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Using Simulation Games in Development Education

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A simulation game takes a real-life situation as a model and draws out from it the key features, struggles, roles and dilemmas. In doing this, a simulation game imitates reality while reducing complexity to manageable proportions. Players 'walk in the shoes' of another person, becoming part of a situation they would not ordinarily experience, along with its feelings, dilemmas and conflicts. Taking on a role can require players to think and act in new ways and from unfamiliar perspectives. They need to give themselves permission to let go of their own life goals and try to think and make decisions like the person whose role they are taking on. This can be both challenging and enlightening, and participation in a game works best when people freely choose to take part.

Rules, symbols, goals to be achieved, set time frames and often a bit of fun, provide a structure that aims to involve and motivate the players. The degree of freedom within the structure varies between simulation games. Simpler games tend to be something like role plays, while others develop different scenarios according to the way players choose to act out their roles and interact with each other.

Involvement in a simulation game gives players the opportunity to begin to come to an empathetic understanding of a situation. However, real learning takes place as a result of the carefully facilitated debriefing and discussion process that immediately follows the playing part of the game. During the debriefing, players are helped to move out of role, look back on what happened and distance themselves from it. At this point, players share their experiences of the game and how they felt about things. Then they move on to discuss how those experiences can apply to real life. It is often during this part of the process that participants come to an 'Aha' experience where they say something like, "So that is what it is like to be faced with...." or "Is that what it was like for you (in such and such a role)? I didn't realise."

The simulation game process is not designed to introduce new material. Rather it gives participants an opportunity to apply and integrate theoretical knowledge they already have. It might help them to bring together a range of issues they are familiar with, or perhaps they may become more aware of the assumptions under which people act, or find new ways to interpret local situations in the context of

wider social changes. Hopefully, the process leads people to ask deeper questions, to analyse situations more thoroughly and to seek out more knowledge. For some, the empathy they develop may lead to a more profound commitment to justice and development concerns. For each person, the direction and degree of learning will be different and may continue to unfold for a long time into the future.

Ideally, facilitators should have played the simulation game they are facilitating. Being familiar with the principles of facilitation and having had some training to develop facilitation skills will increase the effectiveness of the experience for all involved. Because so many things happen at once in a simulation game, it is also advisable to have an assistant facilitator, especially during the debriefing.

Action for World Development has produced three simulation games that particularly relate to agricultural issues.

Is it the Real Thing? (Junior secondary to adults) is a simple, fun game that raises the dilemmas faced by rural communities when choosing between cash crops and subsistence crops.

Living in the Pineapple Republic (Senior secondary to adult) is a game that starts with a scenario where peasant workers in an imaginary tropical country have formed a Co-op to take over a pineapple plantation. The other landowners, the export company, the military government and the bank all have different interests and concerns related to the doings of the Little Pineapple Co-op.

Which Rice? (Senior secondary to adult) is a game that points to the links between consumers and producers when it comes to evaluating and responding to the effects of the 'Green Revolution' on agriculture.