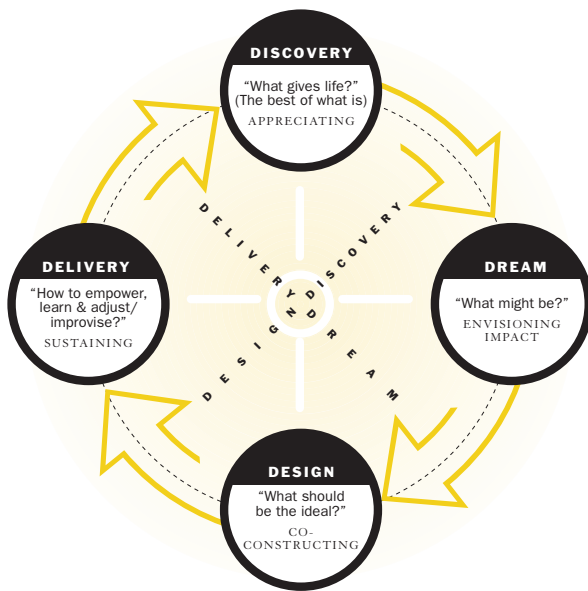
Further, they have a better understanding of the relevance of new initiatives to their

long-term goals. Buoyed by the confidence of their past successes, and inspired by a vision of a better future, people are better able to take up the many challenges that they face in their day-to-day lives.



The path to the future is rarely straight or free of obstacles.





## The 4-D Appreciative Inquiry Cycle

Adapted from D. L. Cooperrider, D. L. Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: A constructive approach to organization development and change*. (Cleveland, OH: Lakeshore Publishing, 2001).

**R**ATIONALE FOR AN APPRECIATIVE APPROACH > Like many development organizations, MYRADA had in the past designed and delivered their projects using participatory techniques intended to uncover local problems, resource constraints, deficiencies and unmet basic needs. While these approaches encourage participation, emphasize the importance of local knowledge and address real problems, MYRADA found that such approaches often failed to sustain community participation. MYRADA concluded that deficit-based approaches left people

with the impression that their community was full of problems and needs, most of which require the help of outsiders to overcome. The focus on needs entrenched a sense of dependence that reduced people's motivation to initiate their own development activities. These unintended consequences prompted MYRADA to shift away from deficit-oriented methods toward processes that build on local strengths and achievements and generate a sense of hope in the community.

**A DIFFERENT KIND OF TRAINING** | After spending five hours conducting appreciative inquiry exercises with the members of the Mahalakshmi self-help group of Kadiri in the sweltering heat, we asked them how they felt.

“We are a 13-year-old group, and we have been through many training programs. But this is different. We want to know what took you so long to conduct this kind of a program? We had no idea of our strengths. If you had done this a few years ago, imagine where we might have been today. You must promise us that you will do similar programs for other groups in our village.”

## SETTING THE STAGE – INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this section we provide information, based on our experiences, on how to conduct an appreciative inquiry in the context of small groups with limited time. While we occasionally make reference to applying appreciative inquiry with larger groups over extended periods, the reader is encouraged to explore other resources for information on those applications.

Before conducting an appreciative inquiry, the facilitator must carefully consider many factors including the size and composition of the group, the depth of the inquiry, the style of interviews, the method of recording the results, the role of the facilitators, and the location and timing of the event. Below, we offer suggestions for addressing these topics.

**GROUP COMPOSITION** > As with any group process, it is necessary to have all of the key stakeholders involved from the beginning. This ensures that the inquiry addresses issues of interest to all parties and helps to reduce the chances of obstacles and opposition to the visions and action plans that emerge. Further, because appreciative inquiry is an experiential and transformative process, the more people that can participate, the better. Even so, the facilitator should determine whether the group consists of people from similar circumstances with common interests, or if members come from more divergent backgrounds. This information, along with knowledge of the group's history, will allow the facilitator to ascertain how well group members know each other and consequently, how much time should be spent on ice-breaking and group-building exercises.

## DEPTH AND DURATION OF THE INQUIRY

> The scope of the inquiry will be an important factor in determining how to structure the interviews and how to share and act on the results.

Appreciative inquiry has been used in as little as an hour and as long as several years. Typically, the larger the group, the longer the inquiry will take. However, even small groups can undertake very in-depth inquiries that require extended periods of time to complete. Further, if the process is successfully institutionalized, the group will develop an “appreciative eye” that pervades its operations and ensures that the inquiry continues indefinitely.

Most of our experience comes from applying appreciative inquiry with small groups (fewer than 25 people) in two to five days, although IISD also has experience using the approach with a Canadian aboriginal community (population 350) over one and a half years.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For more information on IISD's experience using appreciative inquiry in Canada, please see <http://www.iisd.org/ai/waterhen.htm>.

**GROUP SIZE >** The size of the group determines, to a large extent, the type of exercises that can be conducted effectively and the methods by which they should be recorded and shared. The group size primarily refers to those that will be directly involved in the Discovery, Dream and Design Stage exercises. Implementing action plans typically requires efforts from a larger group including other community members, government agencies, development organizations and others.

**Small groups (fewer than 25 people).** The advantage of small group inquiries is that all of the participants have a chance to share their stories and dreams with the full group. Most exercises can be conducted in a plenary setting, or in sub-groups reporting back to the larger group.

**Large groups (more than 25 people – summits).** In larger groups it is not possible to listen to every story. This means that the group will have to divide into pairs or small groups to tell their stories. The smaller groups then decide which of the stories they will share back with the larger group. The best stories are shared in the larger group where they are discussed and themes, strengths and enabling factors are drawn out.

**Large Groups (more than 25 people – interview team).**

Another approach in large groups is to establish an interview team where each member of the team conducts one-on-one appreciative interviews with members of a larger group. This structure is often used when it is difficult to assemble the entire group for a sufficiently long period. It is then up to the interview team to analyze the data and present it back to the participants, preferably in a large group setting but also by other means such as newsletters, videos, etc. The benefit of this is that each person can spend more time sharing his or her story. The drawback is that it reduces the opportunity to hear each other's stories, which is important in building empathy, revealing unknown assets and developing strong bonds.



MYRADA staff help school children formulate action plans to achieve their dreams. Many children have given little thought to the range of careers that are available to pursue. They welcome the help from training staff in considering the various steps that they will have to take.





**Large Groups (more than 25 people – cascading interviews).** In very large groups it may be necessary for the interview team to train others to assist in the inquiry. One model for doing this has each person who is interviewed become an interviewer. While this approach may speed up an inquiry, care must be taken to ensure that the quality of the interviews remains high.

**RECORDING THE RESULTS >** It is important to record the output of the inquiry accurately and thoroughly. We tend to use flip charts, which everyone can read and refer back to. In most instances, the flip chart paper is left with the groups for future reference. Results should be recorded in the local language of the group so members can refer back to it in the future. We have also found it very useful to have group members record some of the results themselves so that they feel more comfortable repeating the process on their own. Video can be an effective method of capturing the results of an appreciative inquiry process, particularly when the outcomes are being shared with others who did not participate directly. Some groups have painted their visions and strengths on cloth banners and find them more useful to carry around. They also have visual appeal. Many groups have laminated the results of the process to preserve them. This demonstrates the ownership that people have in the outputs of the exercises.

**INTERVIEW TEAM ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES >**

Prior to meeting with the group, facilitators should agree on the specific roles and responsibilities that they will have during the inquiry. Where possible, we have tended to assign one or two people to lead the process and ask the questions, and another person to record the results. The facilitators monitor each other to ensure that each maintains a positive attitude and line of inquiry.

**THE CASE OF THE MISSING BANNER |** After the appreciative inquiry exercises, the Sarvashakti Federation of Odeyarapalya had prepared two cloth banners measuring one by three metres and costing about Rs. 500. One of them listed out the federation's strengths and another had a picture of its visions. The federation proudly displayed the banners during all its meetings and events including a mass wedding ceremony it helped to organize for poor couples in the village. After the wedding, the logistics committee of the federation realized that the banner of strengths was missing. The members searched for it in the nearby bushes and forest, suspecting that a strong breeze may have blown it off. When they failed to locate it, they sent messages to all SAGs and people in the area to look for it. There was no progress but the members did not give up. Ten days later as the federation's president was walking past a small village, he noticed a woman's petticoat drying on the roof of a house. Faint traces of letters on the petticoat caught his attention. He climbed up the roof, and lo! The federation's strengths were visible on the petticoat! By now no woman in the village would admit that the petticoat was hers. The president located the tailor and forced him to disclose the identity of the woman. The "guilty" woman was in tears and explained that she was illiterate and therefore did not know what the banner meant. The woman apologized and paid a fine of 50 rupees to the federation. The local painter received an order for a new banner the next day.



**LOCATION** > Location is an important consideration in conducting the inquiry. The more comfortable participants feel, the more likely that they will share meaningful stories and become engaged in the process. It is important to choose a location that is relatively quiet, so that everyone can hear, and one that is free of distractions, so that the momentum of the exercises is maximized. The facilitator should take care to ensure that they have the wall space and materials to record and display the process on flip chart paper. The venue should also allow free entry to participants regardless of caste, religion or gender.

The importance of location is illustrated by the example of one MYRADA facilitator who was not satisfied with the quality of the stories or the level of group interest in the session he was leading. In a somewhat daring move, he stopped the inquiry and asked the group about locations around the village that were particularly special. Members identified a very special and peaceful site that was about one hour away. Without hesitating, the facilitator requested that everyone walk to the site. Although this took up valuable time, the facilitator found that the group dynamic entirely changed when they were outside in the beauty of the new location. The stories were more meaningful and the group's interest was much deeper.

**TIMING** > Timing is also an important consideration in conducting the inquiry. The facilitator should try to schedule the event when the participants will be free to concentrate on the exercises. This will typically require that participants be consulted on an appropriate time and informed of the probable duration of the exercises. Appropriate time should be planned so that participants neither feel that the process is too rushed or is dragging. It is important to schedule sufficient breaks so that the participants remain engaged and also have time to reflect on the emerging results.



Training staff discuss their roles and responsibilities prior to meeting with a self-help affinity group. Such preparation is important to ensure that the inquiry proceeds smoothly and is adequately documented.

**OPENING EXERCISES** > We have found it useful, time permitting, to conduct several opening exercises that help the group members feel good about themselves and think positively and constructively. Below are several exercises that suit this purpose:

**Opening song or ritual:** Local customs often include singing a song, reciting a prayer, lighting a lamp or some other activity that signifies the beginning of a program or relationship. Try to seek a song that has a positive and inspirational theme.

**Participant introductions:** Break into pairs and have each person find out several things at which the other person excels. Then have one person introduce the other to the larger group, describing their strengths. If group members already know each other well, each person can introduce the other highlighting what they value in the other, or recounting a particular achievement that the other has made.

**Personal strengths list:** If the group is small, write the name of each participant on the top of a sheet of paper (one name per page). Then ask the group members to circulate the papers and to write one thing that they really admire about the person whose name is on top. At the end of the exercise, each person ends up with a sheet of paper with a long list of the strengths that others see in them.

**Group assets exercise:** Give the participants three cards each and ask them to write the three things that they are particularly good at doing. Collect the cards and post them on the wall. Have participants arrange them into categories upon which they decide. Discuss the group's resources.

**Village walk:** Taking a stroll through the village with group members can provide an excellent opportunity to seek physical examples of previous achievements. For example, if a hill has been replanted with trees, or a temple constructed, ask the group about it. How did it happen? Who was there? Who did what? How did they feel when it was completed? Try to identify the strengths that the group drew upon to complete the task.

If there is not sufficient time for a walk around the village you can ask the group a question such as “What do you feel most proud of in your village?” or “If an important person were to visit, what achievements would you want to show?” Ask for comparisons like: “What did this village look like 20 years ago?” and “What has changed for the better?” Try to find stories that evoke pride and fond memories from the participants. This will help to create an atmosphere conducive to further story-telling.

**Coat of Arms:** Give the participants paper and pens and ask them to construct their coat of arms. A coat of arms can look like a shield or crest divided into sections where participants draw or write responses to questions such as:

- > Draw a plant or animal that symbolizes your strengths and best qualities.
- > Draw or describe your personal long-term vision.
- > Draw a symbol of personal achievement; something upon which you look back with pride.
- > Create a motto that represents your personal beliefs or values (“words to live by”).

A coat of arms can also be constructed for the group as a whole. This exercise works better in literate groups, but pictures can replace text if the group prefers.

We tended to use this exercise only during the staff training sessions. It was not commonly used with the community groups, as the idea of a family crest was quite foreign to them.

**THE POWER OF IMAGES** | When asked what their family valued in them, a member of Saraswati SAG Federation drew a small circuit and said, “I am like a light switch; I bring light to my home.”



## DISCOVERY S T A G E

The Discovery Stage of appreciative inquiry is a defining feature of the methodology. Good Discovery exercises create an opportunity for sharing stories that recognize individual merit and mutual strengths. This builds the bonds that are necessary for individuals to invest their efforts in collective action for extended periods.

The opening questions of the inquiry can generate remarkable energy and valuable information. As David Cooperrider explains: “The questions that we ask set the stage for what we ‘find,’ and what we ‘discover’ (the data) becomes the stories out of which the future is conceived, conversed about and constructed.”<sup>6</sup> As such, selecting the focus of the inquiry and generating appropriate questions takes on particular significance.

**FORMULATING THE DISCOVERY QUESTIONS** > When generating Discovery questions, it is important to:

- > Frame questions in an affirmative way that implies respect for group members;
- > Ask open-ended questions that invite stories and embellishments rather than yes/no responses;
- > Build affinity among participants by framing questions such as “tell us a story about a time when members of this group played an important role helping you to realize a dream or overcome a challenge”;
- > Add additional questions to determine the necessary details (the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where* and *how* of the event); and
- > Seek stories of personal experiences from participants rather than accounts of others.

We believe that to be effective, appreciative inquiry should address two interrelated and complementary outcomes: group capacity building and community development. With a focus on capacity building, the participants can

consider periods when the group was working at it best. Stories will relate to internal processes such as decision-making, leadership, financial management and reporting; and core values such as transparency, participation and equity. The visions and action plans that emerge will address how those internal processes could be strengthened. For example, how could the group become more innovative? How could individual members be recognized for their achievements? How could leadership be rotated to build everyone’s capacity? How could communication with outside agencies be improved?

**As story-telling is the heart of appreciative inquiry, it is important that the facilitator poses questions that stimulate story telling about past events, rather those that elicit lists or yes/no answers. We have found that when people recount their successes and factors that enable them through narratives, their responses are more genuine and representative than when they are asked to list individual or group strengths. When people recount their experiences through stories they reveal their strengths indirectly. It seems to be more genuine and less likely to be “what the participants thought the facilitator wanted to hear.” As well, stories evoke emotion, sympathy and respect. Stories prove, reveal and corroborate strengths. They inspire. They capture the listener and liberate the teller. Besides, story-telling is universal, something with which people in most cultures grow up.**

<sup>6</sup> David Cooperrider, and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Constructive Approach to Organization Development and Social Change*, (unpublished workshop manual, Corporation for Positive Change 1999).

With a combined focus on community development, the participants can also consider their achievements within the community. Stories might relate to building a road, reducing illiteracy in the family or eliminating gambling in the village. The visions that follow will address the group's role within the larger community. They might relate to immunizing local children, undertaking a watershed development project, empowering women through literacy training or starting new self-help groups.

Given the importance we place on a balance between capacity building and community project planning, we have included example questions below that address both.

### EXAMPLES OF DISCOVERY STAGE QUESTIONS

#### Personal questions:

*Recount a story about an exceptionally empowering experience in your life. What made it remarkable?*

*Recount an event where you demonstrated remarkable leadership abilities. What challenges did you face? How did you overcome them?*

*Tell a story about a time when you felt you overcame a significant challenge to achieve something remarkable. How did you feel?*

#### Internally-looking group questions:

*Tell a story about a time when you were really excited to be part of the group.*

*Tell a story about a time when you felt the group was really at its best; when energy and enthusiasm were particularly high.*

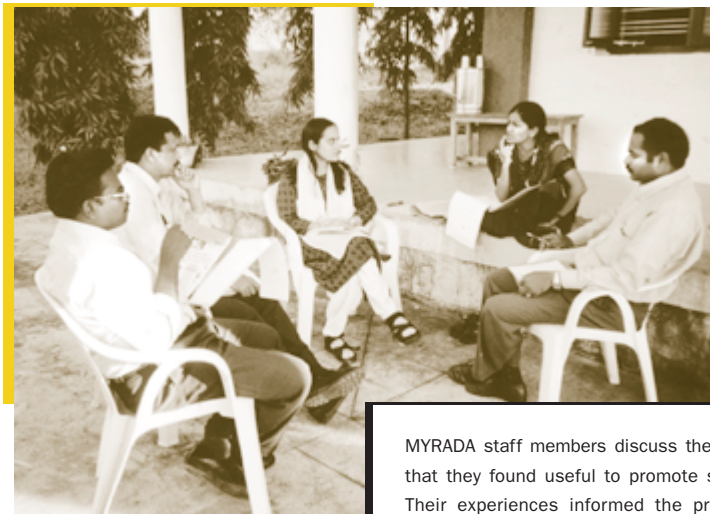
*Tell a story about a time when an innovation—a new way of doing things—helped your group achieve something important. What happened specifically?*

*Describe a time when your group exhibited excellent internal communication skills. What was happening? What was it like to be part of it?*

*Describe an incident in which your group built strong linkages with another institution. What made the linkages remarkable?*

*Describe an instance in your group when you felt that someone was really well recognized for their contributions and accomplishments. What was the incident? What form did the recognition take? How did the person feel?*

*Tell a story about a time when you really felt the support and encouragement of other group members?*



MYRADA staff members discuss the techniques that they found useful to promote story-telling. Their experiences informed the production of this publication.

*Tell a story about a time in your group when you felt that decisions were really being made in a participatory way. What was happening?*

*Describe a period when the group's energy and momentum for common action was at its peak. What were the factors that inspired group members and gave life to the groups actions?*

### **Externally-looking community questions:**

*Tell a story about a time when the group did something really remarkable for the rest of the community. How did the community respond?*

*What is it that makes others in the community respect the group and its members. How did this respect come about?*

*What is the most exciting community achievement you can recall? What role did the group or its members play?*

*When you think of all of the achievements the community has made, which one has produced the most enduring benefits? What made it so sustainable?*

### **Follow-up questions:**

The facilitator can ask additional follow-up questions to reveal more details. These questions might take the form of:

- > What happened specifically?
- > How did it make you feel?
- > How do you feel now when you recall it?
- > What would it feel like to have such moments on a deeper or more frequent basis?

**STORY ANALYSIS** > With encouragement, the above questions will generate rich narratives that reflect individual, group and community achievements, values and aspirations. The role of the facilitator is to help the group draw common themes from the stories and to understand more completely the conditions that made the peak experiences possible. This should involve group discussion prompted by simple questions such as:

- > What are the strengths that made the achievement possible?
- > What individual and group values are reflected in the story?
- > What external conditions existed that contributed to the peak experience?

We have found it useful to analyze the stories immediately after they are told. That way the stories are still fresh in the participants' minds and the emotion associated with the story is present. All participants should be involved in identifying and documenting the conditions that enabled each peak experience. High participation helps to ensure that the strengths, values and other factors represent a shared perspective. As well, by taking part in the analysis, each participant better understands the process and how to recreate it in the future.

Adequate documentation of the strengths and enabling factors is important, as the participants will refer back to them in the Dream Stage. Collect individual as well as group strengths and values and the essence of each story on flip charts that are easy for all to see. Some groups may prefer to depict their strengths and values through pictures or songs.







### CHOWDAMMA'S STORY

Chowdamma, a member of the Swati Self-Help Group in Gajaga, narrates this story of her peak experience:

“My husband was a compulsive gambler and his habits kept my family poor. One day I confronted him about it and he said: ‘I am a man and I decide what I do. But, if you have the courage, catch me red-handed, then I promise to give up.’ Those were difficult times, but I decided that I would take up his challenge. For almost a year I plotted and schemed and followed him on the sly. I was not so lucky. Then I told the other members of my self-help group about my trouble. They assured me they would help me as they could. This lightened my burden a bit.

Then one day, during the annual festival in our village, my husband came home, had an early supper and said: ‘I am off to Kamasamudram.’ Kamasamudram?! I knew he was lying and was trying to fool me. This was the day I was looking for. It was dark outside; I cloaked myself with a dark blanket and followed him from a distance. He slowly went off the road into the fields and I saw him enter an old pump-house. I returned home quickly, left my sleeping child with the neighbours and gathered my friends from our group. Seven of us cloaked in dark blankets and armed with big sticks stole up on the gambling den. The door was locked. One of our group pretended to be a prostitute. The door opened a crack and we all pushed our way in. What a scuffle that was and how the men fled, almost falling into an old well! My husband pretended to be asleep while one of his friends tried to gather all the outside playing cards and destroy the evidence. Cards were falling out of his pockets. We scolded them, scolded them a lot: ‘You irresponsible men, being married and with children—is this how you behave?’

Then I called for a village meeting. This problem had to be tackled by more people. That night my husband ran away to a secluded house, as he did not want to face the village. The men were unwilling to discuss the issue but I insisted and demanded justice. We found my husband at the house, brought him to the meeting and he swore off gambling ever since. No one gambles in the village anymore. My husband returned home and I watched him for a week—he never ventured out. He told me: ‘Now you are the man of the house; I concede defeat.’ I am happy because my husband also kept his word.”

Chowdamma's story reveals remarkable strengths: determination, ingenuity, cunning, teamwork, courage and more. It also illustrated one of the core values of the group: improving the lives of families by stopping gambling in the village. The story led to a group vision where self-help groups would be formed for other women and that the liquor store in the village would be closed. When the training staff returned to the workshop, they almost fell over each other to narrate the story. They had worked with the group for years but had no idea the group was so resourceful and determined.

## TIPS ON FACILITATING THE DISCOVERY STAGE

### Preparation:

- > Develop the interview protocol and agree on roles and responsibilities prior to meeting with the group, yet be flexible as events unfold.
- > Ensure that the time and location of the inquiry are convenient for participants.
- > Find out about the group's background and possible strengths and weaknesses that could be addressed through the process.

### Materials:

- > Ensure that there is an adequate supply of materials appropriate to the exercises. This might include chart paper, markers, crayons, paper, pencils, group records, camera, snacks and tea.

### Attitude and expectations:

- > Enter with the highest expectations of the group and its abilities.
- > Use humour to break down fears and barriers between trainer and group members.
- > Be ready to listen in an interested and encouraging way—like a friend hanging on every detail.
- > Maintain respectful body language and high energy. Maintain eye contact; sit forward.



Project staff recall stories of peak moments.

**Story-telling:**

- > Focus on the incident itself and not on unnecessary background information.
- > Ensure that the environment is conducive to story-telling.
- > Give participants time to think after the questions are posed; good stories might not come to mind immediately.
- > Stories should include the relevant “who, what, when, where and how.” Use an example, if necessary, to get the process going.
- > Ask for stories of the group’s successes. Once people are comfortable, seek stories of individual accomplishments.
- > Start with group members who you know have a good story.
- > Be ready with follow-up questions.
- > Use encouragement to validate/confirm people’s stories and achievements.
- > Seek stories that are based on personal experience rather than second-hand accounts.
- > Use topic selection/linking questions to discover strengths and accomplishments in an area where you know the group needs help.

**Story analysis:**

- > Identify strengths and enabling conditions for all stories (group and individual).
- > Accept all stories for what they are and try to find strengths in them.
- > Deepen the analysis by asking probing questions to reveal the underlying values, strengths and factors that led to the success.

**Dealing with problems:**

- > Recognize that some groups may feel demoralized, anxious, frustrated, angry, powerless or resentful, which makes it difficult to tell stories of peak experiences. It is important to acknowledge these feelings without emphasizing them. Show understanding, let the members express their feelings, then steer the inquiry back to the more positive Discovery questions.
- > Be aware that some participants may become very emotional as they recall the difficulties they have faced. This is a healing process that should be allowed. Do not forget to stress that they have overcome the situation.



**Documentation:**

- > Ensure that the strengths and values are sufficiently documented, including in the group’s record books if they are available.
- > Ask illiterate groups to draw their stories, strengths or visions. Drawing provides participants with a visual reminder of their strengths and dreams. It can also create strong metaphorical images.
- > Have someone other than the facilitator record the session.
- > Write in the local language (or their language of choice)—it is their process.
- > Take photos of charts (it’s easier than drawing them again), so that you can leave the flip charts with the group.

**Internalizing the approach within the organization’s routines:**

- > Explain the Discovery process to the group so that they understand why it was conducted and can undertake it on their own.
- > Promote a process by which group members tell one or two stories at each meeting to continue the Discovery process. A topic for each meeting may be established.

**EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF STORY-TELLING | Basavaiah, a member of a group in BC Halli HD Kote, recounted a story of overcoming a challenge:**

“Mahadevaiah, and I are close friends. Many years ago as we both kept a night watch over our crops, a snake bit Mahadevaiah. He panicked, but I ripped my shawl and tied a tourniquet to his leg. We decided we had to go to the hospital but it was 12 kilometres away and there was no transport in the remote area. The road was not lit and I was concerned, as elephants sometimes roamed them. We started our long trek in the dark but midway through the journey, Mahadevaiah collapsed. I was really worried. How could I lose my friend? Mahadevaiah is a heavily built man, but on that day I got some unknown strength in my body. I hoisted his unconscious body on my shoulders and I don’t know how I did it but walked the remaining six kilometres to the hospital. The doctors saved Mahadevaiah’s life. I will never forget that day!”

It was an emotional moment for Mahadevaiah who was also present during the appreciative inquiry session. He broke down crying: “If not for my friend, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Raviprakash, the MYRADA facilitator, tells us that he could not resume the process for another 10 minutes because of the emotions evoked by the story. Such incidents have given him a deeper respect for the group members.

**EVALUATION OF THE DISCOVERY STAGE** > We consider a Discovery session to be conducted successfully if it meets the following criteria.

**Stories were factual:** People shared their life experiences and added sufficient detail that other group members understood the event and its significance.

**Stories were inspiring and energizing:** The energy in the room was high, with the story-teller actively speaking and other group members adding details to other people's stories. Other members were eager to tell their own stories and the confidence of the group and its members increased. People expressed their emotions during the exercise.

**Affinity among participants was enhanced:** The group members felt like they knew each other better after the stories. The cohesion within the group increased. The relationship between the facilitator and the group members was also strong.

**Stories and enabling factors were adequately documented:** The key elements of the stories, memorable phrases and the factors that enabled the peak experiences to occur were recorded for all to see.

**New strengths were revealed:** The group discovered things about itself that it previously did not recognize.

**There was an adequate understanding of Discovery process:** Group members understood how the exercise was conducted and could do it on their own in the future.

**INSPIRATION FROM OTHERS** | In the Lakshmi SAG of Gajaga, Bhulakshmi narrated the story of her peak experience—the day she learned to write her name: “For a month I used only my thumbprint. Then the group reminded me and some of the others that we had not learned to sign our names and should do so. All of the others learned but I still couldn’t manage it. They took us to Boodikote. Rukkamma held my hand and showed me how to write but my hands and leg shook with fright. Everyone laughed at me. I had only one day left before the next meeting. What to do? That night I didn’t sleep. I tried over and over again to write my name on Ragi. My husband laughed at me and said: ‘Aren’t you ashamed? Even children can do it.’ Then suddenly I found I could write!”

When the MYRADA staff met with the group the next day to continue with the appreciative inquiry exercises, they found that one of the other women in the group had been inspired by Bhulakshmi’s story. She had practised hard that night and found that now she, too, could write her name. The group’s vision became the reduction of illiteracy in the village.



## DREAM STAGE

In the Dream Stage, local people discuss how they can build on their strengths to better their group and their community. What would the group be in five years? What would be its greatest achievement? What role would the group members play in the development of their village? What would it look and feel like if the group was always at its peak? Aspects of the group's vision are likely to encompass social and economic relationships, cultural traditions, natural and man-made environments, governance structures, employment opportunities and social infrastructure.

Because the images of the group's future that emerge are based on their strengths and past successes, they represent compelling possibilities. People become inspired and begin to understand the importance of renewed action.

In our experience two important types of visions emerge from the Dream Stage exercises:

1. Visions that address the internal structures and functions of the group (following from the capacity building focus); and
2. Visions that articulate a long-term mission for the group in the development of the village (following from the community development focus).

## OBJECTIVES OF THE DREAM STAGE

> The objective of the Dream Stage is to enable participants to evolve quality visions based on their strengths and values. At the end of the Dream Stage exercises participants should be able to:

- > Articulate their dreams and express the group's mission;
- > Explain the purpose of their dreams;
- > Recall the strengths and values behind each dream; and
- > Evaluate their dreams (based on the criteria described at the end of this section).



Three women discuss their vision of the future.



## DREAM STAGE EXERCISES >

**Reviewing strengths and themes from Discovery Stage:** If the Dream and Discovery exercises are conducted on separate days, the participants should review the strengths derived through the stories told before moving on to the Dream exercises. This helps to ensure that the dreaming is linked to past accomplishments and it is grounded in reality. The facilitator may invite the group to review its strengths and values along with the factors that enabled its past successes. Participants may categorize the strengths identified if they see fit.

**Visualization exercise:** Ask participants to relax for a moment, preferably with their eyes closed, and to imagine what their group could be like in the future. Prompt the group with questions like: “What would this group look like if it was constantly coming up with new and better ways of doing things?”; “What would this group look like if linkages to other institutions were exceptionally strong?”; “If the group was really making a difference in the village, what activities would it be doing?”; or “If the community really came together and worked hard, what could this village look like in five years?” Ask the participants to describe their images in detail. Record the output on flip charts or by other highly-visible means.

This exercise can also be conducted on a personal level. For example: “What would you feel like if you frequently achieved your personal goals?” or “What would it feel like if you participated effectively in all group decisions?” or “What positive changes would you like to have made in your community five years from now?”

**Personal and group wishes:** To get participants thinking about a preferred future, the facilitator can ask group members to formulate three personal wishes and three wishes for their organization. These should be genuine and heartfelt wishes. Participants should be supplied with small cards or other means of recording their wishes and given time to complete the exercise on their own. The facilitator can assist the process by asking participants a question such as: “If you visited yourself five years from now, what would you like to see?”

**Goal or vision “tree”:** Another exercise that we have found useful is a goal tree. This works particularly well for prioritizing group and personal goals. Give the participants paper of various colours and ask them to construct a tree where each goal is represented by a piece of fruit. The larger pieces of fruit can represent more important goals. Those goals that are harder to reach and require more planning and effort are placed at the top of the tree. Thus a small piece of fruit near the bottom branches represents a less important goal which is nonetheless, easy to achieve. The tree can be enriched by listing the key strengths of the group as its roots, and the core principles and activities of the group as its trunk. This illustrates the past, present and future of the group.

**DREAMING | This group will mobilize the necessary resources and build a school within the next year.**

**This community will plant 1,000 trees over the next two years to ensure the forest's survival for future generations.**

**This group will concentrate its efforts over the next six months on creating a village free of gambling and drinking.**

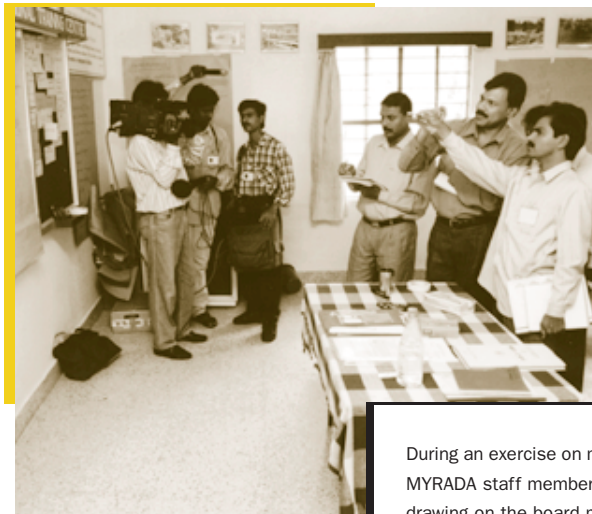
This exercise is great for stimulating discussion and has the advantage of creating an image that the group can display and review. As the group achieves its goals, they can be picked from the tree and placed in a basket at the bottom of the diagram. This becomes a method by which the group can monitor progress towards their dreams. This exercise can also be conducted for individuals.

**Drawing or collage:** Pictures can often depict an organization's vision more holistically than short statements. Use questions like: "With a lot of effort and hard work, what could your group/village be like five years from now?" When there are several participants, make sub-groups and then help them to consolidate the results. Alternatively, individual members can draw their own personal vision and group visions and then discuss the match.

**Group mission:** While the preceding exercises tend to be useful in producing short- to medium-term goals and a self-vision of a highly effective group, it is also important for the members to consider the group's long-term mission within the community. To facilitate this, form several smaller groups and ask each to put forward their ideas on what the world is calling the group to become. Beyond the day-to-day operation of the group, what role could it play within the community in the longer term? When the sub-groups have developed some ideas, reconvene the larger group to discuss them. If possible, have the larger group consolidate the ideas in the form of a picture, mission statement or a *provocative proposition* (see below).

**DOCUMENTING THE DREAMS >** The group's dreams can be documented in a wide variety of ways. Some of these include drawings, songs, statements or charts. The important point to remember is that the vision should be clear and easy to understand in whatever form it takes. It is preferable that it is displayed in a prominent place and it is reviewed and updated at regular intervals.

**WRITING PROVOCATIVE PROPOSITIONS >** Another method of recording the output of the Dream Stage is through the creation of "provocative propositions." As Jane Watkins and Bernard Mohr describe it: "A provocative proposition is a statement that bridges the best of 'what is' with your own speculation or intuition of 'what might be.' It stretches the status quo, challenges common assumptions or routines and helps suggest real possibilities that represent a desired image for the organization and its people."<sup>7</sup>



During an exercise on multiple realities, a team of MYRADA staff members debate what an abstract drawing on the board might depict.

<sup>7</sup> J.M. Watkins, and B.J. Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. (Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001), p. 141.

This exercise requires particular attention to the selection and sequence of words. As such, it is more appropriate for literate groups that have been together for some time. It is a demanding exercise that, if properly facilitated, can result in powerful statements. If poorly facilitated, it can dramatically lower the energy of the process. We tended to use the exercise with training staff, but less often in the field with groups.

A good provocative proposition should meet the following criteria:<sup>8</sup>

- > **It is provocative.** It stretches and challenges the group, forcing it to move beyond the parameters of its normal routines.
- > **It is grounded.** Similar challenges have been met in the past and, as such, the vision represents a compelling possibility.
- > **It is desired.** All group members would like to be part of the group as it is described in the statement.
- > **It is stated in the present tense and in affirmative language.** This helps the group project a positive image of itself.
- > **It is highly participative.** Achieving the statement will require effort and input from all group members.
- > **It stimulates organizational learning.** The statement directs group members to be more attentive to those qualities that exist when the group is at its best.
- > **It addresses multiple aspects of the group's structure and activities.** This could include such things as leadership, societal purpose, communication, staff, structures, business practices, community relations, etc.
- > **It balances existing activities with future goals** through a strategic transition.

### **SIMULATION EXERCISE TO CONSTRUCT PROVOCATIVE PROPOSITIONS**

> To construct provocative propositions in a group inquiry, we often use the following simulation exercise. Ask the participants to imagine that it is several years in the future. Their group has just been nominated for a very prestigious award for organizational excellence. The award recognizes outstanding groups that should serve as a model for the entire country. Break into sub-groups and assign each of the groups with one of the following tasks.

1. A national television station is sending a camera crew to interview the group. You will have 30 seconds of airtime to describe why your group is so exceptional, where it finds its energy and what it contributes to sustainable development. Develop a 30-second statement.
2. The national newspaper has set aside two column inches of space to cover the story. They would like to know what makes the group perform so well, why it makes the world a better place and how it maintains such a high level of enthusiasm. Develop a short newspaper item.
3. The Secretary General of the United Nations is phoning to congratulate you and hold you up as an example to the rest of the world. You have 30 seconds to describe the qualities and values that contributed to your group's success and your mission in the world. Develop a 30-second statement.
4. The Prime Minister wants to know why you deserve this prestigious award. He can only be reached by telegram. In 60 words or fewer, describe why the group is so exceptional, what gives it life and why the country should be proud of you. Develop a 60-word telegram.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Cooperrider and Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Constructive Approach to Organization Development and Social Change*.

The facilitator should circulate between the groups gently prodding participants to stretch their imaginations and create an inspiring and desirable image. What would the group really look like if it were attracting national/international attention and accolades? Bring the sub-groups together and ask them to share their results. This can be a very fun session if the participants act out their scenarios. An example of the provocative propositions that resulted from this exercise when it was conducted with training staff:

*Our organization has a clear and evolving vision and mission that we have consistently achieved by adopting innovative strategies and best practices. We have dedicated and professional staff who are vision-oriented and exhibit admirable leadership. Our good administration is accountable, transparent and extraordinarily efficient. The participation of people's institutions, effective networking and advanced communication systems sustain our energy and lead us to continual success—making the villages in which we work better places for all to live.*

The following short, but potent, statement was produced by a men's self-help group:  
*The self-help group is part of our bodies.*

Another group composed a poem that described what one would see while walking through their village—green fields, avenues, clean surroundings, prosperous and peaceful people, etc.

## TIPS ON FACILITATING THE DREAM STAGE

- > Breaking through mental barriers can take time. Try to create a non-distracting atmosphere and allow participants sufficient time to think about new possibilities and articulate them. Be encouraging. Group members may feel cautious about putting forward ideas that seem radical, even if they are desirable.
- > If participants are drawing their Dream images, the facilitators may want to give them some privacy so that they do not feel self-conscious of their work.



Two students write action plans to achieve their dreams.



- > Strive for consensus around an inclusive group vision. This will make it more likely that all members will contribute to its realization. Involvement in a group process enables a person to have a vision, because they see the visions of others, and express that vision because they feel the support of others.
- > Use inspirational sayings and slogans to encourage participants.
- > It is important that the group perceives something as its own vision—and finds it inspiring—even if the facilitator might not.
- > The first time groups envision, they tend to be conservative in their assessment of their capabilities. If you feel the group isn't stretching itself, ask further questions or conduct another Discovery exercise that will help them to identify additional strengths and think about other goals.

**EVALUATION** > Through our work in India, we have identified what we believe to be the characteristics of good visions—those that truly inspire people to achieve their destiny. Good visions are challenging, yet achievable. They create tension between what the group is currently doing and what it could achieve based on its past accomplishments and current attributes. They stir the group to action. They are holistic, shared and form the basis for the group's activities.

We consider the Dream Stage to have been completed successfully if vision statements meet the following criteria:

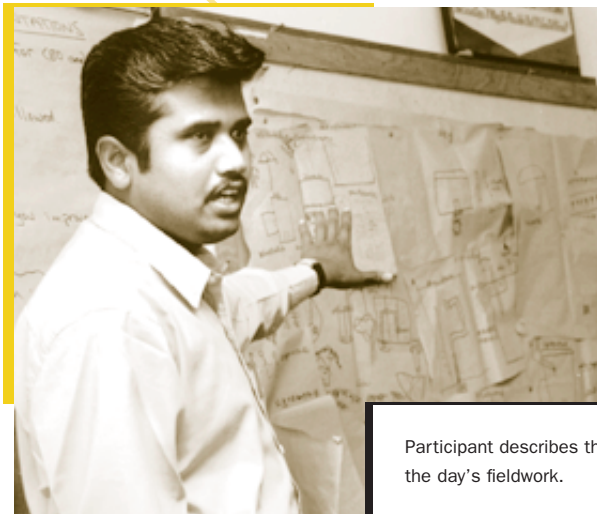
## CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD VISIONS

### Holistic:

- > Vision addresses the betterment of the group and its processes as well as the development of others in the community.
- > Vision incorporates many dimensions—economic, environmental, social, spiritual and ethical.
- > Vision is a mix of immediate activities, long-term activities and strategies to reinforce important strengths and values.

### Challenging:

- > Vision requires a commitment to doing something that is beyond what the group normally does.
- > There is a degree of difficulty and risk that must be overcome to achieve the vision.



Participant describes the details of the day's fieldwork.



- > Collective action as well as individual initiative is required to achieve the vision (also requires some sacrifice of individual needs for collective good).
- > Achieving the vision requires changes in the forms of engagement with outside agencies (communication, relationships, social structures, etc.).

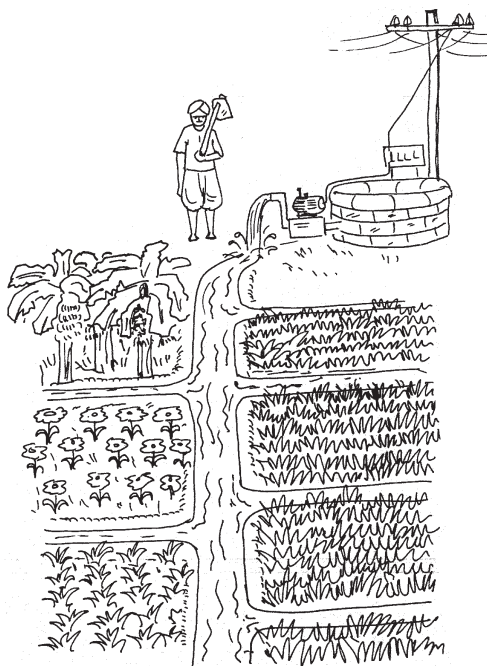
**Achievable/realistic:<sup>9</sup>**

- > The vision should be specific, measurable and based on an assessment of current resources.
- > The vision can be achieved as it is based on strengths the group has demonstrated through past achievements.
- > The group has the potential and willingness to adopt new forms of engagement (relationships, communication, social structures, etc.).
- > The vision draws on existing capacities and available resources within the group.
- > The group has seen similar ideas work elsewhere.

**PICTURES AS METAPHORS** | In December 1999, as part of a training program, a group of MYRADA staff tried appreciative inquiry for the first time with members of Sarvashakti Federation in Talavadi. The group was mature and confident, but the staff were not. They were groping for words to describe visions and how to develop them. One of the frustrated participants stood up and said: “We are a small seed now, you want to know what we will look like when we grow up to be a big tree. Is that all? All right, leave us alone and we will sort it out.”

An hour later, the MYRADA staff returned. On a flip chart there was a beautifully drawn picture of a big well with an electric pump. Water from the well flowed into several paddy fields and orchards with bananas and other fruit. A farmer stood beside the channels regulating the water flow. “Oh no!,” exclaimed one of the staff, “they want us to electrify those old government-sponsored wells.” And then the federation began its presentation:

“We are like the water from this well; we will always be useful and life-giving. These paddy fields are the self-help groups that form the federation. Their prosperity will be the federation’s priority. The fruit orchards and banana plants are like other institutions and individuals in the community. We will also help them. The farmer depicts the federation representative who shall always be responsible to see that the efforts and utility of the federation goes to the right place.” The group then presented a list of activities and programs that they had planned for the next 10 years.



<sup>9</sup> A balance should be sought between the challenge and the reality. It should stretch the group, but be achievable.

**Shared:**

- > Everyone has the same understanding of the vision.
- > Members of the larger community are also aware of the group's goals.
- > Everyone in the group can articulate the vision.
- > The vision integrates the aspirations of all members. Everyone has contributed to and benefited from the vision.
- > The process of developing the vision was highly participative.

**Documented and institutionalized:**

- > Vision and strengths are recorded in a minutes book and in charts or in other visual media.
- > Vision is documented and displayed where the group meets.
- > System for regular sharing, reworking and following up on the vision is established.
- > Future visioning is a self-initiated process.
- > The group has discussed the roles and responsibilities of members in working toward the goals.
- > While giving support to the process, the facilitator should be mindful not to impose their own visions of what the community should be. This tends to reduce the group's ownership of the results.

**Evolving:**

- > The vision changes and grows regularly and reflects current priorities.
- > The vision changes in response to the external environment or as a result of frequent review.

**Internalized:**

- > Group members identify with the vision at a personal level.
- > Visions are implemented out of self-interest rather than by outside pressure.
- > Group members use appreciative inquiry in other contexts, such as with family members and other associates.

**Reinforces existing strengths:**

- > Vision strives in part to reinforce existing strengths.
- > Vision is linked closely to outcome of Discovery Stage, and incorporates the strengths and values that the group wants to reinforce.
- > In the vision, there is an emphasis on learning.

**Not heavily dependent on outside agencies:**

- > Group members draw on their own resources and do not rely heavily on others to achieve their vision. This emphasizes interdependence as opposed to dependence or independence.



## DESIGN STAGE

The Design Stage is intended to bring together participants in a dialogue about creating their desired future. With a vivid image of their dream, people begin to consider how to build social systems for their community that might, for example, re-define approaches to leadership, governance, participation or capacity building. As they compose strategies to achieve their dreams, local people discuss how to incorporate the qualities of community life that they want to protect and the relationships that they want to achieve. They turn imagination into action by establishing roles and responsibilities, developing strategies, forging institutional relationships and mobilizing resources to achieve their goals.

Detailed planning begins at three levels:

1. Action planning on short term objectives established in the Dream Stage;
2. Discussion of long-term strategies to achieve more challenging goals; and
3. Consideration of structural changes that will reinforce existing strengths, core values and life-giving forces and create mechanisms for continual organizational learning.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE DESIGN STAGE** > The objective of the Design Stage exercises is to assist the group members develop the structures and strategies needed to take action on their short- and long-term goals. Through intensive and methodical planning, practical steps are defined that will direct group and individual actions.

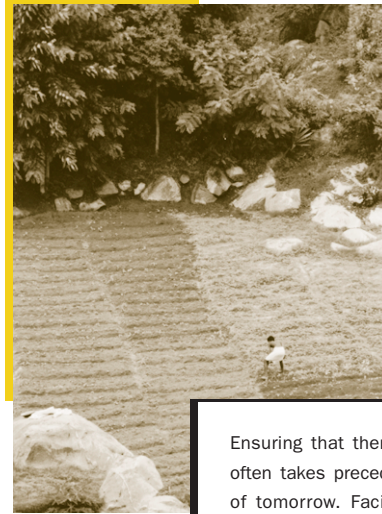
Specifically, at the end of the module, participants should have:

1. Segregated issues in their vision that are short-, medium- and long-term in nature, and separated simple activities from strategies and structural changes;
2. Worked out detailed strategies to achieve each element of the vision along with possible alternatives and fall-back options;
3. Broken down each of those strategies into a set of doable activities spread out over a period of time;
4. Set mechanisms for regular review of their visions and achievements in order to institutionalize the process;
5. Documented the process of Design; and
6. Verified the link between their strengths, visions and action/strategy plans to ensure that actions match their goals.

**DESIGN STAGE EXERCISES** > Before detailed action planning can proceed, it is necessary that the group agree on which dreams are most important for immediate action and which will be left to a later date. This might involve grouping the dreams into the following categories:

1. **Short-term objectives:** These objectives might include simple activities such as forming two new self-help groups in the village, building 10 latrines or conducting three low-cost marriages.
2. **Long-term goals:** These goals tend to require more time, the cooperation of larger numbers of people, the mobilization of resources and the acquisition of new skills. They might include such things as undertaking a large-scale watershed development project, reducing illiteracy in the entire village or abolishing underage marriages.
3. **Structural changes to the organization and the way it functions:** These dreams tend to reflect the long-term mission of the organization as it may be described in the provocative propositions. These goals are more difficult to measure but are critical to reinforcing the group’s capabilities and helping it achieve its mission. They include the “softer” elements such as empowerment, leadership, recognition, innovation, etc. They might include statements such as: “Our group will play a leadership role in our community, acting as mentors for our children and setting the standards of conduct in the village.”

**Prioritizing the dreams:** Given that there may be many goals and vision statements, yet only limited time and resources, it is important for the group to carefully consider where it will first put its effort. One method of prioritizing is to list all of the vision statements on flip charts, and then give participants sticky dots, pieces of tape, markers or some other means by which they can vote on the statements. Depending on the number of visions, we typically give the participants between three to five dots per category and ask them to put a dot beside the vision that they would like to mobilize behind first. Group members can put more than one dot beside a vision if they consider it very important. When all of the votes have been cast, total the votes for each vision to determine which ones the group feels most interested in pursuing. In small groups, consensual decision-making through discussions is also effective.



Ensuring that there is food on the table today often takes precedence over the considerations of tomorrow. Facilitators need to ensure that meetings are held when it is convenient for group members to attend, otherwise participation and concentration will suffer.

**Group discussion:** Prioritizing the dreams is also possible simply through extended group discussion prompted by questions like:

- > Which of the goals is most important to the group?
- > What would you like to start working on right away?
- > Which aspects of the group would you like to strengthen first?

**Developing action plans:** After the dreams have been categorized and prioritized, participants can begin developing action plans to achieve them. This planning can take several forms. Among the most popular with appreciative inquiry professionals is the use of organizational development frameworks such as McKinsey's 7-S framework which focuses attention on the group's structure, systems, style, strategy, skills, staff and superordinate (overarching) goals. Another popular framework is the Weisbord Six Box organizational model which illustrates the relationship between the group's purpose, structure, rewards, coordinating mechanisms, relationships with leadership playing a central role. Planning can be seen as analogous to architecture in which the various systems within a building complement each other to produce a structure with certain characteristics. This is a useful analogy as it illustrates the importance of the timing in the construction of the structure. The foundation, for example, must exist before the walls can be erected and the electrical system installed. Similarly, the group must develop governance, communication and documentation systems before it can form effective partnerships with outside agencies.

While the above frameworks can be very effective, some community groups will find the complex language and process overwhelming. In such cases, simpler methods that ask the community to consider the "who, what, where, when, how and why" of events are often more easily understood. This can be preceded by probing questions such as:

- a. How do we proceed with the action planning for our visions?
- b. What aspects of our visions would we like to deal with and when? How do we prioritize the various aspects of our vision? What are the short-, medium- and long-term issues?
- c. What aspects of our visions are simple activities; which of them require deep and intelligent thinking and are not straightforward?
- d. Are there issues in our visions which require us to change our organizational structure or core functions? How do we go about these and when?

The important consideration is to concentrate on the roles and responsibilities within the group, bearing in mind the features of the organization that the members currently value and those that they would like to see operating in the future.





## WHY

- > Helpful for the poor families.
- > To reduce indebtedness among poor families (due to loans taken for weddings).
- > To support girls who are orphaned.
- > To create awareness on the ills of the dowry system.
- > To create awareness on the advantages of simple weddings.

## WHAT

Organize 15 simple marriage ceremonies.

## WHERE

For people living in the federation's work area.

The weddings will be conducted in a public place near Odeyarapalya.

## WHEN

During the anniversary of the federation (in the month of May).

Three couples each in May 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005.

## WHO

All the members of the federation and SAG.

The following members are responsible to take this forward:

1. P Nagaraj
2. Shivananda
3. Mahadevappa

## HOW

- > Selection of couples.
- > Mobilizing contribution.
- > Awareness discussion on simple marriages.
- > Awareness discussion on demerits of marrying people when they are very young (under 18 and 21 years of age for women and men respectively) by an external speaker.

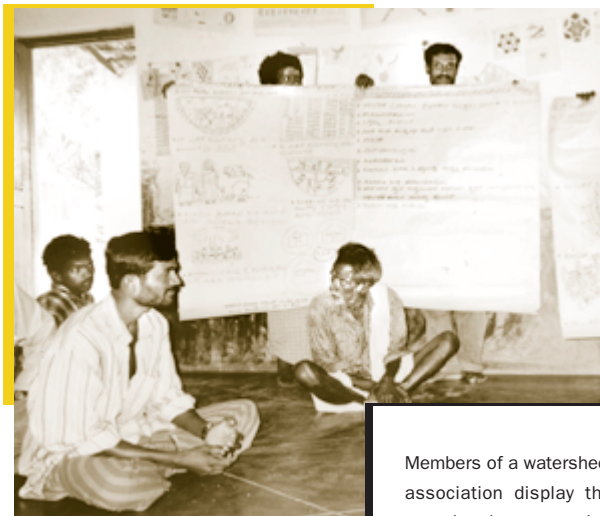
**An example of an action plan developed using simple questions:<sup>10</sup>**

<sup>10</sup> Actual results of the first round of Design by the Sarvashakti Federation of Odeyarapalya Area.



In developing the action plans, it is important that the members begin planning activities across all three categories. This ensures that they will be buoyed by their short-term achievements while still addressing their long-term goals and structural changes. Members will find it useful to revisit story-

telling to identify what has worked in the past. For example, if one of the visions stretches the group to become more innovative, the facilitator can ask the group to recall stories of times when they tried an entirely new way of doing things with remarkable results. As the group analyzes these stories, they develop a better understanding of the conditions that enable innovation to occur. Further inquiries into these topics are then possible. For example, a group member may recall reading about a new method of planting trees which could then be successfully modified for their own conditions. The group could then consider ways in which they could encourage the habit of reading so that future innovations were more likely. This practice of identifying topics and then inquiring deeply into can produce remarkable ideas for change.



Members of a watershed development association display their vision for restoring the community's land. Other participants look on.



**KEEPING UP THE ENERGY LEVEL DURING DESIGN >**

As the Design phase tends to emphasize analysis, discussions and decisions, the process can be tedious. The facilitator should use games or other exercises to energize the participants and to illustrate specific points related to Design:

**Co-ordination games:** These games illustrate the need to have good coordination among the members of the group to achieve their goals

**Teamwork games:** These games illustrate the need for teamwork and how good teams can deliver greater results than individuals

**Stories and examples:** Stories and examples that illustrate goal orientation or successful planning and strategies will help the participants

**DOCUMENTATION >** As with the other stages of appreciative inquiry, it is important to thoroughly document the action plans on flip charts or by other means so that the group can refer back to them as implementation proceeds.

**EVALUATION >** Action plans are likely to be effective when they:

- a. Have clearly-stated objectives/results/goals and vision;
- b. Have specific strategies to achieve goals that address:
  - i. Staff/Members – roles and responsibilities, rewards and recognition, relationships (internal),
  - ii. Stakeholder relations/partnerships (external),
  - iii. Skills (capacity building for technical as well as “soft” skills like leadership, networking, vision building),
  - iv. Resources – (financial, social, human, material, environmental, etc.),
  - v. Systems – (organizational/financial management, monitoring and “valuation,” documentation and communication, policies, etc.); and
- c. Are consistent with the organization’s stated societal purpose (mission) and the shared values of the members, and when they create mechanisms for continuous learning.

**A LARGE-SCALE PROCESS: PREPARING A COMMUNITY DESIGN OUTLINE FOR BIDARAHALLI** | The MYRADA/PLAN HD Kote Project conducts a regular planning and budgeting exercise called the Community Design Outline in every village that it works. Usually the CDOs are prepared using several participatory techniques like mapping and problem analysis. After the introduction of appreciative inquiry, the project decided to prepare CDOs using the AI approach. Bidarahalli is a village of settlers with 202 households. There are 10 SAGs of women and two youth groups in the village. Though the village itself was quite united, the people rarely made efforts to build linkages with the government or other organizations. They always brought their list of problems to the meetings with MYRADA and hoped that MYRADA would provide solutions. They would accompany the MYRADA staff to meetings with the government but never speak up themselves.

The CDO preparation exercise involved the entire village. In the morning, the five local MYRADA facilitators introduced the purpose of the exercise with discussions on the concept of development. There were 250 participants.

The community members were then divided into smaller groups numbering 15–20 in each—groups of men, women, children, politicians, people’s representatives and government officials. The MYRADA facilitators spent up to four hours with each group as participants discovered their strengths and developed visions for their village. The village then gathered together at the school in the evening and each group presented their strengths and visions to the plenary. There were long and frank discussions about the visions drawn up by various groups and in the plenary the participants consolidated and prioritized the visions for their village. They also developed some plans for implementing their visions. The dates for budgeting and further planning were agreed upon.

The discussions for prioritizing visions were interesting and the outcomes unexpected. For example, the priority of the men’s group was to construct a road to the village while women preferred access to safe drinking water. After long discussions, the women’s priority also became the village’s priority. It is rare in Indian villages for women’s priorities to be even heard in public. The women and children also convinced the village to improve the status of their school—this became the second highest priority.

Vision for five years:

**ADULTS**

1. Dwellers of the village have safe drinking water.
2. Each family owns a toilet.
3. There is a good road to our village.
4. Our village school has a good building.
5. The SAGs in our village are strong.

**CHILDREN**

1. Our school provides a good learning atmosphere.
2. It is clean.
3. We have safe drinking water.
4. The school has a playground.
5. Our school has a library and sufficient classrooms.
6. All our houses are electrified so that we can study under sufficient light.

Since the exercises, the people have remained enthusiastic about their visions and discuss them regularly in their group meetings and with the local government. It was useful that many local government representatives were also SAG members. The final planning and budgeting meeting took place in the office of the local government and, unlike before, the groups did not ask for MYRADA’s assistance for most of the programs. They entrusted the youth group to coordinate all communication and interactions outside the village and the SAGs for all activities within the village. In a year, the village council had mobilized and completed the following programs:

Overhead tank for drinking water	Rs. 450,000 from the government	The community donated its time, got involved in and supervised construction activities, and raised local resources.
A new school room	Rs. 150,000 from the government	
School sanitation	Rs. 50,000 from the government	
Grama Panchayat office (local government) building	Rs. 150,000 from the government	

The village has achieved their visions for five years in less than one. Additionally, the SAGs have started to function independently and MYRADA’s only interaction was reduced to a monthly monitoring meeting. The SAG members also play an active role in their federation and are also trained to train other SAGs. They are now being trained to facilitate appreciative inquiry with other groups whenever required. Raviprakash and Mahadevaiah, the MYRADA facilitators, feel that the attitudes of people have evolved and they now look at themselves as agents of change.

## DELIVERY STAGE<sup>11</sup>

**OBJECTIVES OF THE DELIVERY STAGE** > This is the stage during which group members mobilize resources, form new relationships, acquire new skills and implement their action plans. Collective vision directs collective action.

### Effective Delivery emphasizes:

- > **Innovation:** During the implementation of their action plans, group members should explore new methods of organizing that maximizes the efficiency of their human and financial resources, but also improves their chances of success.
  - > **Continuous learning:** Members need to be conscious and systematic about learning from their successes, however small, so that they can be recreated.
  - > **Nurturing an “appreciative eye”:** This involves a continuous search for and celebration of the peak moments of the group and its members.
  - > **Institutionalizing the appreciative inquiry process:** The group should make efforts to routinely discuss their visions and action plans, and to continue to inquire into and learn from their peak moments. The strengths and values that they identified and the vision that they developed should be thoroughly documented and where possible displayed as a reminder of what enables success and what the group is working towards.
- > **Self-reliance:** To as great an extent as possible, the group should turn to itself to plan and implement activities to achieve its vision. This does not preclude forming new partnerships to mobilize resources and acquire new skills, but it should recognize the members, as opposed to outside agencies, as agents of change.
  - > **Monitoring:** Group members should monitor the progress that they are making and revise their action plans and strategies where necessary.
  - > **Participation:** Shared responsibility for decision-making, resources mobilization and implementation maximizes the chances of sustained success.
  - > **Transparency:** Open access to financial records gives group members the confidence that the funds they raise are being administered appropriately.

<sup>11</sup> This stage is also known as the Destiny Stage. We prefer to call it the Do Stage as the word Delivery is seen by many in community development to imply that the outsiders are delivering the services. Nonetheless, given its popularity we have used the term Delivery here.

## FOLLOW-UP: KEEPING THE CYCLE GOING

Appreciative inquiry needs to be seen as a cycle where a new round of discovery, dreaming, designing and delivering can occur at any time. This might mean quick inquiries to discover new strengths as implementation proceeds, or changes to the vision and action plan as priorities evolve. It can also mean more in-depth inquiries to achieve more significant structural change.

The appreciative inquiry process can be institutionalized in the community-based groups in the following ways:

- > The groups set aside some time at every meeting to discuss their visions, plans and progress towards achieving them;
- > Visions/plans and achievements are displayed prominently to act as a constant reminder;
- > The groups learn to appreciate, celebrate and reward success;
- > The groups review and envision during their anniversaries and also share their visions with the larger community;
- > The group delves deeper than before into their strengths and visions;

- > Group members take the concept of appreciative inquiry home to their families, their friends and other institutions; and
- > The groups support other peer organizations to undertake the process and form their own visions and action plans.

**RELATIONSHIP BUILDING: FROM STAFF MEMBER TO FRIEND** | P Vijaya Kumar, the District Project Coordinator of Chitradurga, believes that his relationship with community members is transformed after he facilitates appreciative inquiry sessions:

**“The relationship is no longer based on authority or dependency. SAG members from villages no longer perceive me as a Project Officer, but as Vijaya Kumar the person, a friend.**

**“I recall one frail old woman, who was a member of a federation in Holalkere. She started out as a passive participant in the vision-building exercise for her federation, but towards the end of the three-day program, she had turned out quite boisterous; she even broke workshop norms. While the rest of us discussed some serious matters related to the federation, she was pestering me to take her on a picnic! I guess I have now learned to take these distractions in my stride!**

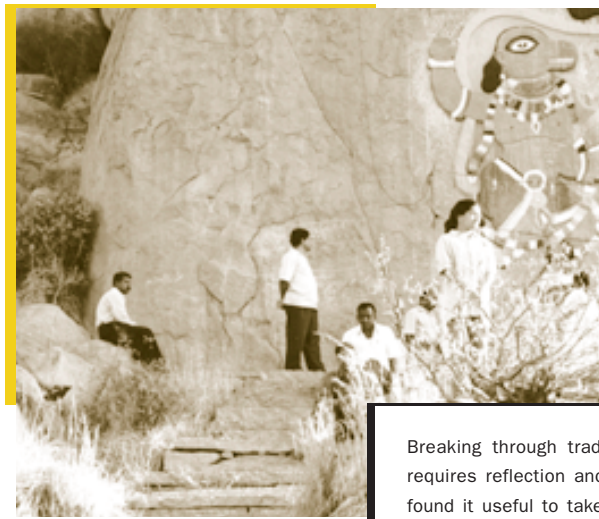
**“A few months later I recognized her in a large gathering where I was to speak. As I spoke to the group I saw her at the rear of the audience waving out to me. A few minutes later she was missing from the previous spot and there she was, in the middle of the audience, trying to catch my attention! Then she disappeared again. I thought she had left but noticed someone grinning away in the first row. There she was again! She ran up to me after the meeting, tapped on my shoulder and said: ‘I hope you are doing fine!’ and then disappeared into the crowd. I felt so happy. Ordinarily women in India are shy, preferring to stay in the background. Appreciative inquiry has helped me to reach out to people like her, and perhaps change the way she perceives herself.”**



**ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR** > During the Discovery Stages, the facilitating organization needs to play a proactive role to:

- > Build capacities of the client groups so that they can carry forward the appreciative inquiry process on their own, through planning, implementing and assessing their work;
- > Remove structural obstacles that come in the way of the poor asserting their constructive role in the community;
- > Document and highlight the achievements of these groups so that the approach will find greater acceptance and application in the development community; and
- > Learn from and document its experiences so that the process can be shared with others.

**POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS** > The successful application of appreciative inquiry requires creative and energetic facilitation and an expectation that the group is capable of success. We found that in the few instances where the facilitator lacked these skills and attitude, the group members did not challenge themselves in their goals and in some circumstances failed to recognize all of their strengths. Enthusiasm for the process was low and initiatives were not sustained.



Breaking through traditional ways of thinking requires reflection and clarity of purpose. We found it useful to take an early morning silent walk where participants could contemplate what they had learned during the training sessions.





We also concluded that appreciative inquiry takes time. If it is attempted as a short exercise, energy and enthusiasm might initially rise, but a deeper analysis of strengths and a thoughtful vision-building and action-planning process will not occur.

An in-depth appreciative inquiry requires highly trained facilitators and the resources and time for analysis, consolidation and long-term commitment for the participation of several stakeholders. Every organization that intends to use appreciative inquiry must make decisions about how far it will go in this regard. Practical considerations in the field may also present choices like: “Should we take every group through appreciative inquiry or only try it out with a few?”; and “Should the process remain in the hands of a few or become accessible to a larger number of people, including facilitators from the community?”

As well, because appreciative inquiry challenges assumptions and seeks, in some cases, to reinvent social systems, the process can in rare instances create conflict. This can happen where there is an imbalance in power relationships which results in group members disagreeing on the vision and action plan, or not participating. Effective facilitation skills are necessary to return the emphasis to positive and shared values, and to ensure that all participants have a chance to tell their stories and contribute to the group goals and action plan.

In our experiences, the benefits produced far outweighed any drawbacks of the approach.

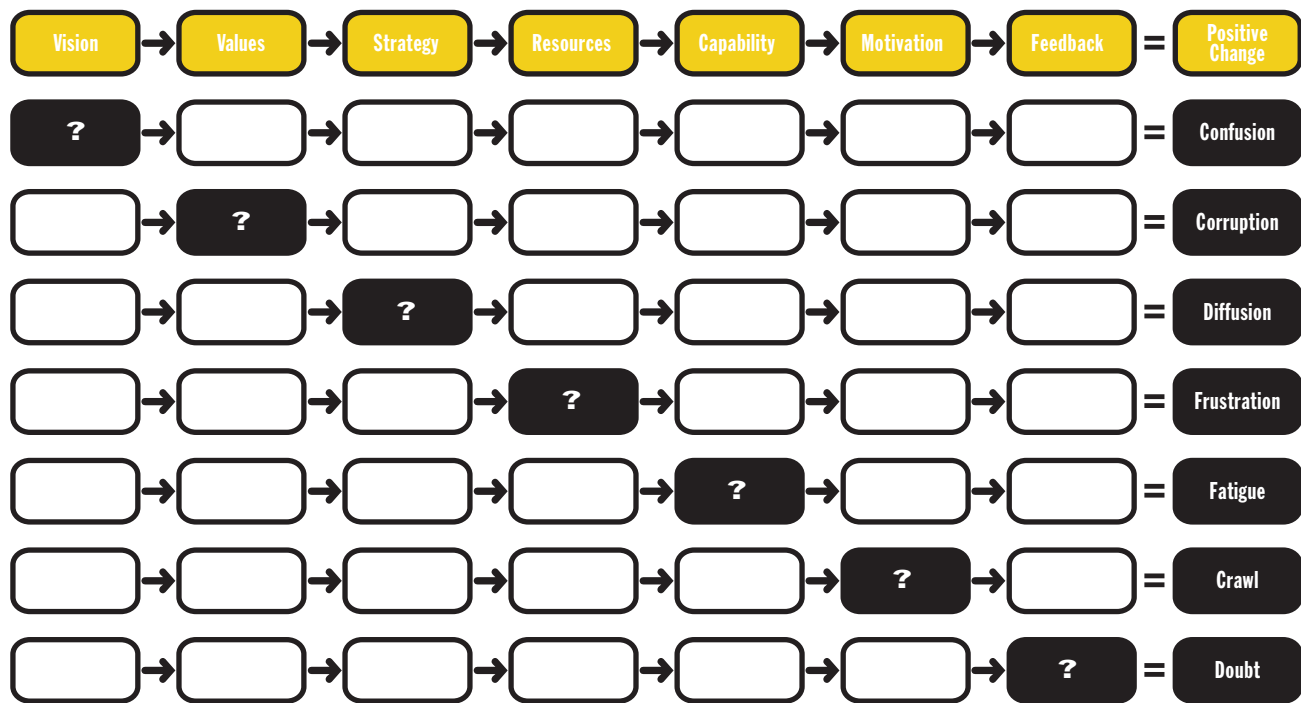


Overcoming challenges is part of daily life.

**APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY WITHIN A BROADER DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**

> Appreciative inquiry should be seen as part of a larger development strategy. To understand this better, the table below explains some of the more important factors that enable positive change.

When one of the factors is absent, change may be difficult to sustain. The table suggests possible outcomes when a particular factor is absent. In the second row for example, a group vision is lacking which can result in people becoming confused as to their purpose. Similarly, in the third row, when values are not shared the process can be corrupted. Where no strategy exists to coordinate actions, efforts may be weakened.



While the diagram greatly simplifies a very complex problem, it helps to clarify our impression of how appreciative inquiry contributes to a larger development strategy. Appreciative inquiry can be very effective in establishing an inspiring group vision, articulating shared values, developing strategies and engendering interest in implementing them. Appreciative inquiry creates a sense of ownership in new initiatives. It can also be a useful feedback tool. However, while it may be helpful to reveal hidden resources and skills, it does not in and of itself create resources, build technical skills or establish new institutional relationships. These are areas where alternative measures need to be considered. And, as always, all of the key stakeholders need to be involved in the process to ensure that the strengths, goals and action plans are inclusive and representative. Nonetheless, by providing people with an effective tool to understand how they successfully addressed past problems, we have found appreciative inquiry excellent at generating new ideas and action for more secure and sustainable livelihoods.

## **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL**

> We have found the relationship between appreciative inquiry and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) to be complementary; one enriches the other and they can be used together.

- > Appreciative inquiry is a process to discover people's strengths and to use the momentum and energy generated to build a group vision and action plan. PRA refers to a set of systematic, semi-structured tools and methods for participatory learning and project planning.
- > Both appreciative inquiry and PRA are based on values of mutual respect between various participants and an ethic of inclusion and participation.

- > Appreciative inquiry makes use of story-telling and personal reflection, while PRA focuses on cause-effect relationships, organizational linkages, timelines, seasonal calendars, transects and other data collection exercises.
- > While appreciative inquiry is most effective as a complete and continuous cycle, PRA exercises do not have to follow any particular order and are capable of standing alone.
- > Both appreciative inquiry and PRA can be used in a variety of circumstances and for different purposes. Practitioners often use PRA to gather data on problems and needs, but the exercises themselves tend to be neutral. As such, they can easily be used to facilitate the discovery of strengths, the documentation of a vision or the development of an action plan.
- > Due to its emphasis on stories of personal or group experiences, appreciative inquiry tends to have a strong emotional element. Participants and practitioners alike can find it quite transformative. When used in combination with PRA drawing exercises, images with metaphorical qualities are often produced. For example, an electrical pole might be used to represent empowerment. Resource maps drawn in PRA tend to represent existing situations, whereas those drawn in appreciative inquiry exercises depict an ideal environment as envisioned by the participants.
- > Community development practitioners require accurate data of current conditions and inspiring images of what a community can be at its best. As such, they will find value in PRA and appreciative inquiry.



**EXCEEDED EXPECTATIONS, RAPID IMPLEMENTATION** | In April 2000, MYRADA staff facilitated an appreciative inquiry session with a self-help group federation from HD Pura.

After seeing the determination with which one of the local MYRADA officers maintained a small garden, even while village chickens ate his flowers, the members were inspired. One of their long-term visions read:

“The environment of our village is changed for the better and we have created recreational facilities like parks.”

The task was to be hard as Savithamma, a member of the group explained to the MYRADA staff when they returned eight months later. “We knew it would be difficult but we were encouraged when we recalled that we had closed down a liquor store a few years earlier. We decided to convert the dirty open space behind their school into a park. We had to evict several people who had illegally constructed homes in the area, convince people not to use the space as a toilet and fend off land sharks. But by now our reputation had spread and the local authorities ensured that the land was handed over as soon as possible. We fenced off the area and planted several trees and other annuals. Every day we watered the plants by carrying pots of water from a well. Now you cannot even imagine that this park was once an open toilet!”

As the MYRADA team sat on the ground enjoying tea under a thick canopy of Singapore cherry trees, they gazed around somewhat confused. It was a lovely spot with a few hibiscuses and other flowering plants, but not as many plants as they had expected.

“Where are the plants?” one of them asked.

“They are right above you,” they said. The Singapore cherry “trees” were really nine-month-old plants; the constant watering and care of the federation members had helped the trees grow very quickly and, in only seven months, they were already two meters tall! The group members beamed with delight.

The MYRADA staff were impressed, the group had achieved their three-year-vision in eight months. They asked the group about it. “We were not sure about what we could achieve. With this experience, we have formed a new vision to convince others to develop gardens all over the village.” The meeting ended early. The women apologized but explained that they had to rush off to collect additional saplings from the Horticulture Department for their garden.

# Section Three

## THEORY BEHIND APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

In developing appreciative inquiry, David Cooperrider and his colleagues drew on research from a wide range of disciplines including medicine, education, sports psychology, counselling, quantum physics, biology, history and organizational development. Below we present a brief description of the theory behind their approach to positive change.<sup>12</sup>

Appreciative inquiry starts from the perspective that an inquiry into organizational life should begin with appreciation. The knowledge that the inquiry generates should be relevant to the organization and applicable to its activities. The inquiry should provoke members to challenge their assumptions as well as their imaginations. Finally, it should be a collaborative process where all the key stakeholders are involved.<sup>13</sup>

The approach challenges the idea that the best way to improve an organization is to identify and remove its deficits. The process of identifying problems, analyzing their causes, analyzing solutions and developing action plans portrays the organization as a problem to be solved. Appreciative inquiry, on the other hand, views the organization as a “mystery to be embraced” which is better served through discovery and valuing, envisioning, dialogue and co-constructing the future. The former tends to reduce the organization into small pieces that are analyzed in a technical way. The latter recognizes that the organization is greater than the sum of its parts. Like any complex system, it is as much the linkages between the organization’s components as the components themselves that shape the organization and determine its effectiveness. Dynamic forces and random shocks ensure that many factors remain beyond analysis.

Problem solving can tend to turn into a search for the guilty that raises defenses, reduces morale and contributes to deficit-based images and dialogues within the organization.<sup>14</sup>

Appreciative inquiry is based on the following five principles:<sup>15</sup>

### 1. Constructionist Principle

The constructionist principle postulates that reality cannot be observed in an objective and disassociated way. Instead, it derives from an organization’s collective experiences, assumptions and expectations. As such, at any one time, multiple realities can exist within a group based on the way in which individual members interpret events, their causes and consequences. Further, the reality that the group members create is not static, but constantly evolving. As such, social knowledge and community destiny are interwoven. The words with which a group describes itself can have a significant effect on the reality it perceives. As a poet knows, words are potent forces in creating images—they create worlds. Therefore, to be effective, development practitioners must be capable of understanding, reading and analyzing communities as living, human constructions in which language plays an important role.

<sup>12</sup> This section was adapted from various sources including:

F. Barrett, *Creating appreciative learning cultures*. Organizational Dynamics Vol. 24. (1995) 36-49.

F. J. Barrett, D.L. Cooperrider, *Generative metaphor intervention: A new approach for working with systems divided by conflict and caught in defensive perception*. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science Vol. 26. (1990) 219-239.

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<sup>13</sup> For further information on these assumptions see F.J. Barrett, *Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures*, *Organizational Dynamics*, 24 (1), (1995), 36-49.

<sup>14</sup> F.J. Barrett, & D.L Cooperrider, *Generative Metaphor Intervention: A New Approach to Intergroup Conflict*. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 26 (2), (1990) 223-244.

<sup>15</sup> Adapted from D.L. Cooperrider, and D. Whitney, *A Positive Revolution: Appreciative Inquiry*.

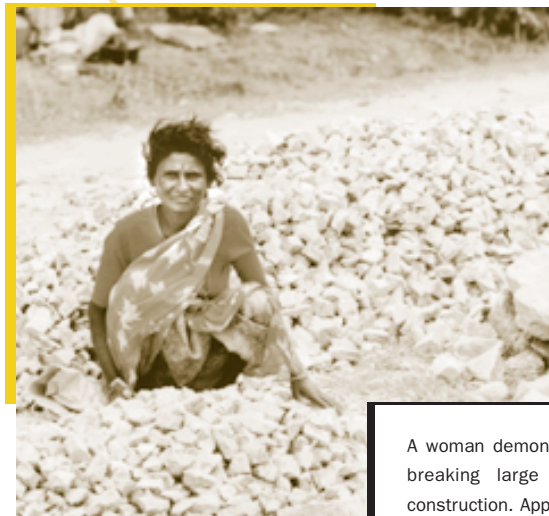


## 2. Principle of Simultaneity

Because reality is an evolving human construction, it is possible to influence the way that an organization sees itself and its surroundings. The questions that a facilitator poses and the expectations of the group that they hold, can either reinforce the existing sense of reality that the group has created or it can liberate the group to look at its situation in an entirely new way. As such, inquiry and change are not separate moments, but occur at the same time. Since they occur simultaneously, the act of inquiring is intervention. As such, it becomes critically important how any inquiry into the group proceeds because the questions that are asked set the stage for discovering stories from which a new future can be conceived and constructed.

## 3. Poetic Principle

Based on an understanding that reality is a social construction, the organization can be seen as an open book—an incomplete story that is continually being co-authored by group members over time. Since it is open to interpretation, we are free to study virtually any topic related to the group, its members and their experiences. We can inquire into the group's problems, needs and worries, or we can choose to look at moments of creativity, innovation and joy. Recognizing that the seeds of change are implicit in the first questions we ask, appreciative inquiry chooses to focus on the positive and life-giving forces.



A woman demonstrates the correct method for breaking large rocks into gravel for road construction. Appreciative inquiry recognizes that hardships exist, but seeks to identify and build on those factors that give meaning to people's lives.



## 4. Anticipatory Principle

The anticipatory principle postulates that current behavior is guided by images of the future. People form expectations of the future and base their current actions on the images that they see. Therefore the way that they behave has a responsive component that addresses events as they occur, and an anticipative component that speculates on what is to come.

## 5. Positive Principle

Cooperrider and his colleagues established the positive principle based on their extensive use of appreciative inquiry. They found that building momentum for change requires hope, inspiration and sheer joy in creating with one another. People prefer to put their efforts towards those things that make them feel good. The more positive the questions that are asked, the more people are captivated by the inquiry process and the longer the benefits are sustained. Just as plants turn towards sunlight, human systems tend to turn towards positive images and those things that give them energy and nourish their sense of joy and happiness.

Appreciative inquiry rests on a belief that in every system, organization or individual, something works. It is important to focus on what works as it influences the way in which people perceive themselves. When a group questions a long held assumption and realizes that it may not be true, they understand that they have power over their own future. Other assumptions begin to be challenged, and images of the future that emerge that previously seemed impossible.

Overcoming the significant challenges present in poor communities can be a daunting task. People have more confidence to journey into the future when they can carry with them the knowledge that they have succeeded in the past and that exceptional moments of their own making are around every corner.



Members of self help group federation of HD Pura participated in an appreciative inquiry exercise in April 2000. Their five-year vision was to raise funds to purchase the land in front of their community centre (a dry field that was being used as the village toilet) and turn it into a park for the benefit of the community. In November 2000, we met in the park under the trees they had planted. Their pride in achieving their dream in less than eight months is obvious.

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# The Positive Path

USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN RURAL INDIAN COMMUNITIES

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