

# Like learning to dance

## Towards universal principles of the Gender Action Learning System



*Champions of BAIR, Rwanda sing and dance the GALS welcoming song. Linda Mayoux, 2015.*

By: Thies Reemer, October 2020

In February 2020, a group of 47 facilitators, champions and supporters gathered in Kenya for the Empower@scale workshop “Facilitating change at scale”. Participants shared the excitement about the momentum for scaling up Household Methodologies (HHM) to contribute to the empowerment of many women, men and youth who currently live in marginalised situations.

At the same time there was a sense of anxiety: how can we make sure that it is done the right way? The Gender Action Learning System (GALS)<sup>1</sup> does not prescribe a blueprint of how it should be done.

The participants of the Empower@scale workshop – based on years of experience with the methodology – reflected on the universal aspects of GALS. What is it that makes the methodology successful in all these different contexts? What should we keep close at heart when we want to reach millions of people? Participants concluded that the drawing tools, the details of the process and the peer replication are context specific. However the basis should always be the same. These “principles” are universal and can be applied in any context.

*“GALS is like learning to dance. First you need to feel the basic underlying rhythm, and then you can be creative.” Linda Mayoux, 2019<sup>2</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> Building on other participatory approaches GALS was developed by Linda Mayoux with local organisations in various countries since 2007 under Oxfam Novib’s WEMAN programme. The methodology was since then progressively developed and adapted by many individuals and organisations. See <https://gamechangenetwork.org/methodology/>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://gamechangenetwork.org/methodology/participatory-action-learning-system/>

The participants reviewed the different principles of the GALS methodology, from the perspective of facilitators. The Empower@scale partnership supports the principles below as a guidance for everyone who wants to join the initiative to scale up the use of GALS. The principles, good and bad practices below are based on discussions during the Empower@scale workshop “facilitating change at scale” hosted by Hivos in Kenya in February 2020, and the distinctive features of GALS as described in the GALS phase 1 manual<sup>3</sup>.

**1. Gender Justice is non-negotiable.** The interests of women as well as men are equally addressed when working towards gender justice. Women’s human rights as established in the UN convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) are non-negotiable, with men as partners in pursuit of social justice. Equal rights are not a favour or a gift: everyone is born equal.

**Quote** “In my work as a facilitator, I have to stand and defend the rights of both men and women without apologising.” (Josephine Kasande, 2020)



Good and bad practice in the light of experience:

😊😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Addressing men as full allies in the change process and women as intelligent actors in change.</li> <li>- Addressing gendered power relations between women, between men and between different gender identities</li> <li>- As facilitator asking probing questions in an appreciative way to question gender norms</li> </ul>
😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitate participants to discover the negative consequences of gender inequalities in their own context</li> <li>- Use the diamond tool to prioritize which gender relations need to change first</li> </ul>
😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Imposing the changes in gender relations to participants based on external sources</li> <li>- Simplifying gender as relations between women and men</li> <li>- Using the GALS tools purely for livelihood planning without the gender focus</li> </ul>
😞😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Addressing women as victims and men as problems.</li> <li>- Simplifying gender as relations in monogamous married couples.</li> <li>- Reinforcing stereotypes such as calling women farmers “the wives of the farmers”</li> <li>- Justifying or enforcing victim blaming when analysing or discussing violence</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> “Rocky Road to Diamond Dreams, GALS phase 1 implementation manual”, written by Linda Mayoux and published by Oxfam Novib in 2014.

## 2. Make it Fun! Excitement and enthusiasm

**trigger change.** Having fun together makes it easier for women and men to feel free to work together as equal human beings despite gender

inequality. Inequalities between women and men on issues like property ownership, control of income, decision making, violence and division of labour are rooted in social norms, beliefs and traditions. Excitement and enthusiasm help people to mobilise themselves, change

their lives and share with others. Creative action learning methods like songs, dances, drama, role plays and drawing generate excitement. This makes it easier to address sensitive issues; overcome tension; create a socially connected learning environment and encourage concentration.



Figure 1: Champions from DUHAMIC, Rwanda perform their improvised gender balance song. Linda Mayoux 2015.

**Quote:** “Excitement and fun are necessary to move as a team towards the changes”. (John bosco Okaya, 2020)

Good and bad practice in the light of experience:

😊😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fully integrate drama, theatre and songs in each session.</li> <li>- Ask participants to develop a song after learning each different tool, so that others who are not in the session can learn the tool through the song.</li> <li>- To learn the GALS tools ask groups to physically enact the steps of the tools.</li> <li>- Invent energisers that reinforce the content of the session.</li> </ul>
😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Keep training sessions lively by using drama, theatre and songs.</li> <li>- Keep changing the seating arrangement.</li> <li>- Include energisers in each session</li> </ul>
😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Compromising on songs, drama and theatre in order to maximize the number of GALS tools and details of the steps in a training.</li> </ul>
😞😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requesting participants to be severe and grave throughout the sessions.</li> <li>- Classroom-style seating arrangement with the trainer in front on an elevated platform.</li> </ul>



### 3. Everyone can be a leader.

Education level, age, gender identity, economic status or any other parameter does not matter: everyone can be a leader. No title is needed in order to lead. Cultivate the leadership potential of all participants and strengthen the voice and power of those whose positions are most vulnerable. "Participation" means that everyone takes responsibility for changing their own lives and sharing with others. This empowers everyone to participate and own the change process.



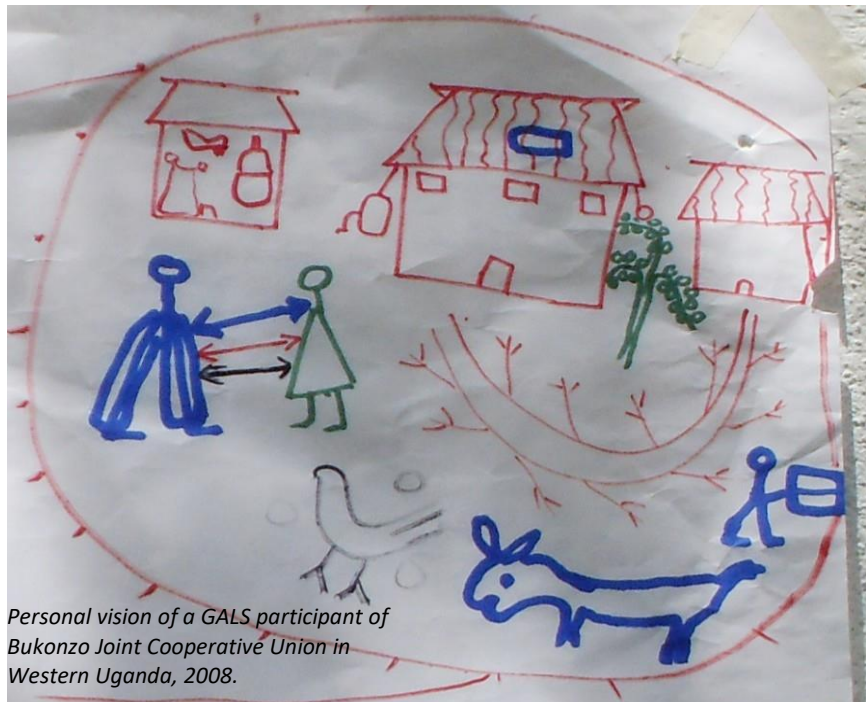
Figure 2: woman sharing her view on social challenges during a meeting in Port Sudan supported by PASED. Linda Mayoux 2005.

Good and bad practice in the light of experience:

😊😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Champions from the community teach staff of organisations how to use the GALS tools</li> <li>- Facilitating from the back, community participants are in front with the marker pens.</li> <li>- Facilitators and champions use GALS in their own lives, so that they can walk the talk and be a role model.</li> <li>- Start workshops with those who live in the most vulnerable situations , so when the leaders are engaged in a later stage they can voice their priorities to the leaders.</li> <li>- Encourage participants to keep personal diaries for their GALS tools</li> </ul>
😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As facilitator, make your own drawings to show that you are not different.</li> <li>- Seating arrangement: circular or semi-circular, everyone at the same level.</li> <li>- Champions from the community draw and explain the steps to participants.</li> <li>- Use the song for passing on the stick to take turns leading the direction.</li> </ul>
😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As facilitator do most of the talking and drawing.</li> <li>- As facilitator demonstrate all the tools asking participants to copy.</li> <li>- Always correcting participants.</li> </ul>
😞😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exploitation of champions in the community to showcase for outsiders.</li> <li>- Always give the word to the most dominant participants.</li> </ul>

#### 4. Start with visions and the positive.

Draw visions for the future and focus on positive things. This helps to cultivate a positive energy for change. Never start with problems. Visions for the future are not static, they need to be reinforced and revisited. This triggers a focus on actions whenever problems are discussed.



*Personal vision of a GALS participant of Bukonzo Joint Cooperative Union in Western Uganda, 2008.*

Good and bad practice in the light of experience:

😊😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As homework after a visioning exercise, ask participants to help one of their peers or family members to develop their own vision, and ask for feedback the next morning.</li> <li>- When there is not enough time in a GALS workshop, focus on the things that enable participants to undertake actions for changing gender relations.</li> </ul>
😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- On the vision journey, ask people to come up with the double number of opportunities compared to number challenges.</li> </ul>
😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Failing to organise follow-up activities after GALS sessions. This may be harmful for participants who expressed themselves on sensitive issues, they may risk repercussions if there is no follow up.</li> </ul>
😞😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Using problems as the starting point of analysis and planning.</li> <li>- Imposing project logframes and pre-determined indicators to community participants.</li> <li>- Leaving out the action planning steps for the sake of rushing.</li> </ul>

#### 5. Including Everyone.

Everyone in society is included. To achieve social justice, start with people who live in the poorest conditions and the most vulnerable positions who are normally excluded from decision making processes. Enable them to prioritise the changes they need in order to empower themselves.



*GALS champion living with blindness in West Nile, Uganda. CEFORD 2013*

Good and bad practice in the light of experience:

😊😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Challenge the organisers of learning events to invite people in vulnerable positions who currently live in marginalised situations, and select a meeting venue in which they feel at ease.</li> <li>- Using pairwise drawing and discussions to make sure everyone's view is included.</li> <li>- Swapping roles: making sure that vulnerable participants train or facilitate powerful participants.</li> </ul>
😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Always asking those who are most silent to share first. When it is time for sub-groups to present, start with women.</li> <li>- Sticking to the time schedule in a very rigid way making it difficult for vulnerable participants to fully participate.</li> <li>- Making sure that powerful participants (leaders, more highly educated) do not intimidate vulnerable participants.</li> </ul>
😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not questioning the participants list (making assumptions about how the participant selection was done).</li> <li>- Imposing your own examples when explaining the tools, so that everyone copies your example.</li> <li>- Not keeping time so that participation becomes difficult for some of the participants.</li> <li>- Choosing a posh meeting venue that is intimidating for vulnerable participants.</li> </ul>
😞😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Excluding vulnerable participants from participating.</li> <li>- Only giving the more vocal and dominant participants the chance to share their views.</li> <li>- Not allowing any feedback from participants during the sessions.</li> <li>- Talking harshly and reprimanding participants.</li> <li>- Using inappropriate tools, for example the gender balance tree with youth, singles and widow(er)s with small children.</li> </ul>

## 6. Action from Day 1 and pyramid

**upscaling.** Change will only be sustainable and scalable when participants feel that they own the process. Every learning activity should therefore focus on what participant can replicate individually or collectively without external facilitation. Actions need to be planned and taken home from the first day of using the methodology. While maintaining the basic principles, the methodology needs to be adapted to local needs by groups of local "champions". These champions then train other participants as well as staff. Those trained train others

because they have a self-interest in helping or changing behaviour.



*Personal GALS diary, Laos 2015.*

Good and bad practice in the light of experience:

😊😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encouraging participants to use individual diaries for their own personal tools.</li> <li>- After every session, asking participants to make a plan for peer sharing within their families or social networks.</li> <li>- Identifying champions in the community who can help others to change.</li> </ul>
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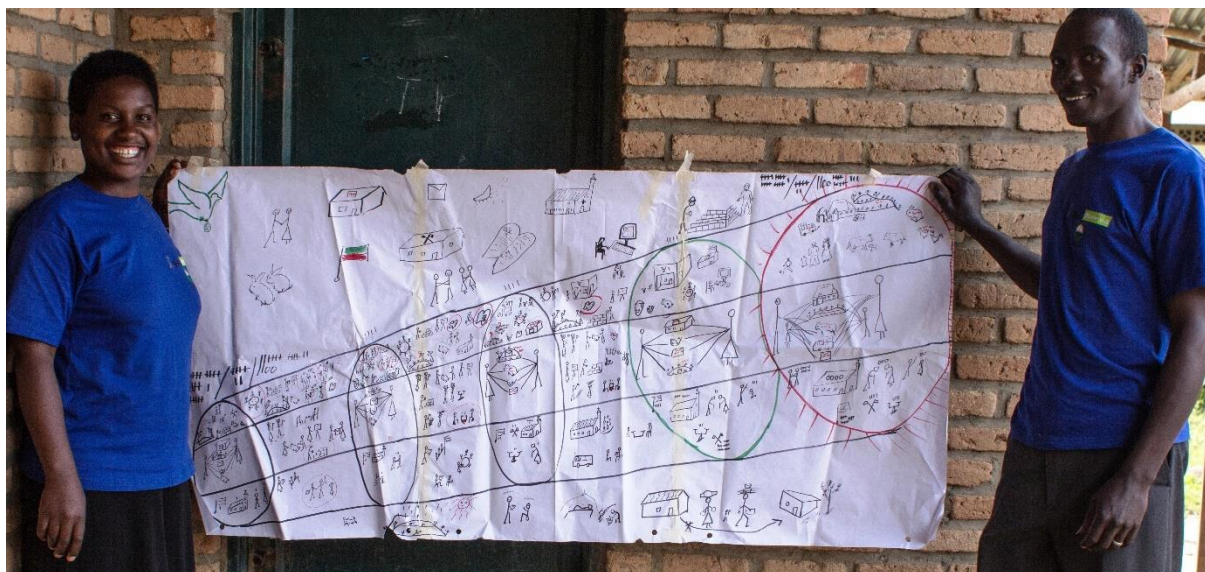
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- After GALS sessions, conducting community dialogue sessions in which local leaders and opinion makers are included, to create a positive environment for vulnerable participants to act on the changes they planned in their vision journeys.</li> <li>- Contextualise the GALS tools: facilitate participants to adjust the tools in a way it is more useful for them, while maintaining the GALS principles.</li> </ul>
😊	- Organising exchange visits between community groups on their progress of changing gender relations and livelihoods.
😞	- Not having any data on outreach and replication.
😞😞	- Developing vision road journeys in the office and imposing these to be used by the community participants.

**7. Drawing is believing.** Drawing – rather than writing – triggers participants to think outside the box and come up with creative solutions. It does not need to be artistic, it needs to encourage everyone to clarify their own ideas, to believe in their own voice and to communicate with mutual respect and a sense of equality.



Good and bad practice in the light of experience:

😊😊	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitating that participants discover and adapt the tools to their own situation.</li> <li>- Participatory introduction of tools: facilitator stands at the back and asks participants to draw the different steps of the tools.</li> </ul>
😊	- Giving participants time to draw by themselves
😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Drawing for participants</li> <li>- Suggesting that drawing is for illiterate people only</li> </ul>
😞😞	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Writing instead of drawing</li> <li>- Telling participants what to draw and how to draw</li> <li>- Using pre-defined templates for the tools</li> </ul>



*A couple in Eastern Rwanda showing their vision journey for equality and a better livelihood. Linda Mayoux 2013*