Ten years of Barefoot Guides for Social Change
Unlocking collective generosity and intelligence

Ten years ago the first Barefoot Guide was conceived by the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), marking the beginning of a fascinating experiment in surfacing and sharing social change practice that has led to four Barefoot Guides, with inputs from hundreds of practitioners from dozens of countries across the world. Several more Guides are in the making and now the newly formed Barefoot Guide Alliance is embarking on an ambitious programme to expand in new directions.

This writing is a small history and reflection on our journey so far.

The birth - 2005 to 2009
Towards the end of 2005, in the kitchen of the CDRA Centre in Cape Town, three practitioners started a conversation about how we might meet the need for an accessible guide to our organisation development practice. By that time several organisations had started to realise that, alongside their own practice, they needed to support the development of the community organisations or the local NGOs they were working with. They asked CDRA for accessible resources to help their staff in the field with this work.

In July 2006, six CDRA practitioners and a facilitator met over four days in a retreat in MacGregor, a small town near to Cape Town, the first writing workshop, or “writeshop”. We visioned a book that would break from many of the norms of professional and academic publications, of sober text, referenced evidence and tight, qualified arguments. We imagined a more conversational offering that wove together stories from the field, analysis and lessons, practical tips, useful conceptual frameworks (we like to say “archetypes”), poetry and, importantly, image and metaphor. Observation, using metaphor and imagination, has always been a central part of our practice, enabling us to see what is less visible, like artists do, making apparent the living, but often hidden, human dynamics that defy scientific observation. Helping practitioners and leaders to see differently was essential to the task. We imagined a diverse offering that would meet a diverse readership.

Over those four days of writeshopping, we used free-writing, drew pictures and developed metaphors, went on walks in nature, drank wine into the night, discussing and visioning the content and shape. Out of all of these, each of us wrote a draft of a chapter, individually completed in the weeks after the writeshop.

To be honest, this first draft was a rather disjointed collection of windows on our practice. It was good stuff but, since it was entirely written by us, we were still worried it would be obscure for others. So we decided to invite a more diverse range of practitioners and social movement activists, sixteen in all, to join us for a second writeshop, to rewrite the first in-house drafts of the Guide from a user point of view.
For us, this was a nervous and radical step, a leap of faith into opening up ourselves and our practice, not just to be used, but to be reworked by people we hardly knew. It was a four-day writeshop and proved that the risk was not only worthwhile but entirely necessary. Pieces were reworked, adapting the Guide to diverse realities that we could not have known, enriching perspectives and bringing fresh and easier language. New stories and poems were added and ideas for illustrations generated. It was a thoroughly enlivening and enriching process. And it was the beginning of the Barefoot Guide as a community of practice working beyond the organisational boundaries of the CDRA.

In 2007, the Barefoot Guide to Working with Organisations and Social Change (called BFG1) was finally published as a free download on the internet – www.barefootguide.org. The server crashed from overload on the first day!

From the beginning the BFG website was set up for users to download the Guide and to access the Resource Library, the beginning of a growing pool of exercises, frameworks, tools, readings, stories and poetry – too many things to publish as part of the book itself, but worth sharing with the world. Many of the resources originate with the CDRA (or its ancestors) but several come from the wider world.

The writers of the first Guide, from both writeshops, became known as the Barefoot Collective, our first global “community of practice”, opening up the creation process beyond the tight organisational borders of CDRA’s practice to include more resonant but diverse expressions, insights and approaches to social change.

The Barefoot Guide Connection – 2009 to 2015

Where BFG1 was definitely a “path made by walking”, the second, BFG2, was a well-constructed highway, drawing on all the lessons of the first and taking it to new territories. It was fully funded by PSO, the late Dutch capacity development agency and held by three organisations: the CDRA, PSO and VSO. With a broad focus on “Learning Practices in Organisations and Social Change” the second Guide was developed over three writeshops and then grounded in a collaborative action research process in twenty-nine organisations in seven countries. BFG2 was a natural follow-on from the first, emphasizing the critical role that learning (and unlearning) plays, not only in enabling organisations to be adaptive in working with complex change, but in the very DNA of change itself.
While BFG1 was largely CDRA-centred, with important contributions from other writers, BFG2 was a global collaboration mixing face-to-face writeshops and extensive use of emails and Skyping. The residential face-to-face writeshops really secured and maintained the trust that was necessary to manage such dispersed and unwieldy online processes. Working under tight deadlines with sixteen plus writers who had other lives to lead, spread across eight countries, took a combination of patience and persistence and the ability to work with a fluidity that we had not known would be needed. Easier than “herding cats”, but not much.

By the end of the BFG2 it was not clear what “The Barefoot Guide” was as a social entity. By default, it still belonged to the CDRA, but it had a much larger life and the exciting prospect of a more enduring, genuine collaboration of peers across organisational, national, cultural and sectoral boundaries, owned by a web of relationships of people who were doing the work. As CDRA we made this known but we could not see the form it would take.

At the culmination of the BFG2 action research process in New Delhi a proposal was put forward by PSO that the Barefoot Guide should become a named, global collaboration: “The Barefoot Guide Connection”. Once described, it seemed like the obvious next step and was accepted by those who were there, by those who were doing the work. A handful of people put themselves forward, at that point, to be part of the “core team”, charged with growing and caring for this new being, with the purpose of encourage the development of good practice through sharing and developing new Guides and resources, and to do so through a website that would, hopefully, become a nexus for a more consistent and conscious BFG global community of practice.

However, the lofty intention of a conscious global online community of practice, around a generalised notion of “developmental practice” did not materialise as we had imagined. We had hoped we could develop substantive online and email conversations that, once sparked, would catch fire. But these did not get off the ground, and we shifted our approach. It is likely that it takes more effort to activate and maintain online conversations, like a full-time curator, but by then we could see that, in many ways, the field had become saturated with other more or less succesfull attempts to draw people into online communities

The problem, in a way, goes back to our conception of the need. We had assumed that there were enough practitioners who would be drawn into an online public community space to share and learn. Ironically, BFG2, focused on learning, describes how difficult and delicate authentic learning processes are and how the real need for deeper reflection and learning about own-practice, can only
be met through more intimate and honest conversations that are difficult to have and sustain through emails, web-based forums or other text-based conversations.

The Barefoot Guide Connection has proved useful in other ways, continuing to make available the Guides and resources to practitioners and other communities of practice. We have had direct and indirect contact with “learning circles” and “study groups” in several countries, for example, a community group in Kenya who made voice recordings of excerpts of BFG1 to play and generate discussion at the beginning of their regular meetings. We have had requests from universities to include the Guides in their required reading lists. Close to 2500 Guides are downloaded each month, usually several times that when a new Guide is released, and about 500 related resources, amounting to over 35 000 distributions a year. This does not take into account the sharing between people we know takes place but cannot track, nor the many websites that have taken it upon themselves to host the Guides themselves! We have recently discovered that someone is selling a Kindle version on Amazon. It is proving much more difficult to un-publish this than to get it published!

Since BFG2, we have written and published Barefoot Guides 3 and 4.

**The Barefoot Guide and the Creative Commons**

By enabling anyone to download the books and resources for free we have also learned about the value of generosity, the gifting economy and the Creative Commons. In the back of our minds we hoped that this statement of faith and generosity would reap rewards greater than the monies we would have generated as income. And it has, in uncountable ways. It has been gratifying to receive requests over the years by various user groups asking if they could translate the Barefoot Guides into their home languages. The first request came from a team of NGO workers in Indonesia offering a translation into Bahasa, spoken by 160 million people! To date the BFG1 has been translated in eight languages: Arabic, Bahasa, Chinese, English, French, Kiswahili, Portuguese and Spanish. A group in Vietnam is currently translating it into Viet, while another is doing the same for BFG4.

But the effect of this generosity has been far more profound on the nature, culture and development of the Barefoot Guide as a global community of practice. At heart we are an organisation of passionate volunteers. We have been called an “un-organisation” (not a “dis-organisation” though there have been times of that too!). We are not a project or organisation that lives and dies on funding.

Although we collect funds to pay for expenses, like facilitators, illustrators, website and writeshop costs, most have come from a wide range of sources: small donations, crowd-funding and especially from the writers themselves (or their own organisations), particularly for BFG3, 4 and 5, eager to become part of the Writers Collective. The Barefoot Guide Connection (and now Alliance) hopes to raise good funds to grow its initiatives over the next few years but it will never close for a lack of funding.
Writeshops and the Barefoot Guide Alliance – 2015 onwards

Writeshops
The many writeshops we have run over the past ten years, have all been experienced as unusually empowering. Central to that are writing, feedback and conversational processes that help surface and strengthen insight and voice, enabling practitioners and leaders to see their experience, their stories, and themselves in new ways, drawing wise lessons and then expressing and sharing these with others, in writing and metaphor.

To date, close to two hundred and fifty practitioners, activists and leaders have been engaged as writers in the four published Barefoot Guides and resources, in small and large ways, the majority of whom had never imagined themselves as published authors with a voice and a message of value to the wider world.

At this moment, three more Barefoot Guides are being developed: one on transformative evaluation, one on inclusive development and one on seed sovereignty. Another three are in conception (on generative leadership and on climate change mitigation).

Apart from the BFG on evaluation practice, these new BFGs are all initiatives that have come from other communities of practice, outside of the core group, as with BFG3. And this is where, to our surprise, we are perhaps beginning to succeed in generating and supporting the kind of communities of practice we had hoped to support through the website.

What has motivated these communities of practice to approach us? Apart from liking the format and style of the Barefoot Guides as a vehicle to publish their experiences and ideas, the real interest has been in the particular writeshop approach and method we have developed, quite unique in our view. Although we are not the first to use writeshops for collective publishing, our inquiries into the methods that others have used for their writeshops have shown them to be suited for documenting existing technical knowledge (around e.g. forestry) rather than for surfacing and further developing the deeper practices that Barefoot Guides focus on.

This has given rise to the realisation that writeshops are more than just a collective method for writing books. They are a good example of “tools for collective intelligence”, helping to meet the need for processes that enable people to think, learn and work together more effectively, particularly across organisational boundaries. It has dawned on us that what the BFG Connection has to offer the world has been both a product (the Guides) and the process of writeshopping. With more conscious effort we can make more significant contributions through enabling writeshops and other practices to better meet the challenges of collaboration.

The Barefoot Guide Alliance

The BFG Alliance develops and promotes processes of co-working and co-learning and the use of various “tools of collective intelligence”, like the writeshop approach we have crafted, that bring added value to a political vision of citizens collectively reflecting, consulting and organizing themselves in disciplined and creative ways in order to co-create the world, politically, socially and economically. This is the vision of a “deliberative democracy” that the BFG Alliance seeks to encourage and contribute to, through our collective energies, adding to the distinctive contributions and collective energies of others.

We can no longer rely on the political systems and cultures issued from the nineteenth and twentieth century revolutions of great leaders, elite vanguards and competitive politics.
What the world thinks and needs has moved on, but we will remain caught in old patterns of behaviour and response until we transform how we think, learn and work together.

There are already innumerable individuals, organisations and movements doing this work. However, the BFG Alliance has a unique niche and contribution in this, with experience, approaches and methods that have and can enable disciplined, co-creative, co-learning, citizen-driven approaches, practices, proposals, books, studies, actions, etc., which are real deliberative processes that are anchored in the core of its work.

(from a working document)

Until a year ago, the Barefoot Guide Connection was led by a small group of committed individuals, some based in organisations and some freelancing, stimulating and coordinating new Guides and the website (and a growing Facebook page). But we realised that this loose “unorganisation” needed something more consistent, committed and grounded behind it, to help it become more organised, to gather resources and to give it better strategic direction. The CDRA put forward some funds to sustain a part-time website curator and a part-time coordinator. The idea of the Barefoot Guide Alliance was put forward and a year later, after a formative meeting in Paris in late 2015, the BFG Alliance was formed of five organisations from South Africa, India, France, Belgium, Vietnam and the Netherlands.

We have a strong sense that in letting go the ownership of BFG we have been able to encourage a “responsible freedom” in others and a good measure of self-control that has enabled us all to better navigate difficulties and conflicts. Perhaps the notion of “control”, of being in control or of controlling others, belongs to the very instrumental and hierarchical systems we are trying to transform, and in its place we are finding new principles to help us to govern ourselves. The Barefoot Guide Alliance is itself an experiment in the kind of new forms of collaboration we want to support, and hopefully we will have the tools of collective intelligence we need for this challenge.

Some Feedback for the Barefoot Guides

*CDRA and the Barefoot Guide connection, through their approach based on collaboration, reflection and learning, have created an incredible resource for all those working to bring about social change. Practical, reflective, inspirational, accessible and, for these reasons, invaluable guide.*

Laura Fisher · Università degli Studi di Torino

*CDRA and The Barefoot Guides they pioneered have been the key influences in my life and work. I love how they work with questions that provide the space for opening up, offer opportunities for real conversation and deeper reflection. And if there was ever a time for new ways of being and thinking this is most certainly the time. Thank you to CDRA and those of you who have worked on the 4 Barefoot Guides which are my constant companions in my community and organisational development work.*

Marie Corcoran-Tindill

*The Barefoot Guide is a must read for all development workers.*

Mqaphelisi Sibanda · Works at VVOB Zimbabwe

*The Barefoot Guides are chock-full of practical wisdom. It has given more legitimacy to a way of working that has always felt ‘true’ and ‘right’ to me intuitively and that I have seen the effectiveness of in action.*

Tana Paddock · Cape Town, South Africa
CDRA’s approach starts with the most important leverage point for transformational change—the consciousness of the change agent herself.
Patricia A. Wilson

CDRA has been such an inspirational driving force behind the Barefoot guide connection and the various Barefoot Guides. Their passion for collaborative learning and sharing has been key in mobilising this truly unique worldwide community.
Jan Van Ongevalle

I found barefoot materials very useful and also user friendly.
Githaiga Kamau · Country Program Manager at Action Africa Help International, Kenya

The Barefoot Guides are an invaluable harvest of wisdom and insight, made available freely to all those working towards social change. A tribute to the value of collaboration and shared learning.
Carrie Pratt

Proud of the Barefoot initiative which helps people to dig deep to find their source of inspiration, and gives practical handles for transforming self, organisations and the wider society.
Lucia Nass · SA expert at ESAP2

CDRA has done so much in advancing collaborative training and addressing group dynamic challenges within social movements. The relationship with Barefoot Guide will surely enhance and create an engine of fire towards development of grassroots initiatives.
Themba Mavimbela ·

The various [Barefoot Guide] issues offer so much in terms of insights, tools, processes, and inspiration!
Michelle Parlevliet · Postdoctoral Research Fellow at University of Copenhagen

CDRA and BG have an innovative and creative model for change and social impact.
Ahmed Ismael · Director at Siyafunda Community Technology Centre

This unusual and exceptional volume (and series) is hugely accessible yet deeply rooted in solid theory and extensive practice across a wide range of contexts and fields. Expect from it something truly unique in its combination of insight, reflection, experience and highly useable mixed text/visual presentation. It is not “dumbed down.” I have seen it bite as deeply at high academic and professional level as at grassroots community leadership level, an astonishing achievement worth honouring.
Jim Cochrane · Cape Town, South Africa

What they do is to open source knowledge pertaining to learning, training, social change, organizational development and in the process demystifying these fields and take them out of the realm of ‘experts’.
Ravi Badri · Ekta Parishad. Hyderabad, India

I have learned so much from the Barefoot Guides as I heed my calling to walk with grassroots movements and community-based organizations, which are the true engine of social transformation wherever you are in the world. The folks at CDRA and the contributors demonstrate that collaborative and mutual learning is for us all!
Jennifer Lentfer · Director of Communications at International Development Exchange (IDEX)