

**Think**

About unspoken issues which may be affecting the link.

**Reflect**

Consider the reasons for raising an issue and possible outcomes

**Question:**

Whether ignoring a controversial issue is reinforcing power structures within a community?

**Checklist:**

- ✓ Do you respect the rights and identity of your partners?
- ✓ Have you explored any of your partner's views and concerns with them?
- ✓ Have you considered discussing issues of injustice within your link?
- ✓ Have you considered exploring the source of 'injustice' in both contexts?
- ✓ Have you considered issues which may be preventing wider engagement within your own community?
- ✓ Is awareness of an issue affecting relationships within the link?
- ✓ Have you considered how to approach an issue: directly or indirectly?
- ✓ Who needs to be made aware of the issue?
- ✓ What do you want people to do with this awareness?
- ✓ Do you understand why your partners behave in a certain way?
- ✓ Do your partners have access to resources that would allow them to behave differently?

**Next steps:**

- Consider how you can ensure that your link is as open as possible.
- Look at areas which cause tension within your own community.
- Consider how challenging issues are addressed within your own community.
- Consider the issues within your link with which your partners might have concerns.
- Consider the cultural norms, religious beliefs, gender roles, social and economic circumstances etc of your own and your partner community.
- Consider the range of views represented within the link.
- Make contact with local or national groups for information on a local issue.
- Use this opportunity to strengthen the link.

**Differing world views**

A world view is a collection of core assumptions or beliefs with which a person makes sense of the world. These beliefs are usually socially constructed and culturally bound so that reality is subject to multiple interpretations.

Interpretations over which parties are divided lead to controversies, or disputes. Such controversies can range from private disputes between two parties to large scale disagreements.

Controversial issues are usually issues of social significance and have national and international implications. However, issues which do not extend beyond local concerns can be equally significant.

Issues that are likely to be sensitive or controversial are those that have a political, social or personal impact and arouse strong feelings and deal with questions of perspectives.

Religion and politics are all likely to fall into this category. Other issues likely to be sensitive or controversial include for example, family, lifestyle and values, law and order, drugs, financial issues, unemployment, environmental issues, bullying and bereavement.

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.  
*Edmund Burke, Ireland*

There are different perspectives and outlooks on many issues, particularly sensitive issues, within and between communities. Those ideas which either confirm or question deeply held notions of what is right and wrong will become controversial and may create polarised viewpoints. Controversial topics usually concern personal values and beliefs and arouse emotional reactions. Issues are controversial precisely because there are no easy answers.

People's view of a situation will depend on their point of view, which is based on past experiences and beliefs. Therefore it is important for each community to critically reflect on its own perspectives and outlooks. It is in exploring differences in knowledge, traditions, values and beliefs, within and between communities, that learning takes place. This should be a continuous process as cultures change and are not static.

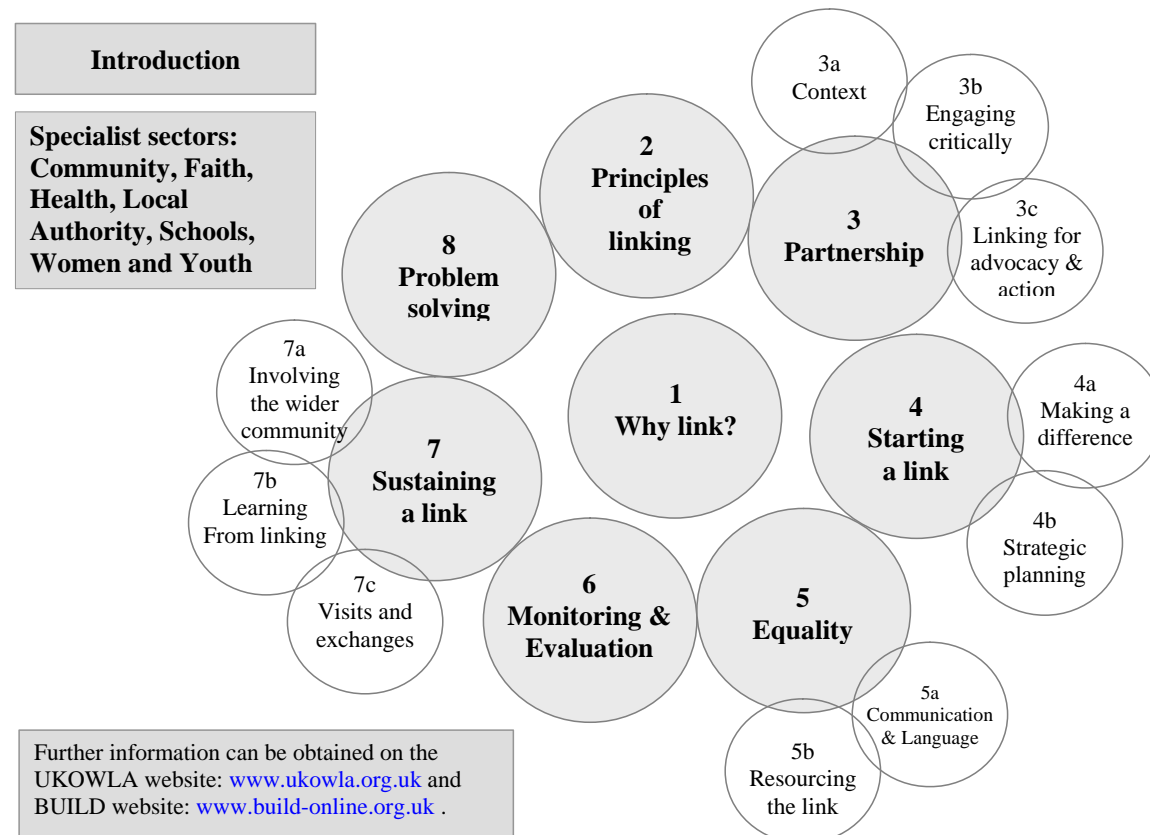
Some issues encountered within linking will be at the national level, including racism, violence against women, treatment of the elderly, corporal punishment in schools, sexuality, whilst others may involve different attitudes towards seemingly innocuous everyday behaviours such as levels of touching, hugging or keeping pets and their place within the home.

It is often thought that by not raising a potentially controversial issue, the partner is demonstrating an awareness of local sensitivities. However, in some situations this 'neutrality' serves to reinforce the power structure within the community and prevents alternative voices being heard. Custom and tradition may be cited as reasons for the continuity of certain practices; however a human rights perspective recognises that civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights are indivisible and interdependent.

There may be local organisations which can provide a perspective on the issue within the local context. National organisations covering a range of issues can also help, for example, GAMCOTRAP (Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices) in The Gambia, MIND (National Association for Mental Health) in the UK or ANDES (Association Quechua-Aymara for Conservation and Sustainable Development) in Peru.

Where the issue is causing, or has the potential to cause, tension in the partnership participatory methods, ideally with an external facilitator, can be helpful.

**Toolkit for Linking leaflets**



Further information can be obtained on the UKOWLA website: [www.ukowla.org.uk](http://www.ukowla.org.uk) and BUILD website: [www.build-online.org.uk](http://www.build-online.org.uk).

## What others say

You must be able to engage with issues and recognise that difference is very difficult to deal with.

*Dinyar Godrej, India*

If you wish to know the mind of a man, listen to his words.

*Goethe, Germany*

We often make assumptions that people are ostensibly the same: that they use the same language about things. People's cultural experience and value systems are different and it is easy to foster misunderstandings due to different cultural perceptions

*Pete Davis, Oxfam*

Democracy can only be built from the bottom up, by the patient building up of the tolerance and respect for minorities that are its prerequisites. It cannot be imposed or achieved overnight. *Mark Malloch Brown, UN*

How can you put your old people in homes? *Gambian visitor*

It is important to remember that injustice exists in all parts of the world and that we need to address issues in our own society. *Michael Newman, UK*

Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation, and it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development, and peace. *UN Secretary General Kofi Annan*

For goodness sake, will they hear, will white people hear what we are trying to say? Please, all we are asking you to do is to recognize that we are humans, too. *Bishop Desmond Tutu, South Africa*

Your very silence shows you agree. *Euripides, Greece*

Economic and social rights have to go hand in hand with political rights – if you are poor you have neither. *Mary Robinson, Ireland*

## Engaging critically: raising awareness

**Local, national and international organisations exist which provide information on many of these issues. These are some which might arise in your link.**

**Violence against women:** Violence against women is not acceptable or legal and should never be tolerated or justified. Violence against women exists in all countries. It can be in the family, against women in the community and perpetrated or condoned by the state. Attitudes, prejudices and social beliefs that foster and reinforce violence against women must change.

**Treatment of the Elderly:** Older people are entitled to a secure, dignified and independent retirement. The elderly in many countries enjoy considerable status, respect, care, and social and psychological support from their families. However in Western societies, many suffer isolation and loneliness after retiring at the age of 65 and are no longer cared for within the family.

**Racism:** Racism is the belief that human races have distinctive characteristics which determine their respective cultures; usually involving the idea that one race is superior and has the right to dominate others. Racism is treating someone differently or unfairly simply on these grounds. People can also experience prejudice because of their religion, social class or nationality.

**Traditional practices:** Every social grouping in the world has specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others are harmful to a specific group, such as women. Traditional agricultural practices often maintain a balance with the environment which is threatened by new development.

**Western culture:** The abuse of alcohol, drugs, sex and visions of scantily dressed women in films and in the international media cause some communities to view Western culture as corrupt and immoral. At the same time, the education systems and amenities such as clean drinking water and constant electricity in the West are admired, as is political freedom of expression.

**Sustainability:** Sustainable development is about meeting present day needs without affecting the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. A sustainable community is healthy and safe; uses resources sensibly and fairly; is inclusive; has a local economy for all people; cuts waste and pollution; has its own character and cares about people and nature.

**Disability:** Approximately 10 per cent of the world's population have a disability of one form or another. While their living conditions vary, people with disabilities suffer the experience of being exposed to various forms of discrimination. Existing legal protection is generally insufficient to safeguard their rights and they continue to face barriers to access and inclusion.

**Sexuality:** People who are attracted to members of the same sex suffer prejudice and discrimination in many countries. In recent years the emergence of the gay liberation movement has resulted in more liberal attitudes to homosexuality in some communities, whilst other communities remain intolerant implementing discriminatory legislation and persecuting homosexuals.

**HIV/AIDs:** The increasing rate of infection is placing a burden on individuals, families and communities. Many dying are aged between 20 – 45 with serious effects on the economy and development of the community. The stigma of HIV/AIDS and the resulting silence along with limited resources for treatment can lead to a failure to implement effective measures.

**Migration:** People have always left their homelands in search of a better job and a life elsewhere for economic reasons. People also leave their own countries because of civil conflicts and insecurity or persecution. They commonly face discrimination and xenophobic hostility. Women and children account for more than half of the refugees and internally displaced persons.

**Child labour:** An estimated 246 million children are engaged in child labour. The issue is usually hidden with children working in homes, industry, workshops and agriculture. In some countries children are permitted to engage in light work which does not interfere with their education from the age of 12, but for many the work is hazardous and they miss out on education completely.

**Disasters:** Weather is often the last of a series of factors which can cause a disaster. Poverty means many communities do not have the resources to invest in preparing for disasters. Population growth and migration expose increasing numbers to hazards and climate change is leading to a rise in natural disasters including droughts, floods, cyclones and earthquakes.

### Handling controversial issues:

- Give people time to make their point, do not interrupt
- Do not ridicule other people's opinions, or put them down
- Consider the effect that what you are saying may have on other people
- Listen to and consider other people's opinions
- Be aware that body language as well as what you say can affect others

Advice from The Nuffield Foundation

### School Linking Project, Bradford, UK

The Bradford Schools Linking Project facilitates regular contact between primary and secondary school pupils of different ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds and usually from different geographic neighbourhoods across the district, through shared cultural activities.

Teachers receive training in personal awareness, citizenship issues and practical guidance for operating the project. They then plan for a series of meetings over a school year which will enable students to learn together and about each other. The project also works in partnership with a range of creative practitioners and sports providers to develop a sense of what the children share in the district and to encourage everyone to express this in their own way.

The underlying philosophy of the SLP states that: children have a right to learn about people from different backgrounds and a responsibility to understand what it means to be a citizen of Bradford and Britain.

Quotes from children:

*'I'm surprised – I wouldn't have thought I'd be friends with those children.'*

*'I've never had friends who were their religion. Thought that might be a problem. But I've learnt that it doesn't matter what religion you are.'*

*'I felt nervous before but now it's cool.'*

*'I didn't think we'd get along, because we're Asian and they're English. But we did. My buddy and I have the same thoughts!'*

[www.bradfordschools.net/slp](http://www.bradfordschools.net/slp)