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# ORG



## Dilemmas of inter-organisational learning

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## EDITORIAL

# Dilemmas of inter-organisational learning

Organisations can learn from each other, and they can learn together. There is a wide spectrum of ways in which inter-organisational learning (IOL) occurs, ranging from picking up a good idea from a competitor to engaging in strategic alliances. Inter-organisational learning is not only practiced in the private sector but also widely practised in the development sector. However, unlike the private sector IOL in the development sector is hardly studied or evaluated. There seems to be an uncritical assumption that organisations working and learning together is unproblematic and usually beneficial for all parties.

The authors of the feature article question this assumption. From their own practice they have identified a number of challenges organisations face when they engage in learning together. Differences in culture and competition between organisations can impede the learning process. Sometimes it is difficult to find the right balance between planning and setting tangible targets, on the one hand, which is often a prerequisite to obtain the necessary funds for learning, and allowing for the flexibility that is needed for a free-spirited quest for new knowledge, on the other hand.

The dichotomy between planning and flexibility in IOL is addressed by Ann Lamont, who presents a framework of five generic outcomes in the development sectors that can be extremely useful for mapping out the intended outcomes of an IOL process. Other articles in this issue of *Capacity.org* verify Lamont's observations.

One of the generic outcomes identified by Lamont's concerns the 'vertical integration of policy and practice'. This is illustrated well by the case presented by Bhavita Vaishnava. She explains how constitutional changes giving local government in India more power created a new situation for all local actors. The rules of the game had changed but actors still had to figure out how the new game had to be played. Capacity gaps emerged that local actors had to deal with. Local governments and civil society organisations, who often had antagonistic relationships with each other, were challenged to learn – together – how to make the new system work in a way that would also benefit the most marginalised groups.

A case from South Sudan presented by former staff members of PSO, a Dutch umbrella organisation that funded 13 IOL processes since 2010, also verifies Lamont's framework. A generic outcome presented by Ann is 'creating common purpose, peer support and trust among the organisations in a learning community'. The South Sudan case describes how competition between

development organisations has merely intensified the confusion in a fragile environment, where information is usually very fragmented. The aid structure contributes to adverse circumstances for collective learning because organisations tend to work in isolation from each other in an atmosphere of mistrust. The facilitators of this IOL tried to overcome this and create a sense of common purpose and trust by making the relationships between development agencies the object of inter-organisational learning.

A third generic outcome in Lamont's framework concerns 'understanding the contribution of individual organisations to create broader systemic shifts.' This type of outcome is illustrated by Doug Reeler's case of 18 South African NGOs working on early childhood development. They engaged in an IOL process with very modest aspirations. Over time the group evolved to become an advocate for systemic change replacing the current top-down delivery of services to communities by a system in which government, businesses and communities co-create services for young children.

This brings us to IOL in cross-sector partnerships, the topic of the guest column by Rob Tulder. Many NGOs contemplate engaging in partnerships with private sector businesses. However, as Rob argues, unless these partnerships are based on a genuine alignment of purpose and interest many of them are bound to fail. This guest column is a must-read for those who want to learn about and avoid the pitfalls of cross-sector partnerships.

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Towards a knowledge agenda

# Inter-organisational learning: a new frontier

Inter-organisational learning is practiced widely in the development sector, but little research is being done on it. It is therefore high time to set a knowledge agenda in support of practitioners who facilitate inter-organisational learning.

Inter-organisational activities have become common practice in the development sector. Some of these activities aim to categorically achieve learning. However, even when this is not the primary goal, inter-organisational learning (IOL) is usually critical to the success of networks, coalitions, alliances, partnerships and other inter-organisational structures. After all, learning is the key to defining advocacy positions, creating production chains, developing water systems and a myriad of other development activities that require collective organisational action.

This means that a large percentage of inter-organisational activity is at least secondarily devoted to learning: learning about each other's skills, sharing knowledge, coaching each other and developing innovation in products and strategies. IOL can complement organisational learning in several ways, including:

- *Generating innovation:* Going beyond the confines of an organisation's walls inevitably increases the diversity of its people's views, experiences and skills. A diversity of participants can trigger innovation. IOL exposes people to different ways of approaching issues.
- *Reducing costs:* IOL can reduce costs by creating collaborative value among organisations with specialised, complementary knowledge.
- *Efficient dissemination of knowledge:* Inter-organisational relationships are important conduits of information and knowledge.
- *Triggering system change:* A gradual shift has been taking place in the practice of capacity development from working with single organisations to facilitating multi-stakeholder processes and multi-actor collaborations that aim to improve system performance. Examples of such systems are an agricultural value chain, a health system or an education system.

Introducing these changes in organisations presents major challenges, however, and the process would benefit from a framework for thinking about IOL and exploring these

challenges. Unfortunately, a vast body of research-based evidence is not available because, unlike in commercial sectors, IOL in the non-profit development sector has hardly been researched.

This is in itself remarkable. The development sector tends to over-romanticise collaboration and networking. Donors encourage development organisations to engage in networks and strategic alliances. However, despite a proliferation of networks it is often hard to pinpoint what innovations and new insights they have generated.

But IOL does not always produce the results that everyone hoped for. This raises the question how and under which circumstances is it worth investing in IOL? Therefore, we focus in this article on formulating researchable questions based on experiences from practice. It is a first step towards a knowledge agenda. Through it, we aim to begin creating a framework for thinking about the topic and challenging and inspiring researchers and practitioners to engage in advancing our knowledge in this underexplored field.

This analysis will draw on the experiences gained during the following IOL initiatives: The International Land Coalition (ILC), the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and the PSO Learning trajectories.

## What is IOL?

IOL is a process through which actors representing different organisations share and develop knowledge. They do so to secure benefits for their own organisations, for a collective of organisations or for wider society.

Defining IOL in this way makes it possible to look at a very broad spectrum of processes that involves networking, co-production, co-creation or collaborative action. These processes, in turn, entail sharing and creating knowledge that arises through practice and is then revealed through analysis and reflection.

This definition is broader than many of the definitions used for studying IOL in the commercial sector. Those definitions usually



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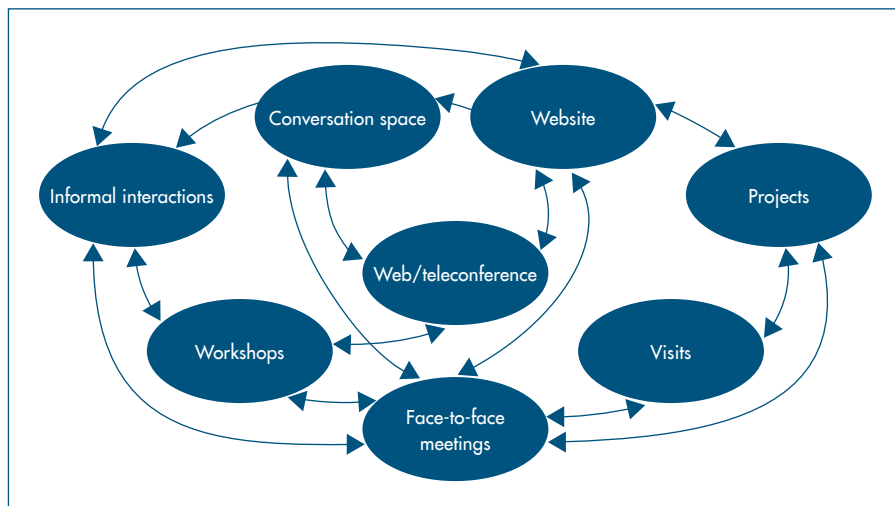
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focus solely on IOL's benefits for individual companies. This definition, however, takes into account a wider range of IOL benefits for individual organisations. Ultimately it also tallies with the philanthropic character of many of the organisations involved in development and the non-profit sector.

## Ecology of learning

Although 'learning' is often associated with formal learning events such as workshops and seminars, IOL occurs more frequently through more informal exchanges between people in different organisations. Charles Jennings, a leading thinker and researcher on human capital development in private sector companies, has gone so far as to develop the '70-20-10 rule'. This rule estimates that 70% of learning comes through experience and practice at doing a job, 20% through other people and conversations, and 10% through formal learning processes.

The idea that IOL takes place through daily interactions is particularly useful for understanding the value of learning and how



Ecology of community learning. Source: Snyder, W. M. and E. Wenger (2004).

it occurs. Community of practice gurus William Snyder and Etienne Wenger illustrate this with their concept of an 'ecology of learning' (see above). Their concept vastly enhances opportunities for learning, and raises particular questions about the pace and sequencing of these types of interactions. The ecology of learning does not focus on a top-down process or expert knowledge or knowledge management. Rather, it emphasises horizontal exchange.

### Dimensions of IOL

The definition of IOL as a process of sharing and developing knowledge to benefit not only one's own organisation but also society at large encompasses a variety of distinct IOL processes. They can be classified along three dimensions: their degree of formality, duration and their degree of diversity (low or high, for example).

This model makes it possible to distinguish eight types of IOL processes. Different combinations of these dimensions suggest that IOL processes can look very different, each with their own learning ecology, challenges and very different types of facilitation. For example, at one end of the spectrum there is an informal, short-lived and very homogeneous group of organisations that meet in a one-off event to discuss a common issue. At the other end of the spectrum there is the formalised, long-term collaboration between a very diverse group of organisations (the International Land Coalition is an example; see box, page 6).

### Degree of formality

An informal IOL process occurs when organisations encourage staff to participate in events or networks that have learning objectives but not a formal organisational commitment. These networks include platforms such as Eldis, LinkedIn and Facebook. This type of IOL process is hard to distinguish from individual expert learning in communities of practice, since it does not involve significant organisational commitment in terms of staff time or

resources. The extent to which new knowledge is adopted and applied depends on the learning culture and practices within the organisation.

IOL processes that require substantial investment are usually based on a more formalised strategic alliance between organisations. One scenario that can lead to a formal strategic alliance is when organisations, driven by a common purpose, engage in a collective thinking process because they lack the capacity to develop or acquire that knowledge on their own, or because they see opportunities that require collective engagement that involves learning.

Often strategic alliances are established in response to a funding opportunity such as a call for proposals. Whereas competition to acquire funding is in itself a disincentive to engage in co-learning, many donors have a policy to promote and reward agencies for engaging in networks and alliances. In order to be eligible for funding, organisations have to establish a consortium or a formal partnership.

Eligibility criteria can vary from relatively relaxed to very demanding, such as requiring that organisations have a certain track record, and are from different countries and even different continents (such as the EU funding programme for developing the capacity of higher education institutes, including Edulink, Erasmus Mundus and Tempus).

### Duration

The duration of an IOL process can be very short. Think of the many seminars and workshops where representatives of organisations are invited to share and develop insights on a certain topic. The ecology of learning in these short-lived IOL processes usually consists of one or two types of exchange (for example, a workshop and sharing resources through a website).

Other IOL processes are open-ended. Participating organisations have a common vision and broadly defined objectives. The learning ecology of these IOL processes is usually rich and sophisticated, and includes visits, projects and website activities. Both

the ILC and the PRME (see box, page 6) are good examples.

In between these two extremes are IOL processes that have a project-like character. They are time bound and have clearly defined outputs and outcomes, such as the NGO Code of Conduct for Health Systems Strengthening (see box, below) or most of the PSO-supported IOL processes.

### Diversity of composition

The composition of organisations participating in IOL processes varies from being homogeneous to being diverse. Diversity refers to differences in the type of core business, size and complexity, the resources or power, for example. Homogeneity is a relative term. Organisations may be similar in one respect, but different in another.

PRME, for example, is very homogeneous in one respect because almost all participating organisations are business schools. But the group is also diverse because the schools represent almost 80 countries, and they range from small and large, well funded and less well funded, to well connected and less well connected.

In other IOL processes the organisations constitute a social system such as a value chain. These include a diverse mixture of actors such as small farmers, farmer cooperatives, large businesses, governmental institutions and research institutions. They have a common stake in a 'system', but they perform very different, but complementary roles in this system. In order to change and improve the system, stakeholders must learn together despite differences in culture, power and competing interests.

The lower the diversity, the more likely organisations are to have similar organisational cultures and values, which makes facilitating the IOL process less complicated. Greater diversity requires more methodological and strategic sophistication to hold together the whole and generate value for all participants.

IOL faces many social, process-related, cultural and technical challenges. The four

### Code of conduct

The organisations that developed the NGO Code of Conduct for Health Systems Strengthening are an example of an intra-sector learning alliance, but with Northern and Southern partners. The organisations share a common concern that some NGO practices, such as paying high salaries in low-income countries and luring qualified people away from national health systems, might actually weaken the management capacity of health ministries.

The code has become a valuable resource for NGOs that want to develop more responsible policies and procedures for employing local staff (see also issue 42 of *Capacity.org* entitled 'Fighting disease or strengthening health systems?').



most common challenges are: differences in learning styles and cultures; creating an open, sharing environment; planning for results; and maintaining momentum and staying motivated.

### Differences in learning styles and cultures

Different organisations have different learning cultures that are influenced by many factors. One factor is the type of profession that dominates an organisation. Generally speaking practitioners have little patience for analytical discussions or the meticulous documentation and analysis of findings. They prefer action and learning while doing. Learning may be applied in practice, but it is often less visible and formal, and without documentation.

Academics, on the other hand, prefer to understand the logic and theory, and naturally gravitate towards abstract conceptualisation, documentation and publishing. Policy makers, diplomats and technicians all have their own learning styles that best suit their professions. These preferences for different learning styles are reflected in the learning cultures of organisations as well.

National and regional cultures influence organisational behaviour, including the way people learn individually and collectively. In *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, Geert Hofstede and colleagues distinguish five dimensions in national cultures including power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and, long versus short-term orientation.

Another factor that influences the learning culture of organisations is the way resources

are generated. The learning process in the commercial sector is informed and directed by clear-cut indicators such as turnover, profit and market share. The goals and work of non-profit organisations, by contrast, are often more ambiguous, which makes it difficult to reach consensus on the direction learning should take.

Differences in learning cultures can be a source of misunderstanding that can complicate the learning process between participants. How to connect people who represent organisations with markedly different learning styles and cultures is a challenge for facilitators of IOL processes.

### Creating an open, sharing environment

IOL processes require an atmosphere in which partners feel free to share information. Research in the commercial sector shows that creating an open sharing environment can be challenging because in addition to common interests, participants can have competing interests that undermine collective learning. Participants also guard against exploitation, which can also inhibit learning. Indeed, Rikard Larsson and colleagues identify two key elements of the IOL dilemma in the commercial sector in their article 'The Interorganizational Learning Dilemma: Collective Knowledge Development in Strategic Alliances': '(1) being a good partner invites exploitation by partners attempting to maximise their individual appropriation of the joint learning, and (2) such opportunistic learning strategies undercut the collective knowledge development in the strategic alliance.'

The effects of competition on IOL in the non-profit sector have not been researched

yet. There is certainly competition between organisations for donor funds and other forms of sponsorship, and this competition gets fiercer as the funding environment contracts. As mentioned before, competition for funds is a disincentive for IOL, and the extent to which this effect is counterbalanced by donor requirements for engaging in partnerships has not been researched.

A related issue arising from competition for donor funds is that mistakes are not something that organisations like to share. For obvious reasons: a negative evaluation could adversely affect funding. Not surprisingly, organisations tend to share successes instead of failures. Learning opportunities are missed as a result, however, because, as Michael Dell once said, 'you will learn from your mistakes and the mistakes of others, for there is very little learning in success.' In order to overcome this barrier it is important to build trust between the actors involved. But trust is not established by starting to share failures. Trust is a prerequisite for openness. Failure will only be shared once trust has been established.

### Planning for results

A recent survey conducted among development organisations in the Netherlands showed that managers of development organisations are increasingly reluctant to commit resources to learning processes without the prospect of tangible and useful results. Hence buy-in at management level hinges on plans with clear outputs and predictable outcomes of value.

The ease with which these kinds of plans can be created depends on the kind of knowledge that is being developed. From

## Dealing with diversity

The International Land Coalition (ILC) is a good example of an alliance composed of organisations from different sectors that are driven by a common purpose. ILC is a membership-driven network of 120 organisations working together to secure land rights for the rural poor through advocacy, dialogue, knowledge sharing and capacity building.

The mixed constituency embraces grassroots and civil society organisations, research and academia, inter-governmental financial institutions and United Nations agencies. ILC aims to 'bridge the knowledge gap between grassroots organisations, research organisations, and other actors, and act as a knowledge broker.'

Because of the diversity of ILC's constituency, the knowledge and learning activities are framed in a variety of sets suitable to different purposes. The community of action is based on evidence-based approaches, collaborative research, multi-sectorial learning paths and multi-stakeholder dialogues. These common elements are used in ILC's global or regional programmes, such as the 'Women's land rights' and the 'Securing the rangelands' initiatives, to facilitate the multifaceted understanding of land challenges.

Significant change will only take place in complex matters such as securing land rights for the poor if a critical mass of actors act in their own sphere of action (technical, political, social and economic) on the basis of knowledge and understanding that they developed collectively.

working on organisational learning over the decades, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön distinguish between three evolutionary levels of organisational learning:

- Single loop learning, which aims to improve a practice with a view to existing standards, policies or norms;
- Double loop learning, which involves reflecting on the appropriateness of existing standards, policies and norms and adjusting them as necessary; and
- Triple loop learning, which questions the entire rationale of the organisation or sector which may lead to radical transformations that touch on the mission and vision of organisations.

The higher the level of learning, the more a learning process is about stepping into the unknown. More unknowns increase the difficulty of defining outcomes in clear-cut targets and indicators. Moreover, such targets are further complicated by the

inter-organisational nature of IOL processes since they involve more diverse goals and participants. All this makes it challenging to gain managerial commitment to support the learning process with resources.

IOL processes, therefore, need to meet two contradicting requirements. They need to be planned in sufficient detail to get funded, and at the same time they need to build in sufficient flexibility in order to be truly innovative.

IOL processes can address this dilemma between planning and flexibility in part by dividing broadly defined learning objectives into manageable sub-objectives and milestones that enhance development effectiveness. Objectives need to be segmented into appropriate timelines, sub-goals, sub-geographies and sub-questions to build accountability and energy.

This task requires skill, knowledge of the subject matter and a clear understanding of participating organisations' expectations. If the learning objectives are too broad they will not effectively engage people because they will not be sufficiently relevant to these people's short-term interests and needs. Narrowly defined objectives are usually best addressed within an organisation.

### Maintaining momentum and staying motivated

Learning takes time and requires repetitive interactions. However, many IOL processes start enthusiastically and quickly fade or find it difficult to maintain robust exchanges. In inter-organisational settings distinct challenges include priorities to respond to intra-organisational demands, geographic dispersion, varying commitments to learning and conflicting temporal cycles (such as preparing annual reports).

IOL processes have a particular need to develop 'leaderful' cultures, to use Joe Raelin's term, that do not depend on a central organising figure, but where all participants understand and are committed to the objectives and take initiative.

The ecology of learning and the typology of IOL processes presented earlier also suggest that there are optimal ways of designing

activities so that their pacing and sequencing matches the type of IOL. What are these designs, and what factors influence their arrangements in addition to the typology?

### Remaining questions

The art of facilitating IOL is still in its infancy in the development sector. The knowledge resources that people involved in IOL processes can tap into are few and far between. The challenges they face in IOL processes mean they have to rely heavily on their own wit and wisdom. This calls for the development of a body of knowledge on IOL that addresses its dilemmas. The following questions also merit further investigation and research:

Are there proven practices in the facilitation of IOL to redress the potentially negative effects of competing interests or concerns about reputation?

How can IOL be planned in a way that satisfies the need to justify investments and at the same time allows for flexibility and innovative thinking? How can the targeted results of IOL processes be captured?

How can facilitators quickly identify an organisation's learning culture and reconcile

### Planning versus flexibility

PSO is an association of 57 Dutch development organisations. Its support office has administered funds from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for projects that improve the practice of capacity development in civil society organisations in developing countries. Between 2009 and 2012 PSO funded and facilitated 13 IOL processes (see also 'Building bridges through learning' and 'Against all odds' in this issue of *Capacity.org*).

A key element in these IOL process was the formulation of a central learning question and learning objectives. Based on this the organisations designed the plan for the learning process with a budget approved by PSO. Adjustments could be made in the course of the process but PSO had to approve any adjustments that would significantly impact the budget. PSO was able to process these requests in a fast and flexible way because PSO staff were actively involved in the learning processes. They fulfilled multiple roles depending on what was needed including the roles of participant, process facilitator, advisor and monitor.

the negative effects of diverging cultures? What can be learned from examples where IOL processes' diverging learning cultures have been used as a strength?

Given the proposed learning typology, what would be the optimum pace and sequence for the ecology of learning activities?

Researchers, practitioners and policy makers who can shed light on these issues with documented evidence are invited to share it with us. A space will be available on the *Capacity.org* website where these resources can be accessed. <

## Dealing with competition

The Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) is an initiative sponsored by the United Nations Global Compact. Its mission is to inspire and champion responsible management education, research and thought leadership globally. PRME seeks to establish a process of continuous improvement among institutions of management education in order to develop a new generation of business leaders capable of managing the complex challenges faced by business and society in the 21st century. Currently, over 470 signatories, mainly business schools, representing almost 80 countries have joined PRME.

Competition is an issue in PRME because participating schools are direct market competitors. PRME facilitators therefore avoid using negative terms when comparing schools. Instead of promoting competition, they prefer to recognise leaders and encourage others to follow suit. In this setting there is also a positive aspect to competition. PRME's steering committee comprises global and specialised associations. Learn more at [www.unprme.org](http://www.unprme.org).

# The importance of defining outcomes

Drawing from years of experience facilitating inter-organisational learning processes in South Africa, Ann Lamont explains how to create a common purpose and at the same time align with the specific interests of participating organisations.

The questions practitioners repeatedly face when facilitating inter-organisational learning processes are: what does collaboration precisely mean and what are its goals? How pragmatic is collaboration? And is it indeed the answer or merely a layer of additional complexity? This is particularly relevant in the South African context where the country's successes – such as the transition from apartheid and the 2010 World Cup – are seen as examples of collaboration. In reality, however, these successes seem to be more the exception than the norm, and the complexity of collaboration and resulting inter-organisational learning is severely underestimated.

The Leadership and Innovation Network for Collaboration in the Children's Sector (LINC) and Bridge (Innovation in Education) projects in South Africa address the challenge of collaboration and the failure to adopt and spread successful practice in the South African children's and education sectors respectively. LINC brings together 100 leaders from government, civil society, academic and research organisations, and funding organisations to draw on their collective wisdom to resolve the underlying systemic challenges in the South African children's sector. Bridge establishes and facilitates multi-stakeholder communities for effective practise organised around key themes in the education sector with the primary objective of ensuring the spread of successful practise.

Experience gained in these two initiatives has generated a critical perspective on collaboration and inter-organisational learning. The challenges of working collaboratively and achieving effective inter-organisational learning include:

- Poorly articulated outcomes of inter-organisational learning;
- Deep underlying patterns of suspicion and mistrust within and between sectors, specifically the government, civil society, academic and research and private sectors;
- Structural patterns and power relationships in the way organisations engage with each other;
- A lack of capacity in terms of time, skill and underlying support systems; and

- A lack of common purpose between members of a particular learning community.
- A failure to address these issues will result in less effective inter-organisational learning. The most critical issue in promoting inter-organisational learning and collaboration is to define the outcomes for learning. While these obviously differ from case to case, there are some generic outcomes.

Critically, inter-organisational learning should not be an end in itself but a means to an end. Defining and measuring these outcomes creates greater common purpose in a given learning community. Regularly feeding back on successes and identifying quick gains creates energy and is self-sustaining. Indeed, LINC has identified five generic outcomes for learning communities in the development sector.

### Collective thinking, common purpose

The first is understanding the contribution of individual organisations to create broader systemic shifts. It is useful to ground inter-organisational learning in the particular challenges developmental organisations are trying to address, as well as in the specific regulatory frameworks and national and global goals.

A critical national goal for South African education, for example, is improving maths and science results. A defined governmental approach is after-hours programmes for disadvantaged learners. In bringing together civil society organisations working in this area, it was useful to look at collective reach and contribution to the education system as a whole.

Individually, the programmes were reaching a couple of hundred learners each, whereas collectively they were reaching thousands of learners. They therefore did not need to scale their individual programmes but could start to think of scale as a collective. In addition, there were clear unintended consequences, such as setting up a parallel education system. It was critical to feed this back and collectively solve the issue. A practise of documenting and



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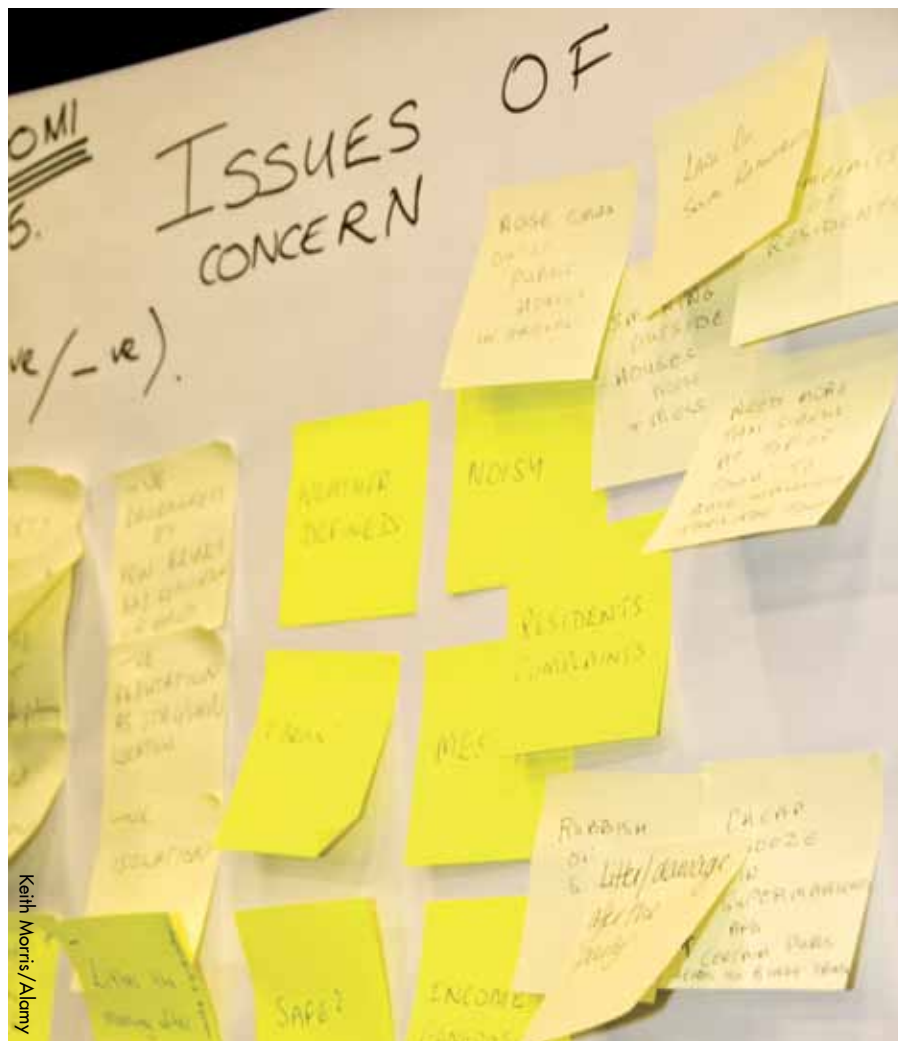
reflecting beyond the organisation was created, where people made a social contribution as a collective.

The second outcome is creating common purpose, peer support and trust among the organisations in a learning community. This is not only a precursor to inter-organisational learning but a key outcome. It is necessary to facilitate and surface – using a variety of methodologies – a learning community's diversity, competitors and power issues. Once greater trust is established, inter-organisational learning happens with very little central facilitation.

This does take time, however. LINC created a practise in the community of documenting and reflecting on trust, and tracks it qualitatively by looking for a reduction in competition; an increase in sharing; an increase in confidence; people feeling less alone and more supported; an understanding and tolerance of different perspectives; and an understanding and reduction in power dynamics in the sector.

The third outcome is maximisation of the efficient use of resources by the learning community. Effective inter-organisational learning and collaboration should maximise resources and subsequently increase impact. The ways in which this happens are through a reduction in duplication, effective partnerships along a value chain, the sharing of tools and research, and the expansion of reach.

The after-hours learning community revealed that many organisations were working in the same schools. The government was recruiting and training tutors when civil society had available tutors at cheaper rates. After-hours programmes identifying the best maths and science learners were run separately from bursary programmes, and organisations were doing



If you have not reflected on your own organisational practise it is difficult to do it externally.

separate research and developing their own tools. Also there was a concentration in geographic reach. Addressing these issues allowed for a significant expansion in the programmes using the same resources. These issues are quantitatively tracked, and tools and research findings made available to all.

### Horizontal and vertical integration

The fourth outcome is the spread of effective practice within the community and its associated stakeholders, or horizontal integration. This point focuses on expanding what works. It gets to the essence of practice and focuses more on what makes a programme successful, rather than on what a programme does.

A particular challenge is that many organisations that participate in a learning community do not have an established reflective practise within their organisation. It is important that all participants feel safe enough to share failures and lessons learnt, particularly with donors. It is not about declaring one particular model or practice more effective than others. LINC tracks the impact of shifting practices based on shared learnings. It has also learned that in this area participants continually reflect and build on new knowledge.

The fifth outcome is the vertical integration of policy and practice This means using the communities to learn how to create a link between practice on the ground, and policy creation and implementation. This is where the challenges of working across the government, multinational aid organisation and civil society sectors arise.

LINC believes it is critical, in order to benefit from different perspectives as well as to create the conditions for spreading successful practise, to have multi-stakeholder learning communities. In many instances, civil society and even research organisations feel powerless to shift policy and to know how to interact with sectors with more institutional power. LINC facilitates learning across sectors so organisations can work effectively with each other and co-create policy. In many instances, the collective power of a civil society learning community forces government participation, equalises the power dynamics and ensures the more rational adoption of successful practise.

Defining and facilitating these five outcomes would deal with many of the challenges related to inter-organisational learning. Specifically, these include articulated outcomes, underlying patterns of suspicion and mistrust within and between

sectors, and the structural patterns and power relationships in the way organisations engage with each other. Additional challenges relate to the capacity within organisations and a common purpose.

### Building basic capacity

Most development organisations have limited human capacity to deliver their core mandate, let alone the additional time required for inter-organisational learning and broader networking and collaboration. It is therefore critical to ensure that inter-organisational learning is as closely aligned with the core mandate of the organisation as possible, and that the outcomes are clearly tracked and articulated.

When a learning community is fairly broad one should allow an organic emergence of sub-topics for learning that are closely aligned with a particular group of organisations' specific interests. Additionally, working collaboratively requires a high level of skill and is much more complex than working on your own. Very little capacity building focuses on this, however, as opposed to more technical skills. Basic capacity building in issues such as listening skills is important.

Lastly, intra-organisational learning should precede inter-organisational learning. If you have not reflected on your own organisational practise it is difficult to do it externally. It is therefore easier to share at a more technical level prior to sharing at a more reflective level. This creates a pattern of reflection.

This approach requires facilitating and using many process methodologies. LINC has found, however, that if the challenges mentioned above are addressed, then the communities for effective learning start taking ownership and continue meeting beyond the facilitated process. From the beginning, LINC has rotated the chair, minute taking and hosting between members of the community. It also gave the meetings a rhythm that works for all the participants. The rhythm and constant feedback on outcomes creates a self-sustaining energy within the community.

In time, the facilitation and tracking of results will be taken on by the communities themselves. Learning communities should be supported by web-based platforms that facilitate the sharing of information and tools. These are easy to set up and should be implemented at the first meeting. We also provide facilitation tools and approaches to all members of the community.

It is important to follow a particular methodological approach and a structured framework facilitated by trained process facilitators to maximise inter-organisational learning. This goes some way in addressing capacity challenges in organisations by offering external and centralised support to the learning process. It also creates the conditions for a learning community to ultimately become self-sustaining. <



## Thematic learning programmes

# Building bridges through learning

PSO, a Dutch umbrella organisation with 57 member affiliates, has funded 13 inter-organisational learning processes since 2010. Referred to by PSO as thematic learning programmes, or TLPs, they were evaluated in late 2012.

**M**any actors in the development sector, whether researchers, policy makers, practitioners or supporters, work in relative isolation from each other. They often lack the space to experiment with new approaches and tools. This constrains their ability to respond to new situations and initiate organisational self-renewal.

In 2010, PSO developed an approach that would cater to these experimentation and learning needs in the development sector. A thematic approach was used because it would enable those involved to reflect on and act beyond their vested interests, positions, roles or perceptions. And thus the thematic learning programme (TLP) was born.

## How it works

A TLP brings together different organisations to systematically and collectively learn from their practices. A core element of the programme is systematic action learning organised around a shared learning agenda. Action learning is conducted by practitioners who are staff members of the organisations participating in the TLP. TLPs are facilitated by conveners, which usually consist of an initiator, independent experts and sometimes the funder.

Ownership of the problem is in the hands of the practitioner-cum-researchers, and in a TLP they are also responsible for designing and implementing the process, monitoring progress, managing time and resources and, if necessary, deploying researchers or facilitators for specific tasks, such as the development of an analytical framework. In the course of the formulation phase, other stakeholders, such as consultants, research institutes and sometimes policy makers join in setting the learning priorities and the rules, rights and responsibilities for their TLP.

There have been 13 TLPs since November 2010 (for a comprehensive list, please see the web version of this article at [www.capacity.org](http://www.capacity.org)). Various themes were addressed, including participatory monitoring and evaluation in complexity, networking, organisational learning (for example, the Barefoot Guide Connection), mainstreaming (of sexual diversity, gender

and disability), organisational assessment, power in multi-stakeholder processes, migration and development, capacity development in fragile states and civil society at a crossroads.

A mid-term analysis conducted in March 2011 confirmed the value of the TLP instrument's initial principles: comprehensive action learning and putting practitioners in the driver's seat. In the wake of this analysis some elements were further developed. The new TLPs, for example, were designed to provide more flexibility in learning approaches, and promote a stronger Southern presence (in the Sudan TLP and the Civil Society at a Crossroads TLP).

A recent evaluation of TLPs found that so far they are relevant and moderately effective in terms of leading to improved practices. They clearly help to increase the involved actors' personal capabilities and provide them with the space to learn new knowledge, methods and tools.

## Results so far

Organisational change within the participating organisations varies and depends on the capability, scope of control and willingness of participants to act as change agents in their own organisations. In this respect, inter-organisational learning and peer learning motivated participants. The public TLP events received positive feedback in that the participants' experiences were deemed meaningful and useful by their peers. It sometimes proved difficult, however, to develop a central learning question that does justice to the organisations' individual learning questions. As a result in some TLPs the individual questions were answered, but it was difficult to come to more generic insights.

Thanks to PSO's experience with the TLP instrument, and the findings from external reviews, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Thematic learning thrives when there is a wide choice of learning instruments and a relatively strict analytical framework, supported by inspiring and appreciative process facilitators.

Thematic learning can only lead to organisational change if the organisation



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considers the learning and research questions urgent enough to invest time in them; if a participating staff member's influence and control extend far enough; and if the pathway of change that participants foresee in their own organisation is clearly outlined and closely monitored.

Because TLPs emphasise joint learning, they have a bonding effect. This is even true for potentially unequal relationships, such as between academics and practitioners, Northern and Southern NGOs, and donors and recipients.

PSO's activities came to an end in 2012, and yet the TLP instrument is likely to have particular added value as part of knowledge platforms, as a bonding tool in public-private partnerships and as an invigorating activity in tired networks. <

## Resources

- Huib Huyse (2011) *Documenting PSO's Experiences with Action Research: Results from an Action Research Workshop in March 2011*, PSO.
- Phlix, G., Van der Velden, F., De Wal, M., and Zevenbergen, K. (2012) *Facilitating Organisational Learning: Insights from practice*, PSO.
- Publications resulting from the TLPs and of lessons learned can be found at <http://partos.nl> under 'Thema's'.



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## Inter-organisational learning in fragile South Sudan

# Against all odds

Learning collectively in a fragile environment is both important and hard. The authors of this article engaged in facilitating an inter-organisational learning process in an effort to overcome mistrust and pre-conceived perceptions.

The way aid is organised in the region has even exacerbated the confusion. In terms of transparency, international donors tend to use competitive tender procedures in the awarding of projects and programmes. As a result, organisations working in the same field have to compete for the same money and become less willing to share information, experiences and insights.

Different sectors in the aid structure – for example, the UN, the South Sudan government, international NGOs, national NGOs, the national military, enterprises and diplomats – work according to their own logic and have their own interpretations and truths about the situation.

The players in the aid structure tend to be guided by preconceived ideas about each other's capacities and motives. Furthermore, there are tensions between international NGOs and national NGOs about who gets what share of the pie. Donor funds are channelled through INGOs, who subcontract work to NNGOs.

The rationale for this is that the NNGOs do not have the capacity to manage the funds and meet the reporting requirements. This may sometimes be the case, but the danger is that it may also lead to a situation in which high capacity and capacity-challenged national partners are clustered together under the 'capacity-lacking' umbrella and national partners are not privy to information about the programmes' progress or ongoing issues that need to be resolved.

This mistrust and negative perceptions cause organisations to work in isolation from each other, and this, in turn, has led to fragmentation. The Joint Utstein Study of Peacebuilding notes that 'most peace-building projects lack strategic connection. The most important problem [with the strategic deficit] is that those projects are not connected to a continuing process of strategic analysis, planning and evaluation.'

### Learning about relationships and roles

In this context PSO initiated an inter-organisational learning process called thematic learning programme, or TLP (see also 'Building bridges through learning' in this issue) in order to improve relationships between actors and hence reduce the strategic deficit. Seven NGOs were invited to

participate and take a closer look at their own relationships in the aid structure. The organisations were selected in a series of two consultation meetings preceded by explorative bilateral meetings. Criteria for selecting the NGOs included:

- interest and experience in relation to the theme of the action research programme, specifically regarding relations and roles in the aid structure of South Sudan; and
- commitment to take part in an action research programme that was a standard element in TLPs supported by PSO.

The organisations were invited to collectively develop and submit a proposal that described their action research plan relating their own practice to the research questions. In this process two organisations withdrew due to a lack of time in the light of the programme requirements. PSO signed a contract with the management of the five remaining organisations: four international NGOs (ZOA, Justice Africa, SPARK and SNV) and one national NGO (IPCS). Unfortunately, due to limited resources and time, the participation in the TLP was limited to those working in the state of Central Equatoria.

### The design of the learning process

The learning took place at four levels: individual learning, organisational learning, inter-organisational learning and peer learning, and learning with external actors that constitute the system. In terms of individual and organisational learning, each of the participating organisations was asked to formulate their own questions and learning needs to be addressed by action research. To this end staff members were coached in formulating a research question, data collection, data analysis and translating the insights and outcomes to their own practices.

Collaborative and peer learning consisted of three meetings in which two senior level representatives of each organisation participated. The representatives included the country managers of SNV, SPARK and IPCS. Justice Africa and ZOA were represented by programme and capacity development officers. The purpose of the meetings was to develop the research framework, and to exchange results and experiences with the learning processes at the organisational level.

When South Sudan became independent in July 2011 there was a lot of euphoria. Now, one and a half years later, governance remains problematic. State building has been hampered by the continuing threat posed by the Republic of Sudan. The South Sudan government seems preoccupied with military preparedness, which comes at the expense of socio-economic development. South Sudan is fragile, experiencing daily human tragedy and ethnic tension, and the country's political landscape is changing rapidly.

During the implementation of this learning project between September 2011 and July 2012, South Sudan experienced tragic tribal fighting (in January 2012). Strife between two South Sudanese tribes in Jonglei State spiralled out of control and ultimately cost approximately 600 people their lives.

Another important political event was the South Sudanese government's decision to close the oil pipelines that pass through Sudan, as a response to the exorbitant degree of transit tax levied by Sudan. Besides affecting Sudan, this almost dried up the South Sudanese government's budget. These examples make clear that the political debate focuses on day-to-day security, civil war and immediate political decision making, rather than on long-term socio-economic planning.

### Divisive effects of the aid structure

Far-reaching political developments take place on an almost daily basis in South Sudan – ones which the international community has to take a stance on. However, this volatile environment presents international agencies with a massive challenge when it comes to determining and implementing a coherent course of action. Information about the situation on the ground is often lacking or cannot be checked due to a lack of security or logistical constraints.

The framework included a shared learning agenda that was derived from the diverse research questions and learning needs of each of the participating organisations.

The mid-term results and emerging questions that came out of the TLP process were shared during two open meetings that involved the TLP participants as well as representatives from other international NGOs (INGOs) and national NGOs (NNGOs), donor organisations and governments. The aim of the open meetings was to influence the system and try to bring about change through sharing insights gained in the TLP. Through organising these meetings it was hoped that a positive example would be set regarding how exchanges between INGOs, NNGOs, donors and governments could be organised in a more open way. The open meetings were also meant to tune the TLP to ongoing developments in the aid sector.

Facilitating the dialogue between INGOs, NNGOs, donors and ministry representatives in the room was a challenge because NNGOs were hesitant to voice their ideas and concerns. As a result the INGO and donor representatives tended to dominate the discussions. To address this, pre-meetings were organised between the NNGOs. By sharing their experiences they became more aware of their own views on relationships between INGO and NNGOs and were able to raise this in the larger meeting.

### Unexpected outcomes

The outcomes of this TLP were different than the initiators had expected. They initially assumed that it would be possible to create an ideal picture on role division between national and international actors. However, during the process participants felt that a focus on formal functions and division of roles was too limiting. They considered it more important to focus on the meaning of partnership, which is

### Shared learning agenda

*Principles of collaboration/engagement.* If and how were they made explicit? What were the challenges to adhere to them? What worked well and what did not work well in finding ways to integrate them into the relationship?

*Choices about roles.* How and at what stage was this discussed, and who should do what? Did this have to be renegotiated over time? If yes, how and why?

*Enabling environment.* Did external conditions influence the relationship and division of roles, and if so, how? Concrete examples of how the way aid is structured influences NNGO-INGO relationships and roles.

*Complementarity.* If and how complementarity was taken into account in the partner selection process and the decision to work together. What worked well and what did not in translating the ideas about complementarity into practice?



about more than agreements and contracts on projects and programmes. Partnerships are about personal dedication, loyalty, credibility, mandate and legitimacy.

By researching relationships and discussing mutual expectations regarding partnerships, the participating organisations gained insight into where there is room for improvement:

- Participants learned how an unbalanced emphasis on upward accountability from national NGOs to INGOs can alienate national organisations from their constituency. This was considered particularly harmful in a fragile setting in which the mandate, legitimacy and constituency of (national) NGOs are much more important than in regular settings.
- SPARK reflected on the way it selected its national partners and reduced the importance of formal procedures for partner selection and focused more on informal aspects, and how this influences the quality of the partnership later on.
- The international NGO ZOA and the national NGO IPCS documented different perspectives on their relationship using a learning history approach. They learned that they would benefit if exchange of information would go beyond project issues. One of the results of the action research was their commitment to agree on ways to monitor the partnership and reflect regularly on the quality of the partnership beyond programmatic requirements.
- Partners learned various ways in which capacity development can become an integrated aspect of the relationship. An example is a mentoring programme where one national NGO mentors another.
- Participants also concluded that all these lessons need to be addressed at the start of a partnership and that they should be reflected on regularly.

At the systems level the TLP showed how – despite competitive tender procedures – it is possible to improve communication between actors. The UN Office for the Coordination of

Humanitarian Affairs and the Joint Donor Office (JDO) appreciated the open meetings, which they considered to be rare opportunities to meet without a direct project interest, but rather on the basis of shared interest. At the time of the TLP, JDO was developing the terms of a civil society fund. Based on the discussions JDO said to make adjustments by articulating the role of the national NGOs.

Other participants also expressed their appreciation for the openness and trust in which discussions took place in these meetings. Although some see each other regularly in meetings of the South Sudan NGO forum and in cluster meetings, the TLP meetings were seen as an opportunity to discuss issues in a broader perspective. The representative of Justice Africa noted ‘it is interesting to hear about other people’s perceptions, and helpful to share experiences. I did not know that others also have critical thinking about INGO–local civil society interactions. It was good to see that bigger INGOS are also open about what they do not know, as well as the journey they have already gone through and the theories that they come up with.’

Civil society development in a fragile environment is a long process that requires long-term funding and engagement. This TLP was limited in scope and duration and therefore had a limited impact. Still, the results indicate that investing in communication and relationship building can improve the collaboration between organisations and reduce the divisive effects of competition.

There is still much more to be discovered. Outside the scope of this TLP, INGOs have been nurturing and further developing the capacity and skills of NNGOs. This strategy seems a powerful antidote to counteract the alienating effects of vertical accountability. Through strengthened capacities to serve their own communities, CSOs and NNGOs develop legitimacy and a strong constituency, which are important ingredients of a more stable society. This is certainly worth exploring further. <

# Devolving power for the poor



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The late 1990s witnessed significant debates on citizen participation and governance in international development. Many countries began to promote the idea of working with actors on both sides of the equation – citizens and civil society, on one hand, and government institutions, on the other. In India, this phase was marked by the introduction of unprecedented governance reforms that changed the face of local governance in the country.

In the mid-1990s the Panchayati Raj constitutional amendments gave local governments in India significant responsibilities for local development and social justice programmes. The law said that at least 33% of the elected representatives at the local level would be women, and at least 33% would also be from the historically excluded ‘Scheduled Castes’ and ‘Scheduled Tribes’, creating new leadership possibilities for these marginalised groups. These changes were followed by other breakthrough reforms in the ensuing decade, which offered numerous possibilities for citizen engagement in local governance as a strategy to address development issues.

These developments made the government realise the importance of working in partnership with civil society, and civil society organisations (CSOs), for their part, saw the need to work not only with government but also with other like-minded CSOs in order to make decentralisation truly meaningful.

In the framework of a programme called Governance Where People Matter (GWPM), the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) forged strategic alliances with local partners and encouraged them to collaborate with each other. These alliances used collective learning as a key instrument to make the devolution of power work and to

Devolution of power to local government changed the rules of the game in decision making and created new opportunities. The Society for Participatory Research in Asia facilitated a nationwide inter-organisational learning process project to make the new system work for the marginalised.

involve citizens in the planning, implementation and monitoring of development programmes. Lessons needed to be learned in a vast number of areas including the implications of the devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to local governments as well as thematic areas such as gender, social inclusion, environment and human rights.

## Two-step approach

A two-step approach was used to forge the strategic alliances. First CSOs were brought together and then a link with government authorities was established. Before engaging with the authorities in negotiations and policy advocacy, PRIA and its local CSO partners needed to build consensus on local governance and its challenges. The bottlenecks in effectively decentralising and devolving reforms were jointly studied and explored. Mutual learning was facilitated through regular dialogue whereby local partners brought to the table their grassroots experiences and knowledge of the local context. PRIA, with its networking and advocacy skills, convened all the stakeholders and worked towards influencing policy. Through these dialogues the partners enriched their collective knowledge and strengthened their mutual bonds.

The second step of extending the partnerships to include state institutions resulted in a rare confluence of actors who were mostly at odds in the past. The new partnership therefore generated important lessons on how different actors (on the demand and supply side) could work together to achieve common goals. Collaboration with the authorities took on different forms, ranging from the usual hand holding and capacity building support to convening and implementing programmes together.

A number of trainings were organized for elected representatives and officials on the roles, responsibilities and functions of local governance, which led to enhanced awareness and capacities on their newly defined area of work. Trainings were also given on micro-planning and effective resource and financial management so that local governance bodies could efficiently shoulder their responsibilities. Exposure visits were also

conducted, which proved to be extremely beneficial knowledge exchange platforms.

Another form of association with the authorities was one-on-one meetings, where information was shared and exchanged at different levels. An example is the way PRIA and the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Contemporary Studies facilitated stakeholders to develop ideas on how to best strengthen the new-style State Finance Commissions (see box). These interactions not only helped the authorities in acquiring new information and insights, but also the CSOs in understanding the limitations on the part of the authorities.

Collaborative monitoring was another important instrument to learn how to make devolution work. To this end PRIA and its partners assisted 12 state governments in conducting activity mapping, demonstrating how far, and in what areas, devolution had occurred. The focus was on monitoring the performance of state governments on the devolution of powers to local self-governing institutions.

The memoranda of understanding and memoranda of agreement signed between the

## Strengthening finance and planning

PRIA and the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Contemporary Studies organised a national seminar in 2005 to discuss the status of State Finance Commissions (SFCs) and initiatives required to strengthen them. The representatives of 11 SFCs along with the members of the planning commission, senior officials from state governments and other public finance and local government experts participated and presented their views. Following this, a workshop was held in 2006 to convene an SFC task force, which resulted in measures to strengthen the SFCs.

In relation to this the role of District Planning Committees (DPCs) was discussed as well. DPCs are mandatory institutions that are often not used adequately. PRIA and its partners prepared the national report on the status of DPCs with data from 12 states. In Andhra Pradesh, discussions with the SFC on the status of devolving financial powers to Panchayati Raj Institutions led to regular district-level meetings.



Duncan Vere Green/Alamy

national and the state governments (with regard to devolving power to local government bodies) were also monitored. Based on the findings, compliance reports were sent to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, which incorporated the input in the report on the state of panchayats, which was tabled before the Indian Parliament.

### Lessons learnt

The GWPM enabled PRIA to enhance its skills on engaging with state institutions and multiple stakeholders such as the media, academia and CSOs. The partnerships created and nurtured through this programme, offered five clear lessons.

First, the collaboration between government and civil society at the micro-level is best realised when it is based on the principle of learning by experimentation. This approach helps to develop trust among the partners and creates a non-hostile environment where they understand each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Especially when working towards state responsiveness, it helps to break the ice and understand the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders. While conducting activity mapping for devolution and the study on the role of the panchayats, PRIA and its partners ensured that the state agencies were engaged at different levels. This not only developed their ownership but also helped in co-planning and co-designing of interventions where learning would happen collectively.

Second, the clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities is crucial during the initial phase of the partnership. This is best done in a participatory manner where the existing capacities, skills and knowledge of the partners' determine the key roles that they could play. This also helps in ensuring that the collaboration is not influenced or dominated by any one particular partner, but the tasks are divided as per their roles from the very beginning. For the GWPM programme, roles and responsibilities were

strategically divided among the partner CSOs depending upon their skills and the particular location (district, state and national) where they were situated.

Third, strong inbuilt mechanisms to formally share experiences and lessons among the partners are important to facilitate the process of mutual learning. They also lead to the creation of new knowledge. Joint planning, collective monitoring and reflection on lessons learnt significantly helps to improve the quality of interventions and also strengthen the partnership. Interfacing was thus an important element of the GWPM programme.

Interfacing was realized through a two-pronged approach: internal sharing and reflection with the partners and the team, done on an annual and quarterly basis through planning and review meetings, and external sharing among different actors through multi-stakeholder dialogues. For example, the findings of the study on the status of the DPCs and monitoring of devolution were shared with different stakeholders and recommendations/reports were presented through these dialogues.

Fourth, in cases where the aim of the partnership is to influence state policies, it is crucial to effectively capture the knowledge gained through various interventions. As policy advocacy is likely to be more effective when supported by facts and empirical data,

the systematisation of knowledge around critical issues is thus important if the argument is going to hold any sway. Thus the various reports and studies that were produced during the GWPM programme, including the ones on devolution, were prepared with great caution to ensure that all the aspects and findings are included so that recommendations could be made.

Fifth, maintaining the sustainability of such large-scale partnership initiatives, which are both horizontal and vertical, is a huge challenge as well as a learning experience. Based on the GWPM programme, the three most important aspects of sustainability that PRIA focused upon were:

- The sustainability of impacts of the interventions, especially at the local level, which could be achieved by making interventions more participatory and co-owned by the local communities, CBOs and government agencies.
- The sustainability of partners and networks at the state and national level, PRIA's approach towards continuous investments in nurturing these relationships and enabling partners to access local resources contributed to the same.
- Last but not the least was the sustainability of perspectives and institutional mechanisms to support the above. Regular monitoring and evaluation, periodic strategic planning, assuring the quality and relevance of work and building internal capacities and systems, are some of the crucial aspects that need to be maintained.

The GWPM was built on the premise that the many lessons, capacities and skills of diverse stakeholders, when put together, have the potential to strengthen and constructively facilitate the creation of knowledge. This knowledge can then be further systematised, transferred and used for higher level advocacy towards policy change.

Therefore, in addition to the programme's other major contributions, there were two other highly significant achievements. First, it led not only to inter-organisational learning among the set of CSOs (PRIA and its partners) but also inter-institutional and inter-sectorial learning between the CSOs and the state institutions. And second, as a result of these partnerships and collaborations, a number of policy level changes could be attained. <

### Governance Where People Matter (GWPM) programme

This programme was implemented by PRIA from 2003 to 2008. The GWPM aimed to 'empower marginalised families for their active participation in the effective utilisation of development resources' through 'making self-governing institutions transparent and accountable', on the one hand, and 'enabling citizen leaders to have effective voice in governance', on the other. The programme was implemented in:

- States where PRIA was intervening directly, such as Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and West Bengal
- States where PRIA partnered with the regional support organisations, such as Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra in Uttar Pradesh, Samarthan in Madhya Pradesh, Unnati in Gujarat and Sahayi in Kerala
- States where PRIA collaborated with other local civil society groups in consultation with the regional support organisations, such as Censored in Bihar, UNNATI in Rajasthan, the Centre for Youth and Social Development and Gram Vikas in Orissa

# From learning together to working together



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Late in 2006 the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), a South African NGO, was approached by the Netherlands-based Bernard van Leer Foundation, to coordinate a community of practice for 18 of its partner organisations working in four of South Africa's provinces in the field of early childhood development.

The group of partners is diverse. Some work directly at the grassroots level improving the skills and organisations of women caregivers, upgrading the crèches they run and registering the centres with the state. Some work on advocacy issues, supporting or challenging the government to adopt more policies and practices that support young children, while others focus on developing practices through training, materials production and research.

CDRA proposed a workshop with its partners to test the feasibility of the donor's proposal and develop a comprehensive design for the 'learning community'. This workshop took place a few months later in March 2007 in a small hotel south of Durban. Each organisation was invited to send its director and a practitioner. Even though the process was donor-initiated, it was not donor driven, focused on all the participants' creative input.

The five-day workshop had its struggles. Some partners expressed doubts about the benefits of something they had never tried before, while others were a little suspicious of the donor's motives. Some of the rural, African-led partners struggled to find their voice amidst the more confident and assertive opinions of the urban, often white-led partners. But they were open and willing to try, a characteristic of spirited practitioners

Almost six years ago 18 South African NGOs all working on early childhood development were brought together in a learning alliance. Over the years they have established a collaborative learning and working platform, involving organised community-based women caregivers, to develop workable and sustainable solutions for the well-being of young children in South Africa. This is their story.

who seem to draw good energy from the openness and playfulness of young children.

A five-day creative process – in which contextual perspectives were shared, questions 'surfaced and deepened', practices described and approaches debated – produced a vision of why and how they might learn together. Work was alternated with frequent drawing and sculpting exercises, role playing, much singing, and a daily session in which partners played children's games, revealing the thinking about how they promote the development of young children in age-appropriate ways. The workshop not only discussed how partners might learn together; it became an experience of exactly that.

What emerged from the workshop became known as the Early Childhood Development Learning Community (ECDLC). It contained the following core points:

- The ECDLC is a collaboration of partners of the Bernard van Leer Foundation for the purposes of sharing experiences and learning, building knowledge and collaborating in various ways to improve practices and policies in the ECD sector;
- Four-day learning workshops will be held every six months with each partner sending two of its members, including the director;
- Each partner will have a fund of ZAR25,000 (about \$US2,800) available per year to enable it to visit, and learn and share with, other partners;
- CDRA will have a fund available to work individually with partners who require it, to help build their organisational capacity and help equalise their participation in the learning community;
- A website and email list will be developed to enable cross-communication and have a common platform for sharing materials; and
- An action research programme will be set up to surface local and indigenous

childcare practices and knowledge (this came a year later).

A proposal was developed and sent to the donor for approval and within two months activities began.

## The learning journey

It has been a remarkable journey of mutual learning, and increasingly of working together. In all of the reviews CDRA has done with partners the horizontal exchanges – 32 to date, ranging from one to five days – have stood out as the most beneficial. These exchanges are about sharing practice onsite, unlocking surprising capacities in a range of areas in both the hosts and visitors. Equally important, relationships have been forged that have lasted well beyond the initial phase, providing a strong foundation for co-working.

The range of areas includes approaches to working where crèches do not exist; sustainable child nutrition programmes; family literacy to stimulate young minds and support parenting; strategies for caring for HIV-positive children; toy-making from recycled materials, savings groups of caregivers, family and community; and leadership and management capacities for running crèches. The list goes on.

But changes were also happening at a less obvious, less visible level. For the rural members of the group, being exposed to others in such an equalising and participative forum has boosted their confidence and leadership. The participative action research programme, which focused on the rich child-rearing traditions and the local and contemporary practices of the communities themselves, also helped the members to begin to question some of the top-down, western-oriented practices that they had been promoting. They have begun to pay more respect to community resourcefulness and how it can be activated.

It became clear from the feedback that both the hosts and the visitors gave each

other a 'psychological' boost, validating each others' practices and reducing their isolation by connecting to each other and the outside world. Although it is the most difficult thing to pin down, quantify or even articulate, there is no doubt that the most beneficial aspect of horizontal exchange lies in this result. It brings to mind Margaret Wheatley's maxim 'To create better health in a living system, connect it to more of itself.'

### A second phase emerges

Now, since 2011, the ECDLC has shifted into a second phase, built on the mutual learning foundations of the first phase, described above. In this second phase the ECDLC has become a collaborative learning and working alliance based on what is called the Letsema Programme. This has emerged from a major change in thinking, partners realised from the experience of the ECDLC that could work beyond their limited and individualised capacity-building and advocacy projects, and move the centre of gravity of their efforts to collaboratively building the collective organisation and leadership of the communities they were working in, to empower them to engage the world differently for the well-being of their children. From the Letsema brochure:

'The Letsema Programme aims to change the way the system for generating services for young children works. The current system is top down. Government, NGOs and businesses try to deliver services to passive recipient communities. This system completely ignores community knowledge of early child development and their agency and leadership. Letsema works towards a system whereby government, businesses and communities co-produce services for young children.'

In the Letsema Programme the ECDLC members work together to mobilise the community-based caregiver groups that they have worked with individually over the years. Just as the members have been doing for themselves in the first phase, the community caregiver groups are encouraged and supported to visit each other, learn from each other and boost each other's knowledge and capacities. In the process, relationships and grassroots solidarities develop, creating a foundation for a movement that can more confidently surface and build its own resourcefulness and from there engage government and business to co-creatively find solutions for young children.

It is still early days, but the energy of this initiative from below is refreshing and enlivening and practitioners are relieved to be breaking away from a project mentality. A grassroots leadership development process is now underway with a visit to India scheduled in early 2013 by community leaders and practitioners from different districts of the province of Limpopo, to learn from innovative practices there. It will be a journey where grassroots leaders and practitioners will continue to learn from each other and strengthen their relationships



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and ability to cooperate and collaborate into the future. This will extend to other provinces in the course of next year.

### CDRA's role

CDRA has been the coordinating member at the national level for the past six years. But its role has been varied and has evolved over time. Sometimes CDRA has played an initiating and motivating role, and sometimes it has played a more restrained and encouraging one. Its approach has been to support the ECDLC members to take the lead themselves, who are, in turn, now working to develop the leadership and organisation of women caregivers on the ground.

In the last two years the programme's centre of gravity has shifted to the provinces, each of which assigns a local lead member to provide coordination and support. CDRA's style of leadership is to facilitate wherever possible but not shy away from taking the initiative when it is called for – a delicate dance that requires it to meet each challenge with a unique perspective.

There are no easy blueprints or accepted structures or procedures for these new kinds of collaborating organisations, and so CDRA has had to 'learn its way forward'.

### A bumpy but fascinating road

There are challenges and difficulties associated with inter-organisational collaboration. Working across several organisations in an adaptive, emergent process makes it particularly difficult to schedule common meeting and workshop times as they are subject to the schedules of all kinds of other project-related work (which is funded by fussy donors and subject to donor demands and often pre-planned in detail).

Of course collaboration has to adapt to these considerations as well, but things can get drawn out and CDRA frequently grapples

with the anxiety that momentum might be lost. Occasional changes in the people representing the participating organisations does mean that CDRA has to go back over familiar ground, but this can be strengthening or consolidating, even if it may initially seem to waste time.

Funding is an ongoing challenge because few donors are accustomed to funding complex processes where the outcomes and timelines are being developed by an emerging grassroots leadership who cannot be hurried and disempowered by donor anxieties for deadlines and 'proof of impact'. They must find their own method and rhythm.

This is the most fascinating and central aspect. The impact will come and when it does it will be real and sustainable because there is a deep ownership developing. Thankfully the Bernard van Leer Foundation has the experience and vision for this kind of work, but it only provides seed funding. Longer-term funding, hopefully from local foundations, will be required in the future.

The most interesting hurdle is how to deal with the sometimes 'messy' nature of the collaboration, which is the result of time challenges and conflicting priorities but also of the collaboration's diversity and the physical distance between its members. Everyone is aware that huge forces exist today that could pull apart collaborations. It is hard enough for people inside organisations to learn and work together. But things are holding together remarkably well, largely because of the investment in mutual learning forged in the horizontal learning exchanges and workshops during ECDLC's first phase.

It continues to be a learning process not bound by clear outcomes and deadlines, or even a fixed vision, but open to process, open to what will be discovered along the way by those doing the work. <

# Go together, learn together



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**I**f you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.' Nowadays, policy makers and leaders of businesses and NGOs habitually quote this old African proverb in support of their partnering strategy. Partnering is the most institutionalised form of inter-organisational learning. But the partnering process is anything but straightforward. Indeed, it is replete with (learning) dilemmas.

Cross-sector partnerships have become particularly popular since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, where it was recognised that sustainable development dilemmas cannot be solved by single-sector actors. Research conducted by the Partnerships Resource Centre in the Netherlands shows that 96% of the world's largest firms have established partnerships with 'non-market' parties – primarily NGOs – to further shape their inclusive business strategies.

International organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme and the World Health Organization, as well as national donors such as the Netherlands, have initiated hundreds of public-private partnerships. Cross-sector partnerships force participants out of the comfort zones of their traditional sectors and present formidable learning dilemmas. Indeed, partnerships can be struck for the wrong reasons, or with the wrong partners, using the wrong modalities.

A first learning dilemma is the type of partnership arrangement: is it based on funding or competencies? Today, a growing number of

partnerships sought by NGOs are ad-hoc mechanisms for addressing budget deficits that have sprung up since governments have started to cut funding. NGOs consider partnerships with funding agencies or private corporations a necessary evil.

Financial reasons rarely provide solid ground for effective partnering. This is true for inter-firm alliances: despite trillions of US dollars spent on alliances and mergers, half to two thirds of these failed because there was neither a long-term motive, nor a willingness to engage in serious learning through the partnership. In cross-sector alliances, a lack of commitment means that complementarities are not taken advantage of, which kills joint learning in its tracks.

Crowding out is a second learning dilemma. Partnerships are often coalitions of the willing. Partnerships between firms and NGOs act as a substitute for malfunctioning governments, for example. But by taking away governments' primary responsibilities, partnerships also take away, or crowd out, the incentive for governments to improve their governance and learn from their failures. The challenge is to engage governments in joint learning activities – even if they are reluctant to.

The type of negotiations chosen by partners presents a third learning dilemma. Interest-based negotiations are commonly behind the creation of partnerships, and they often result from a commonly perceived threat or a search for complementary strengths – the idea being that parties are aware of their interests.

That is not always the case, however, especially when long-term interests differ from short-term interests. There is a serious risk that at best parties will play a zero-sum game and trade off immediate interests without adding any value to the partnership. A partnership thus evolves that frees energy for novel, out-of-the-box or real win-win solutions. Partners seek to align their goals, rather than trade off interest, and find common solutions. In such cases, learning comes from thinking out of the box rather than playing interests against one another.

At the moment, many partnerships are created on the basis of a relatively simple analysis of the sustainability challenge or a sometimes naive optimistic expectation of an opportunity. Reality, however, is full of dilemmas. Cross-sector partnerships are important because we urgently need to deal more effectively with the dilemmas of sustainable development. An inappropriate understanding of or insufficient willingness to discuss these dilemmas will strongly influence the actual partnering process. This creates a second-order dilemma: a partnership that deals effectively with dilemmas creates new dilemmas. If you want to go far and fast, share your dilemmas. <

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