BEING A “FACILITATOR”
Table of Contents

Part 1: Being a “facilitator” ............p.6

Part 2: Concrete experiences.............p.10

1. Local visitsn......................................................p.11

2. The participation of beneficiaries in the
   establishment of our activities or projects................p.14

3. Meetings and assemblies .................................p.15
   a) International Executive Board meetings...............p.15
   b) The International Assembly...............................p.18
   c) Day of reflection for the International Secretariat....p.20

4. The “facilitator” method tested in
   a national association ........................................p.20

Part 3: Conclusion.......................p.22
Being a “facilitator” is a method that we shared at our last AIC International Assembly in Guatemala in March 2015. We would like to pass it on to you in this Training Booklet. A brief introduction will give you an insight into what being a “facilitator” means (part I).

We will then share a few experiences of it from within AIC (part II). Throughout the Training Booklet, testimonies collected from volunteers (quotations in italics) will illustrate the content. We thank them very much for having shared them with us.
Being a “facilitator”!

In order to understand better, let’s start with the story of Rebecca, a young woman who is currently being supported by volunteers from a local AIC group.

In her childhood, receiving little encouragement from her parents, Rebecca very quickly dropped out of the school system. For a girl, it wasn’t important, and then at home there was neither the space nor the peace and quiet to study. So she helped her mother at the market. And yet, she had always dreamed of reading and writing. Now she is 30, she is married and has 4 children. With her family duties and the poverty that she has to face on a daily basis, life isn’t easy. For a few months, she has been going to an AIC social centre. There, she feels people listen to her. Little by little, encouraged by the volunteers, she has taken on some responsibilities at the centre. She is discovering her strengths and realising that she is capable of doing a lot more than she imagined. “People have emphasised my strengths when I couldn’t see them anymore and have reminded me of my values and my dignity. When you hear someone tell you that you have strengths, it makes you strong”. She spoke about her dream of learning to read and write. Then one day, she decided to follow the literacy course that the volunteers had offered her so many times.
This story is about listening, valuing strengths, having confidence in others, two-way exchanges and dreams. It also shows us that moving forward with someone and learning from each other is a source of energy and change. This is what the “facilitator method” teaches us. We should having faith in people and in their abilities to find solutions to the challenges with which they are presented. It is their situation! We are there to encourage and support their responses to it.

We notice that this method really resonates with AIC’s values. When it comes to approaching others as human beings, St Vincent was already doing it and advocating it 400 years ago!

It’s very difficult, when you can foresee a solution, to be patient, to wait for people to find their own solution themselves, to accept to be ‘no more’ than the person with the resources.

So how do we proceed?

All we need to do is break our habits and change our attitude: rather than analysing the problems to produce a solution, we trust and value the strengths present in each individual person.

The first stage is meeting each other, in this case the volunteer and the person living in poverty. The first challenge is to learn to mutually get to know each other on a human level, through informal conversation. This means that we will meet as equals, make connections and recognise each other in our human experience.

Then comes the second stage: listening, which should be attentive, positive and appreciative. Listening is difficult and it is the most important quality of a good facilitator!

Learning to listen is about using your intuition in order to be able to understand someone else. Very often people are not asking for solutions, but to be understood and to feel welcome.
The third step is appreciating and revealing the strengths in each of us. This means appreciating people, how they are living and what they are doing, their resources and their strengths, in order to learn from each person’s experiences. We are looking to identify and name the strengths that people prove they have through what they are doing already, even if it is only through small acts. The process of revealing the strengths of each person and sharing experiences is what will stimulate them to go further. If we have confidence in them, they will regain confidence in life!

« One day, someone told me that I had strengths. It was the first time that I had been told I had strengths. So now I use them! »
We then reach the fourth stage: speaking about the dream, a motor for change that makes us envisage the future. From “who are we?”, we move on to “where do we want to be?”

From the “expert” volunteer... | We become the volunteer “facilitator”!
---|---
We believe in our own expertise | We trust and believe in people’s strengths to respond to the challenges in their lives
We address needs | We reveal strengths
People have problems, we have the solution | Together we have solutions
We play our role as the expert | We build human relationships with others
We give answers and advice | We learn and share

I immersed in myself in the method that was proposed, I actively participated and recognised the need to change in order to fully embrace education as a two-way process and move from being an expert to a facilitator.
Part 2

Concrete experiences

Practically speaking, the best way to become a “facilitator”... is to experience it yourself!

This is what we have had the opportunity to do within AIC in different contexts, during local visits, in our projects, during meetings or assemblies and within a national association.

We are going to share these experiences with you below. It is then up to you to adopt this method, adapting it to your local, regional or national context.
1. **Local visits**

The main objective of a meeting with volunteers or people living in poverty is to appreciate what the group does, to identify and reveal its strengths rather than the problems. A real change of attitude!

A few practical guidelines:

- **The location:** A meeting room with chairs in a circle, all at the same level; we sit among the people we are meeting.

- **As a welcome message:** “We are here to listen to you, to learn from you and your experiences. Together we can move forward together so that your dream for a better life becomes a reality”.

- **The meeting:** As facilitators we invite everyone to introduce themselves as a human person, either all together or in small groups of two or three. We don’t speak about our qualifications, titles or roles. We talk about our life as a human being, in total simplicity, with our strengths.

- **Strengths:** We listen attentively and with appreciation to everything that is said. As facilitators, we are there to encourage the others to come out of their shell, by appreciating their strengths and valuing their actions. The strengths will emerge and reveal themselves.

We have often tested this approach to meeting others, without mentioning “our titles”. After a moment of surprise, people introduce themselves in total simplicity. The human element very quickly becomes the focus of the meeting. The barriers disappear and connections are built. We find we all have things in common, we are mothers, fathers, we share the same passions, etc. There is no longer one person who knows things and one who is suffering. We learn a lot from each other. The atmosphere becomes more relaxed... and together we can move forward towards our dreams, motors for change.

**In order to be able to establish an equal relationship, we need to set aside everything we have learned and our approach to work; stop concentrating on our time and acting as if we are masters in our field and introduce ourselves as if we were brothers and sisters.**
Workshop to Introduce the “Facilitator” Method:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>Rules of good conduct</td>
<td>To create good conditions for an EB meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>To present the objective of the morning activities over the 4 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.33</td>
<td>“Who are we?” activity</td>
<td>To discover each other’s strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.45</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>To discover the strengths of the community + evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>“Who are we?” activity</td>
<td>To discover each other as human persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.35</td>
<td>Introduction: Building a dream</td>
<td>To present the steps involved in building a dream: dare to do it!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>Building our individual dream</td>
<td>To facilitate the creation of an individual dream for an ideal EB. To encourage attentive listening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.48</td>
<td>Feedback as a group</td>
<td>To discover others’ individual dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>“Who are we?” activity</td>
<td>To discover each other as human persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>Introduction: Building a common dream</td>
<td>To present the steps involved in building a common dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.40</td>
<td>Building a common dream in groups</td>
<td>To facilitate the creation of a common dream for an ideal EB with attentive listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.55</td>
<td>Feedback (possibly)</td>
<td>To discover the common dream of group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>“Who are we?” activity</td>
<td>To discover each other as human persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.35</td>
<td>- Building the common dream of the community</td>
<td>To facilitate:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- If time:</td>
<td>- The creation of the EB’s common dream,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- self-evaluation</td>
<td>- Self-evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- action plan</td>
<td>- The choice of actions to achieve it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ to reveal the strengths of the EB!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evaluation to be undertaken at the end of each day

**Material to bring:** paper – coloured paper – writing materials – bell or something similar (for the timekeeper) – big white sheets of paper – pins, sticky tape – talking stick (wooden statue from Africa) – board on which to stick paper (see if there is one in the meeting room)
## Template Schedule - EB 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laurence</td>
<td>Each person notes 2 attitudes/behaviours on a post-it (1/post-it) that will facilitate a good EB meeting → to be displayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarhaïda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayde</td>
<td>“Discover our strengths” exercise: Groups of 2 people who don’t know each other well; each presents themselves to the other as a human person, without mentioning titles, qualifications, etc. 3 mins/person, can use drawings if you don’t speak the same language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In a plenary session, each person presents 2-3 strengths of their partner (get someone to note the strengths → to be displayed).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In groups of 2 (by language), each person explains to the other what they’re grateful for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarhaïda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnès,</td>
<td>3 groups – 1 per language, one facilitator per group (Tayde for EN – Sarhaïda for EB – Agnès for FR). Each person writes their individual dream for an ideal EB on a piece of coloured paper (drawings, phrases).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarhaïda</td>
<td>Feedback as a group. Display the individual dreams!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayde</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michèle</td>
<td>Get into 2 circles and discover the things you have in common with the people opposite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnès</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnès,</td>
<td>3 groups – 1 per language, one facilitator per group (Tayde for EN – Sarhaïda for EB – Agnès for FR). Each group builds and represents its common dream using a tool of their choice: paper, song, words, poem, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarhaïda</td>
<td>Feedback as a group (present the tools used). Display the common dreams!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayde</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you feel today: each person expresses their feelings in turn (as a large group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group discussion to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Create a common dream of the EB based on the group dreams (points in common; we + action verb + object)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Self-evaluation (where are we now?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Choose 3 priority actions to achieve the dream (what are we going to do?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Post-activity report (progress, challenges, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnès</td>
<td>Presentation of the different stages of the ‘facilitator’ method – link to the Priority Lines of Action, with a video as the trailer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Final evaluation:** Very positive for all participants. There was a very human and participative atmosphere throughout the meeting. It was not possible to cover everything that had been planned (we just presented and tested “getting to know each other as human beings” and “building dreams (individually and as a group)” but it was enough (we will put less on the programme next time).
2. The participation of beneficiaries in the establishment of our activities or projects

The facilitator method also allows us to put into practice the notion of “the participation of beneficiaries”, which is often highlighted in project training already.

Projects should be put forward by the beneficiaries themselves; when people discover what they are worth, they will get more involved.

A few practical guidelines:

• Take the time to meet the people who our AIC projects/activities are aimed at and to mutually get to know each other. What is their life story? What are their strengths and dreams?

• Let’s change our perspective! We no longer visit people to analyse a problem and propose a solution, we go to them as friends, to listen, share and learn... We no longer meet “beneficiaries” we work together with “human beings” who have a story, and who have already had to address numerous challenges in facing the situations of poverty that they encounter; people who have strengths.

• We don’t come with premade solutions. We should be convinced that each person has the ability to face the challenges that they encounter in their lives and community. It’s up to us to identify and reveal these abilities.

To learn how to get know the people we work with, we need to let them talk. This is why it is so important to ask questions, have a coffee or cook with them in order to bond informally.
3. Meetings and assemblies

The facilitator method can be put into practice during many different kinds of meetings.

It is important to make sure you adapt to the characteristics of each meeting: the number of participants, the languages in which they express themselves, the time available, the general framework and objectives, etc.

The preparation of a precise schedule is very useful, as is a clear distribution of the tasks between the “facilitators” who have been called to participate in the process. This schedule takes the form of a table which defines for each step of the process the time that will be dedicated to it, what it will focus on, the objective being pursued and the “facilitator(s)” in charge. This framework is a valuable tool for the facilitators as it allows them to calculate how much time can be dedicated to each step (see table p.12-13). Assigning a person who is responsible for managing the time is strongly recommended and giving them a bell is often very practical. However be careful: the schedule serves to prepare the session and then to guide the facilitator, but he or she must under no circumstances shut off or block the work of the group. Experience has revealed that it is absolutely essential to continuously adapt to the reality of the group in question.

The facilitator must make sure he or she gives clear instructions to the participants and must not hesitate to repeat them. An evaluation at the end of the meeting will allow key elements to surface: the results for each of the participants and for the group, the areas to improve on and concrete action plans for the future.

a) International Executive Board meetings

The facilitator method was used during the annual EB meeting in 2014. This meeting had various objectives:

- To present this method to the EB members by trying it out with them so that they would want to become more familiar with it and use it.

- To highlight the importance of stimulating and appreciating everyone’s strengths.

- To show that seeing things from a different, more human perspective can have a considerable impact and allows us to shake up our habits.

- To value the strengths of every member of the EB.

- To create a friendly atmosphere to encourage listening with appreciation throughout the meeting.
Certain members already knew each other well, others less well or not at all. Some of them had been members for several years, others were newly elected. One particularity of the EB is the fact that its members come from different national associations. They therefore do not all speak the same language and are of different cultures. As a consequence, establishing good communication between them always poses a challenge.

After having agreed the rules of conduct for the meeting together, the members were invited to «discover each other as human persons» in pairs. In this exercise, each person in turn is invited to present themselves to the other for a few minutes, without talking about their titles or qualifications, just as a human being. Everyone then notes two or three strengths that they have discovered in the other person before presenting them to the entire group. Noting these strengths on coloured paper and sticking them on the wall so that they are clearly visible allows everyone to marvel at the richness of the group.

Proposing this exercise at the start of the meeting encouraged everyone to participate in the discussions from the beginning of the meeting onwards. Members found it easier to speak to each other, there were more exchanges. For this exercise, it is beneficial to encourage everyone to speak with someone they know less well. The obstacles linked to language differences can be overcome using each person’s creativity or boldness. For some, using paper and coloured pens proved to be very useful; for others it was daring to speak in another language even if they didn’t know it very well at all.

On the following days, the members were invited to create their dream for an ideal EB, first individually and then in language groups, before everything was put together in a plenary session.

It is very difficult to name and accept your own strengths.
This method was used during the meeting of the newly elected EB in 2015. This time, the proposal also included using this approach to develop the team’s action plan for the next two years. To this end, the following objectives were added to those fixed during the EB meeting in 2014:

- To stimulate the inclusion and participation of everyone in the construction of the action plan for the next two years.

- To take everyone’s “dreams” into account to form working groups and divide up the responsibilities.

- To draw up together the priority lines of action for the AIC network.

After beginning the meeting with the exercise of presenting themselves “as human persons”, the members were invited to come up with their dream for AIC together. Using this common dream as a starting point, the members then asked themselves how the EB could contribute to making it a reality. In doing so they identified their objectives and formed working groups responsible for implementing them through an action plan that they were invited to develop. In order to define the composition of these groups, each person was asked to reflect as to what strengths they thought they could contribute to achieve the objectives that had been fixed and to say in which team they could see themselves working. The members really appreciated having the opportunity to speak and be listened to in this way. The tasks were divided up according to each person’s interests and strengths, thus creating conditions which allowed the members to take responsibility for their work with pleasure.

It is important to delegate, to work as a team and not to impose.
b) The International Assembly

During the AIC International Assembly of Delegates 2015, which brought together 130 participants from 25 countries, the organisers tried to foster a facilitator approach and attitude throughout the meeting.

The objectives were as follows:

- To allow participants to try out a change of behaviour in their relationships with people living in poverty.

- To value everyone’s strengths rather than focusing on the deficiencies that need compensating.

- To break our habits of being “expert volunteers”.

- To encourage the development of more empowering AIC projects.

During the opening ceremony, each president shared one of the main strengths of her association. In the proceedings of the meeting, these strengths were presented in the form of a large sun radiating the strengths of each delegation! (see p.8)

After a plenary session with a brief presentation of the facilitator method, workshops were organized to allow the participants to experience the approach. The 130 participants were hence divided up into 6 groups. Each group was guided by a facilitator. The participants were invited to do the exercise of discovering each other “as human persons” (see above) in pairs and to reveal in doing so their own strengths and those of others. The participants then reflected as to how they could apply this method in their AIC work and defined together the best practices that were likely to encourage a change of attitude, both in their relationships with people living in poverty and with the other volunteers in their associations. We observed that the diversity of cultures and especially languages sometimes made the facilitators’ work more difficult.
However the enthusiasm of the participants meant that the things they had in common could be highlighted: “we are all AIC volunteers, we have the same objectives”! They also expressed their amazement at all the strengths that had been discovered within their group and the very powerful testimonies that had been shared. Strengths are motors of change!

On the following days, much importance was given to the dream of the AIC network, notably for its upcoming 400th anniversary, and to the practical means necessary to achieve it.

The common theme presented at the start of each day allowed participants to better understand the link between the different stages of the method.

One day, a leader showed the others that they were all leaders. Sometimes, if we’re not told that we have strengths, we aren’t able to discover them ourselves.
c) Day of reflection for the international secretariat

Using this method during a team reflection day allowed the secretariat members to get to know each other better and to reflect on their relationships and their commitment within the association. Each member had the opportunity to discover or rediscover herself as a person, and as part of the team and the association, notably through her responsibilities, challenges and dreams. The team covered all the steps of the process and finished the day with a very concrete action plan for the coming year which they agreed to evaluate regularly. They fixed a meeting for the following year.

4. The “facilitator” method tested in a national association

A group of volunteers decided to pass on and apply the method they had experienced during the AIC Assembly 2015 within their local context.

The group held a meeting with the volunteers from the Local Board and presented the “facilitator method”, summarising what they had learned at the Assembly. The meeting lasted four hours. Twenty of the twenty-five Board members took part and participated actively.

At first the volunteers were surprised: “Is what I do not good? Am I really behaving like an expert?”

Then they recognised their strengths. They realised that they had them and used them, but didn’t recognise them. “What do I have to change to stop being the expert, the person who saves the poor?”
The group reached the following conclusions and decisions:

This method needs to reach all the local groups, as the experience has shown us that:

- We “monopolise’ the poor” (don’t let them think or act for themselves)
- We “know the solution to their problems”
- We feel very good about ourselves by giving them what we “think they need”
- We don’t take them into account, we just “solve their problems”
- We prolong the need for help
- We trap them into being dependent on us
- We get too attached to the families and don’t want to let them move on

The workshop will be given in each local centre, on the condition that each president commits to taking part and requests her volunteers to do so as well, such that at least 75% of them participate, local partners included.

There will be a review of each case to determine the real needs of each beneficiary. A social worker will be hired to carry out this analysis. If it becomes clear that the financial situation of some has changed over time, we will “let them go”, but not without giving them a big hug, as we always do.

Once the true needs have been detected, we will work on changing ourselves and we will apply the facilitator method:

- Respect, listening attentively, moving forward together, getting informed and involved.
- Interest in those using our services: including ourselves in their lives to understand them from the inside, without judging them if something doesn’t work. There is always a reason.
- Exchanging, building bridges through dialogue.
- Learning from each other, sharing our knowledge and most importantly valuing each person’s strengths.

We will respect the guidelines for being facilitators.

With time and determination, we will move from being “experts” to being facilitators.
Conclusion

In our work for AIC, we sometimes forget that behind the activities and projects, behind our statistics and our reports, behind our impatience to help, there are people with a story to tell, people who have strengths and dreams. The facilitator method invites us to put the human element back at the centre of our AIC commitment.

The relationship between people and two-way exchanges are at the heart of the process: exchanging about who we are, exchanging our strengths and skills, exchanging our dreams.

Being a facilitator is a simple process, which has proven to be effective everywhere and with everyone. This is one of its greatest strengths. It can be adapted to all settings and circumstances, it doesn’t need any financial resources or particular knowledge. Without knowing the method, many volunteers are already applying it!

At the AIC International Secretariat, we have tried it and it has had an impact not only on our way of being and acting within AIC but also in our private lives.

What is difficult is breaking our habits and abandoning our tendency to act as “expert volunteers”. This requires a real change of mentality!

“What counts is not so much what I give but how I give it”

SVP
An international network of more than 150,000 volunteers, mostly women, who work to tackle poverty on a local level in 53 countries.

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www.aic-international.org

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