Organisational learning

CD monitor

This section highlights news and recent developments in the area of capacity development. The CD monitor is compiled in collaboration with UNDP's Capacity-Net.

UNDP/SNV Workshop on Learning by Doing: Capacity Development Approaches at the Local Level
At this workshop, held in Bangkok, Thailand, in November 2007, the participants shared lessons learned on capacity development strategies and development efforts aimed at contributing to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). They also identified critical knowledge gaps that need to be addressed to support sub-national/local capacities for achieving the MDGs.
www.undp.org

Initiative for Peacebuilding launches online resource
The Initiative for Peacebuilding has launched a new website for practitioners and policy makers. The site offers access to a wide range of resources, knowledge and expertise on conflict prevention and peacebuilding, particularly as it relates to EU policy.
www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu

e-discussion on capacity development in post-conflict situations
In early 2008, UNDP's Capacity-Net will facilitate an e-discussion, to be co-hosted by the Capacity Development Group and the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery. For more information, email the network facilitator, Jayne Musumba,
jayne.musumba@undp.org or
capacity-net@groups.undp.org

One World Trust launches Global Accountability Report 2007
The report assesses the accountability of 30 of the world's powerful organisations in the intergovernmental, NGO and corporate sectors on four dimensions: transparency, participation, evaluation, and response to complaints.
www.oneworldtrust.org

World Bank Institute research project on leadership development services calls for case studies
Capacity Day 2007 (Washington, DC, April 2007) brought together thinkers, practitioners, partners and government leaders from around the world to contribute to and raise the level of dialogue on the importance of good leadership. To build on that dialogue, the WBI has launched a Global Leadership Initiative, which will include a research project on leadership development services. The Bank has issued a call for case studies on capacity development interventions targeting high-level strategic leadership.
http://icce.typepad.com/icce/2008/01/call-for-case-s.html

Third High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF 3)
The third high-level forum will take place in Accra, Ghana, on 2–4 September 2008, hosted by the Government of Ghana.
www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness

Capacity.org website
Do you find that knowledge on capacity development is fragmented? At times it can be hard to gain overview of the breadth and depth of resources available.
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Letter to the editor

Capacity development in a fragile environment – Kenya?

When we received issue 32 of Capacity.org on fragile states, no one in Kenya expected that this context of capacity development would be our main concern in 2008. The first weeks of 2008 were traumatic for Kenya, with over 300,000 displaced people and 1000 deaths following the December 2007 election. So how did SNV-Kenya respond to such a dramatically changed environment?

For SNV Kenya in Eldoret it was clear we could neither continue with business as usual, nor go beyond our mandate and provide emergency relief. Instead, together with our clients/partners, we considered what role we could play as a capacity building organisation in this uncertain environment. Our main concern was that thousands of children were unable to attend school due to the conflict. It was also clear that if local education stakeholders did not act immediately, the gains made under the government's 'Free Education for All' policy would be seriously undermined. There were two major challenges.

First, we needed to rebuild the (public sector) education capacity affected by the conflict. For example, education officers were unable to visit the affected schools to assess the situation, there were no clear national guidelines, and government departments felt overwhelmed.

Second, as Derick Brinkerhoff noted in his article in Capacity.org 32, in such emergencies, there is often a dilemma between the urgent need to restore basic services on the short term, and the desire to contribute to long-term capacity development. This dilemma emerged during an emergency coordination meeting in Eldoret, where none of those attending were from local organisations. There was therefore a danger that the humanitarian crisis and the (much needed) international response would undermine the capacity of local education stakeholders in the long term.

Threefold approach
SNV acted to complement the relief efforts by supporting local capacity. Education, as one of SNV's strategic areas, was a good starting point; it was not an urgent basic service so there was time to plan. Our approach was threefold. First, we supported an emergency committee in order to demonstrate visible coordination of education stakeholders. Second, we offered a service contract to a local organisation, the Kenya Private Schools Association (KPSA), to carry out educational needs assessments. Third, we created linkages with affected communities (including teachers and parents) both within and outside the internally displaced people (IDP) camps, enabling them to be part of the solution. Meanwhile, SNV joined the National Education Emergency Committee led by the Ministry of Education. This was an important link to the national level and a necessary step towards scaling up the approach in other regions.

SNV teamed up with UNICEF, an organisation experienced in providing 'hardware' such as setting up makeshift schools, and providing education kits and logistical expertise. These capabilities blended well with the SNV's 'software', in particular its ability to bring together local stakeholders, like the KPSA, municipal and district education offices, teachers, and street children's organisations. As a result, 4200 children were able to continue with their schooling. SNV has continued to help many thousands of children from the IDP camps and elsewhere in the region, to return to school.

The Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation, Bert Koenders, visited Eldoret in February. He commended SNV and UNICEF for their combined support, without taking over (even temporarily) the leadership role of local stakeholders. Many times we were attracted by quick-fix and bypass solutions, but we managed not to give in to the temptation. This is probably the most important lesson learned.

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Learning for organisational development

Countless organisations have experimented with ways to improve their performance through learning since Peter Senge published his trailblazing book The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization in 1990. Although Senge drew mainly on experiences and insights gained in the private sector, his work inspired many working in the not-for-profit sector. There are at least two factors that make learning in organisations involved in development particularly challenging.

First, they frequently lack clear-cut indicators such as turnover, profit and market share that can inform and direct the learning process. The goals of these organisations are often stated in ambiguous terms, which makes it difficult for them to see or agree on the direction learning should take, as it is not clearly defined what good performance looks like.

Second, complacency can go unpunished for a longer period of time than is possible in business. Whereas in business the urge to learn is constantly reinforced by short-term feedback in the form of market share, profit or loss, and shareholder dividends, learning in not-for-profits requires a conscious decision to analyse performance and identify where and how improvements can be made. Failure to do so is not immediately punished, because for these organisations survival depends, to a large extent, on ideological beliefs and political affiliations. Hence the development of new insights and the introduction of important changes can be postponed for long periods.

Many organisations dedicated to poverty reduction have realised that this is not good enough. Various mechanisms and approaches to organisational learning have been developed and applied, but with mixed results.

Ben Ramalingam researched over a dozen aid organisations and found that they are rather poor learners. Although intrinsic factors in the aid sector explain why this is the case up to a point, there is no excuse for aid organisations not to try harder. Both Ben Ramalingam and, from a West African perspective, Mousiliou Alidou offer some useful recommendations on ways to improve learning. Niels Keijzer presents a conceptual framework of five core capabilities that organisations can use to learn about their own capacity in order to improve performance. Guest columnist David Ellerman argues that learning requires open debate, similar to those that take place among the academics in the modern university. Yet within many development agencies such debate is often stifled by the 'Official Views' on the most complex and subtle questions facing humankind.

In the other articles in this issue, the authors provide examples of a wide range of organisations that have taken on the challenge of collective learning.

Charles Owusu describes Action Aid's experience with the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS). Shambu Prasad explains how learning alliances involving agricultural research organisations and community-based organisations in India have achieved remarkable results in promoting the adoption of innovative non-pesticidal management and an innovative system of rice intensification.

Sue Soal describes how the Community Development Resource Association, a South African NGO, has introduced 'homeweeks', monthly meetings where staff are able to learn collectively and in a systematic way. Rebecca Wrigley explains how the staff of CABUNGO, a Malawian NGO, used the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology to learn about how to improve their performance in providing organisational development services to clients. For organisations engaged in advocacy work, Julián Portilla and Sylvia Aguilera describe a set of useful tools to learn about the institutional and political contexts in which they operate. For alliances of organisations engaging in advocacy campaigns it is imperative that the members learn about each other's interests, expectations and commitments. in an article to be found on the online version of Capacity.org, Laura Roper explains how to facilitate such inter-organisational learning processes.

Despite the many new approaches to learning that have emerged in recent years, too many development agencies still underestimate the importance of learning. They fear negative evaluations because they may be seen as evidence of failure, rather than as opportunities for learning. As a result, practices that do not work can be replicated many times because the target groups – the poor – are usually not in a position to give their feedback. The real failure occurs when development agencies avoid rigorous evaluations and in the process miss out on these valuable learning opportunities.

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CONTENTS

Future issues
The next issue of Capacity.org will focus on capacity development in extremely difficult environments, including conflict and post-conflict situations and areas struck by natural disasters.

Cover photo
EPA/Jon Hrusa/ANP

Knowledge and learning in the development sector

Organisational learning for aid, and learning aid organisations

Although many aid agencies claim to be learning organisations, a recent review found that they still need to address some major challenges, especially at field level. Ben Ramalingam asks why this is the case, and what aid agencies can do to learn more effectively.

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In n their efforts to promote organisational learning, many aid agencies have embraced two influential approaches – the learning loops model of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, and the learning organisation model of Peter Senge. Here I draw on the findings of research undertaken by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), which illustrate some of the problems aid organisations face in applying these approaches. Based on these findings, I suggest two reasons why learning in aid agencies has proved so problematic, and what we might be able to do about it.

Single-, double- and triple-loop learning

According to Argyris and Schön, organisational learning can be characterised in terms of a three-level evolutionary model consisting of *single-, double- and triple-loop learning:*

• *Single-loop learning* is undertaken in line with explicit practices, policies and norms of behaviour. Learning involves detecting and correcting deviations and variances from these standards.

• *Double-loop learning* involves reflection on the appropriateness of underlying practices, policies and norms. This approach addresses the basic aspects of an organisation, such that the same things are not done in response to changing contexts.

• *Triple-loop learning* represents the highest form of organisational self-examination. It involves questioning the entire rationale of an organisation, and can lead to radical transformations in internal structure, culture and practices, as well as in the external context.

In most aid agencies single-loop learning happens at individual and group levels. However, evidence suggests that this is usually in an informal and ad hoc manner. In my research on knowledge and learning practices in the development sector, all the organisations studied saw value in informal learning, specifically in small acts of informal knowledge sharing and daily reflection. But there was no clear sense that such activities were actively supported by, or even related to, organisational learning strategies, even though they were generally regarded as key.

For many aid agencies, *formalised* single-loop learning, as promoted in organisational learning strategies, is problematic. My research found that even in organisations where learning is central to the overall mission, systematic learning-based approaches are not widely accepted and applied. Formal learning is frequently seen as a non-essential support function – one, moreover, that is dominated by training and technology.
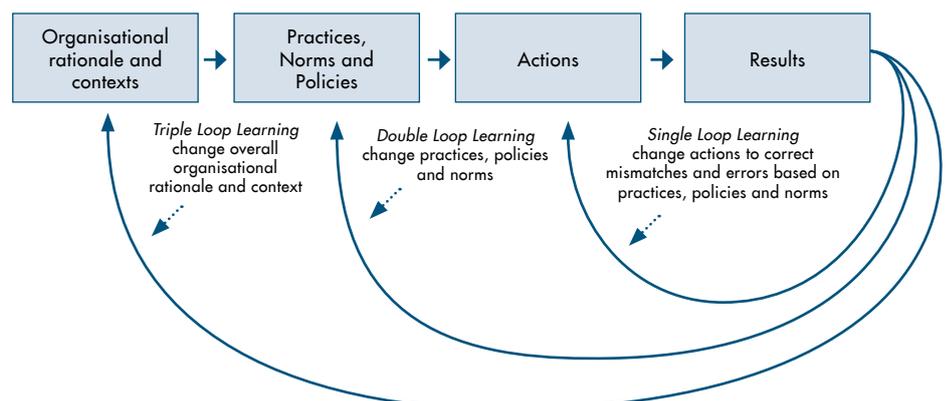
Consider, for example, the 'after action review', a popular facilitated learning process adopted from the US Army. Experiences with this simple tool suggest that it is often applied ineffectively in aid organisations. In one extreme case, the simple notion of a regular, blame-free group reflection process became a 'lessons learned' box in an electronic form to be filled out by individual managers at the end of a project. Such stories are not unusual. Rather than identify specific processes for organisational and group reflection, there is a tendency to point to information systems and documents as the 'end products' of learning initiatives, despite the widely held view that

information is simply part of the overall organisational learning picture. Only a small minority of organisations I have encountered focused their efforts on human dimensions of knowledge and learning. This can lead to mistakes being repeated, time and time again.
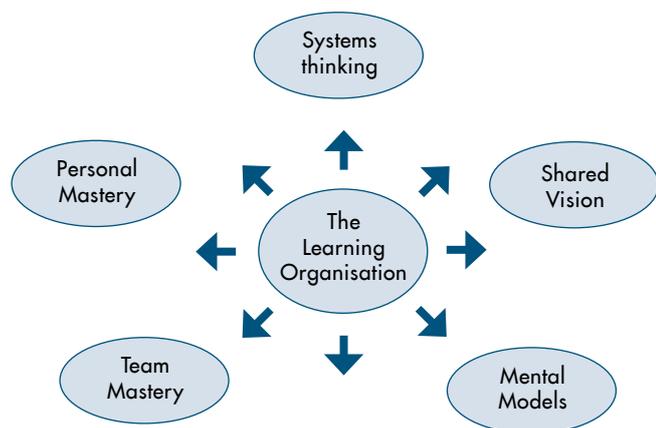
Double-loop learning – questioning practices, norms and policies – is actually in *direct conflict* with the immediacy of ongoing organisational processes. Emerging cultures of learning and innovation frequently overwhelm existing cultures of compliance. In part this is due to entrenched power inequalities, meaning that mistakes cannot be admitted to those who provide resources, whether they are institutional donors, international NGOs or UN agencies. When mistakes are not admitted, lessons clearly cannot be learned.

External relations also have particular implications for adjusting underlying norms, policies and objectives – especially between donors and implementing agencies. There is evidence to suggest that decision-making processes in aid agencies involve establishing common 'narratives' that fit the priorities of the agency and donor alike. From David Ellerman's perspective, such a relationship can be seen as an example of mutually supportive 'Official Truths'. Given the potential organisational interests of both parties in the acceptance of one shared Official Truth over another, this can, and does, lead to imperfect analysis and inappropriate responses.

Such relationships risk circularity, whereby

| Organisational rationale and contexts | Practices, Norms and Policies | Actions | Results |

Triple Loop Learning change overall organisational rationale and context

Double Loop Learning change practices, policies and norms

Single Loop Learning change actions to correct mismatches and errors based on practices, policies and norms

Single-, double- and triple-loop learning (adapted from Argyris and Schön, 1978)

The five disciplines (adapted from Senge, 1990)

It is useful to consider these five disciplines in the context of the operational work of international agencies in the field. Effective international action is in large part dependent on the ability of operational staff to manage and implement programmes and projects. Therefore, the operational level *should* be where much of the learning that is crucial to the success of international action takes place, and where critical improvements are made. To test whether this is so, in 2004 ALNAP carried out a review of field-level learning among humanitarian aid agencies. The findings highlighted some of the fundamental issues these agencies need to address in applying the five disciplines of the learning organisation approach. These are summarised in the table below.

According to Senge, these disciplines have a 'synergy', such that organisational learning cannot thrive unless all five are present. Given this, and on the basis of the ALNAP findings, few international agencies can legitimately claim to be learning organisations at the operational level. This carries serious implications for the effectiveness of aid agencies. At least part of the problem is that the preferred learning mode of operational staff – which is profoundly social, and based largely on tacit knowledge – is not matched by formal learning approaches, which tend to focus on classroom training, information strategies and guidelines.

aid problems are 'constructed' and 'solved' in ways that may bear little relation to actual needs. This makes it difficult to determine what 'really' works in practice, and therefore constrains double-loop learning. If mutually supporting Official Truths dominate no matter what aid organisations do, then even single-loop learning may be problematic. The risk would be that they primarily work to ensure that resource-providing relationships are not affected, and that the continuity of the organisations is not threatened.

There is some indication of a degree of triple-loop learning in aid organisations, given the frequency with which new leaders are recruited, and new strategies are launched. However, this does not appear to be particularly successful in achieving transformation. As one commentator put it, no matter what the situation, you can always predict which agencies will do what, when and how. Such predictability suggests that the deeper commitments to change called for by the concept of triple-loop learning are unlikely to be present internally within the majority of aid agencies.

The learning organisation

Building on the work of Argyris and Schön, Peter Senge outlined his vision of a learning organisation as an adaptive entity that is responsive to past errors and able to transform itself continually. To achieve this rarefied status, an organisation needs to apply five interrelated disciplines, as outlined in the figure below.

Learning organisations – the ideal and the reality in the field

The ideal	The reality
Discipline 1: **Personal mastery** – individual growth and learning	Operational staff feel undervalued by the organisation; there are few individual incentives for learning. National staff and local actors are important sources of local knowledge and vital for learning, but are often excluded from learning efforts. Southern knowledge is incorporated ad hoc at the tactical, rather than strategic level.
Discipline 2: **Mental models** – explicit articulation of tacit knowledge (ingrained assumptions) about the organisation and how it works in the wider world	Tacit knowledge is all-important at field level, with field staff showing a bias towards informal learning and social networking. Explicit knowledge is seldom in the right form or in the right place at the right time – it is always in catch-up mode.
Discipline 3: **Shared vision** and consensus inspiring and motivating staff	The aid sector lacks clarity and consensus about objectives, responsibilities, relationships and outcomes at all levels. This carries through to the reference points and frameworks necessary for understanding and assessing performance, and can diminish staff motivation for learning.
Discipline 4: **Team-based mastery** – learning through improved communication, and openness to creative thinking through reflective conversation and dialogue	There is inadequate support for management and leadership in the field. High staff turnover and inadequate procedures result in constantly changing teams. Continual demands from head office for information 'from the field' create tensions that make learning difficult in many organisations.
Discipline 5: **Systems thinking** – focusing on interrelationships between parts of an organisation	The learning cycle of reflection before, during and after activities is poorly developed and unsupported at field level, which creates problems for systems-based approaches. Most aid agencies make no attempt to learn from recipient populations – a fundamental omission.

The way forward

What can we conclude from the above? Organisational learning in the aid sector is fraught with problems, whether we are talking about single-, double- or triple-loop learning. Moreover, at the operational level, where much learning that is critical to aid work should be happening, we are witnessing an inability to put in place the disciplines and capacities required to become a learning organisation. Problems exist at the aid sector level in general, at the level of individual organisations, and at the level of specific tools.

Why is there such an apparent gulf between the ideal of organisational learning and the reality of aid organisations? I suggest that there are two underlying reasons.

First, the models and approaches borrowed from other contexts have proved less than relevant, and even inappropriate, for aid work. To understand why, a comparison with the private sector may provide some insight. In the corporate sector, where many of the influential approaches to learning originated, the purpose of organisational learning is clear – to build profitability and competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

The aid sector arguably lacks clarity, coherence and consensus relative to the tight integration of the corporate mission. This lack of clarity plays out in terms of goals, objectives, responsibilities, relationships and outcomes, and at the individual, team, organisational and inter-organisational levels. It blurs the reference points and frameworks necessary for understanding and assessing effective performance, which in turn limits the scope for learning. As a result, the aid sector has been, at best, only partially successful in effectively applying the models of organisational learning from the corporate sector. Yet these 'external truths' have continued to play a substantial role in shaping thinking.

Given the above, I think learning initiatives could be further strengthened by paying more attention to 'home-grown' approaches to learning. This means that we accept that learning is not best arrived at through 'external truths', but through the approaches that have emerged from the experiences of people who have lived and breathed the complex realities and multiple perspectives that aid organisations face on a daily basis. It means taking greater pride and working harder to develop and disseminate those approaches to learning that have emerged from within the aid sector itself. Some of these are well established, such as participatory approaches; growing in use, such as the Most Significant Change (highlighted on page 13 of this issue) and Outcome Mapping approaches; or they are emerging, such as the framework presented by Niels Keijzer (page 14). It also means applying learning approaches to new areas such as advocacy, and identifying the new challenges that emerge (page 11). Finally, it means not applying incoming ideas blindly, but challenging their assumptions and testing their relevance, and by doing so arriving at new and more considered ways of learning to deal with development problems.

Second, efforts to promote learning within aid organisations have underestimated the complexity of aid, leading to unrealistic expectations about what learning can achieve. As David Ellerman argues, aid organisations are attempting to address the most complex but ill-defined questions facing humanity, and in many different settings. In working towards change and improving the lives of poor people, aid agencies are dealing with huge numbers of interacting problems, factors and actors. There are inevitably degrees of non-comparability across, and unpredictability within, these complex systems.

The assumption that ideas can be transferred as 'best practice' from one place to another has driven much organisational learning. Rather than scanning globally and *reinventing* locally, as Joseph Stiglitz famously suggested, most learning initiatives in the development sector have tried to scan globally and *apply* locally. This 'pipeline' approach to learning seriously underestimates the complexity of aid work.

Therefore, best practice needs to be replaced with good principles that can provide the context for local reinvention, inspired by global learning. Some argue that this implies that aid agencies should abandon prescriptive, goal-oriented decision making and prediction about future states. This doesn't mean a laissez *faire* approach to learning – quite the opposite. The most appropriate way to bring lessons from one context to another may be, as Patrick Breslin suggests, for 'development workers to become facilitators ... enabling representatives of different communities ... to see *first hand* what in the successful project they would wish to replicate'. Another way to support local reinvention, Nour-Eddine Sellamna proposes, is for agencies to focus on 'understanding the dynamics of change and promoting a collective learning framework through which concerned stakeholders can constantly, through dialogue, express their respective interests and reach consensus'. Home grown-approaches may prove useful here too.

In closing, I would like to quote an old Chinese saying, 'learning is like rowing upstream: not to advance is to drop back'. The articles in this issue – grounded as they are in the complex, diverse and human realities faced by aid agencies – are useful. We may not yet see effective learning aid organisations. We may not yet be good at organisational learning for aid. But in our efforts to learn how to learn, and to engage with the complexity of learning, we are certainly moving upstream. <

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Ron Giling/Lineair

Action Aid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System

Linking learning to decision making

In many aid agencies the rhetoric of learning is rarely matched in practice. Charles Owusu describes the efforts of ActionAid to make systems and structures part of the solution to becoming a learning organisation, rather than part of the problem.

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In a major effort to create space and time for learning and to reform power relationships, ActionAid, an international NGO, introduced the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS). Key elements of ALPS include annual participatory review and reflection processes at all levels, involving multiple stakeholders; greater downward accountability, with more transparent budgets; and the use of locally appropriate language in the forms used for reporting.

ActionAid's struggle to implement ALPS illustrates many of the challenges faced by aid agencies in trying to become learning organisations.

First, ActionAid established annual review and reflection processes at all levels, and across functions, in order to learn from achievements and failures and to improve the quality of programmes. Once the process was institutionalised, however, it was realised that achieving honest dialogue among stakeholders about ActionAid's work required more than just 'space and time' for reflection. In particular, the finance director needed to find ways to integrate financial systems with programme planning and review cycles, so that the review process would directly influence planning and budgeting. This would ensure that learning would be fed back into planning, which in turn would lead to greater transparency in financial reporting at all levels.

It was therefore necessary to simplify the financial reporting schedules and templates used at local levels, so that the information could be easily understood and discussed with community groups. A new and simpler coding system was introduced. An information disclosure policy was introduced to improve transparency by compelling staff to share financial information. Headquarters decided not to require formal country reports, and to allow staff more time to interact with communities. Reporting forms were redesigned, with locally appropriate language; this last element represented a radical shift, and generated much debate.

One of the most difficult challenges that ActionAid had to address concerned the power dynamics vis-à-vis its partners. Most partners feared a backlash if they went too far in their criticism. Because of its power,

ActionAid was aware of the inherent tension when it tried to ask communities and partners to 'open up' in honest dialogue, and to provide feedback and criticism of its work. Decision-making authority was thus shifted closer to the point of action.

Within ActionAid itself, it was recognised that there was a need for decentralisation, regionalisation and devolution of authority, as well as for greater coordination among key functions. Yet the pressure to demonstrate change, and to respond to linear thinking about impacts, the rigid adherence to 'measurable indicators' was in direct contradiction with the learning agenda ActionAid was trying to promote.

A number of factors did much to constrain the learning process. These included the procedures associated with the log-frame approach and the hierarchical culture it fosters, reinforced by disbursement pressures. Another was the priority given to meeting (often unrealistic) targets rather than learning. Yet another was the unrelenting pressure to demonstrate impacts, even though in some contexts learning would have been more appropriate as a yardstick for judging success.

Consistent management support
All of these challenges did not deter ActionAid's management, who enforced ALPS from the top with clear principles and directives. For an organisation that prided itself on its preference for a bottom-up approach, this was somewhat at odds with its philosophy. Most important, management made it clear that it was willing to listen to suggestions, and to review and update any constraining structures, systems, procedures or policies. For example, the impact assessment unit was moved from programmes and made to report directly to the chief executive officer, thus linking learning outcomes to top-level decision making.

Gradually, a feeling of 'failing forward' towards a culture in which failures could be honestly reported began to emerge. The country teams began to organise 'learning events' to highlight the 'tensions and dilemmas' of ALPS. The field teams received support for documentation and research, and budgets were allocated for publications. The management gave feedback and responded promptly to recommendations from the field

teams. Where necessary, heads of department were free to propose or introduce new structures or systems, so long as they enhanced learning.

As more senior staff visited the field, more varied interpretations of progress, success and failure began to emerge. New mindsets developed and old biases began to change. Ultimately, it has been the willingness of the leadership to review and address the constraints inherent in structures, cultures and systems that hold the promise for double-loop learning within ActionAid, even though this does not mean that everything will change overnight. <

Links
• ActionAid's Accountability Learning and Planning System (ALPS): www.actionaid.org.uk/1417/global_review.html

The author was involved in piloting Action Aid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS). He is now working with CCF-USA on its new Planning, Accountability and Learning System (PALS).

The participatory review process, Bangladesh

Institutional learning and change

Learning alliances for poverty reduction

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Agriculture is back on the international agenda, and is the subject of the most recent World Development Report. Yet learning is still regarded as something largely for farmers, ignoring the need for learning among institutions, including agricultural research centres.

Most agricultural research and development (R&D) institutions have been shaped by traditional approaches to technology transfer, in which farmers, extension agencies and civil society organisations passively accept the technologies delivered by researchers. These linear approaches of the 'Green Revolution' were based on the objective of increasing food supplies in resource-rich regions, using improved crop varieties that require increased external inputs.

This high-input model is now facing serious challenges due to its unsustainable use of resources, the pressure on the environment, and its inability to address the needs of small farmers. The rising costs of farm inputs and the falling prices of some agricultural produce have increased income inequalities, and have added to the burden of impacts on rural communities.

Coping with these changes will require much more than increased investment in agricultural R&D. The large research institutions need to realise that they are just one part of an interconnected system. Unlike in the past, they are neither the sole sources of knowledge, nor can they claim to have all the answers to the problem of how to reduce poverty. If they are to be effective, they will have to become less isolated, more interconnected and more responsive to small farmers.

Farmers first

In recent years a group of interdisciplinary researchers has been engaged in a process of critical thinking about impact assessment techniques, 'farmer first' approaches to agricultural research, and a systems view of innovation. Under an initiative known as the Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC), the participants believe that collaborative research programmes could play a key role in pro-poor innovation. First, however, organisations need to develop their capacity for learning, and to transform the patterns of interaction with other actors in the system. This is possible through action research and action learning.

The ILAC team has captured many stories of change at major research centres such as the International Crop Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT). These 'innovation histories' often show that when researchers adopt a more open approach and are willing to learn together with non-researchers, they are able to increase the uptake and impact of their research. For decades research was stuck in a paradigm of one-way technology transfer, with limited uptake by farmers. The ILAC initiative has led to new approaches and tools that are now being used to move agricultural research towards pro-poor innovation. One of these approaches has involved the creation of learning alliances.

Learning alliances in practice

The learning alliance approach emphasises the processes of innovation, and involves collective learning by research organisations, donor agencies, policy makers, civil society organisations and even private businesses. The alliances enable participants to learn across organisational and geographical boundaries, and provide vehicles for collaboration and sharing knowledge about approaches, methods and policies that work, and those that do not. By improving the flows of information and knowledge, these multi-stakeholder platforms help to speed up the process of identifying and developing innovations, and ensuring their adoption by farmers.

Non-pesticidal management

One of these learning alliances is working to reduce the amounts of pesticides used by farmers in Andhra Pradesh, India. The alliance members include a parastatal agency, the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty, various community-based organisations and a network of NGOs. The alliance grew out of informal collaborations between research centres and civil society organisations to explore innovative practices such as lighting

Institutional learning and change

Current methods of impact assessment assume that there is a direct causal link between research and impact, and that this can be measured. Yet many studies have shown that impact assessments are ineffective in enabling decision makers to plan for change, and fail to recognise that the *way* research is carried out influences its impacts on rural livelihoods. In response, the Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) initiative focuses on three inter-related elements:
- *Institutions:* Agricultural innovation takes place within systems with multiple actors at different levels, with different norms and rules governing their interactions.
- *Experiential learning:* involves analysing and understanding the work we do, and regards learning as a social process of reflection and analysis.
- *Change:* This involves ensuring that lessons learned are used to improve both ongoing and future programmes.

To understand the complexity of change, the ILAC team compiled a series of case studies of research centres that have adopted alternative approaches, such as facilitating participatory decision making, establishing learning alliances or promoting new evaluation techniques. The case studies have been published in a series of ILAC Briefs (www.cgiar-ilac.org).

The ILAC initiative combines action research and action learning to foster knowledge production, capacity development and behavioural change. ILAC builds on the idea that learning organisations are able to embrace experimentation, and tolerate risks and ambiguity. They are also willing to work with partners to reach a shared understanding, and to work towards participatory decision making.

bonfires to deal with insect pests. Through a collective learning process, the alliance developed a new system of non-pesticidal management (NPM) practices for a wide range of crops.

In 2002 the Centre for World Solidarity (CWS), an NGO based in Hyderabad, began to disseminate information about the system via its network of partners. Few farmers in the region use formal extension services, but in less than four years, the NPM system had been adopted by 100,000 farmers in 1500 villages. The programme has been a remarkable success. Many farming communities have now completely eliminated the use of pesticides.

The learning alliance also provided a platform for scaling up the use of the system as an alternative to the input-intensive practices that were likely to fail. The alliance has therefore helped not only to reduce environmental stress, but also to open up new markets for the region's organic produce, both local and international, thus increasing the incomes of many small farmers. Most important, much of the alliance's success has been due to women who took the lead in what is arguably one of the world's largest ecological farming projects. As the collective learning has continued, the alliance has helped farmers move away from technology-based methods of pest management, and to adopt a broader approach known as community-managed sustainable agriculture. The Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA), an NGO that grew out of CWS, has also adopted the principle of collective learning, and intends to create new institutional platforms and learning alliances to scale up the approach and transform agricultural practices throughout the state.

The NPM alliance is working to improve the livelihoods of small farmers, tenants and farm workers using local resources. It is managed by community organisations using novel extension mechanisms and farmers as resource persons. The CSA, through its partners, provides technical support and training, and takes the lead in bringing together stakeholders at various levels. Buoyed by its success, the NPM alliance has sought and received policy support to extend the community-managed sustainable agriculture approach to 1 million farmers in Andhra Pradesh in the next four years.

System of rice intensification

Learning alliances may also be facilitated by outside agencies, such as when the various members have different ideas about the process of innovation, and bringing them together could lead to conflict. In Orissa, a poor state in eastern India, the Xavier Institute of Management was able to apply its understanding of innovation systems to facilitate a new learning alliance to promote a new way of growing rice. Known as the system of rice intensification (SRI), this is an interesting agro-ecological innovation that was developed in Madagascar and is now in

use in 30 countries. Unlike conventional methods of raising productivity through genetic improvement and increasing inputs, SRI relies on providing an enabling environment for the rice plant to express itself fully. The system involves a combination of several principles, including the use of organic inputs, alternate wetting and drying, increased spacing between plants, and transplanting the plants while they are young. Although the method has been successful among farmers across the world, it has met with resistance from rice research organisations.

An earlier study of SRI had found that actors such as government departments and civil society organisations elsewhere in India were working independently, and sometimes in adversarial ways. Recognising these institutional pitfalls in a complex environment where none of the actors had complete information or access to resources, the Xavier Institute organised a workshop for dialogue on SRI at the state level. The workshop did not focus only on formal knowledge, and so provided an atmosphere in which farmers and NGOs felt able to contribute, and agriculture department officials were willing to learn from others.

The trust built by the alliance, and its ability to link isolated success stories, have led to greater policy support for SRI in Orissa state. One large private donor has chosen Orissa as one of the states for testing ways to improve productivity in rainfed rice-growing areas, and the government of India has provided support through its National Food Security Mission for the state. All of this has happened due to the new approach of working together, rather than just the large numbers in the field. The open sharing of results has helped to improve accountability, and the various actors have repositioned themselves to explore possible synergies with others. The experience has encouraged other Indian states to create similar learning alliances. Thus Orissa, a late starter in SRI technologically, has provided the institutional lead for the rest of the country.

Open communication

The success of the learning alliance approach is based on the ability of the facilitating organisations to open up channels of communication between diverse partners. In particular, organisations with experience in designing and testing analytical tools and methods can facilitate *collective learning* within and between organisations. Not all of these need to be formal, novel institutional mechanisms. The SRI alliance organises experience-sharing workshops, for example, which ensure the much faster spread of ideas than is possible using conventional extension methods.

In the case of the NPM learning alliance, the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture has only 15 staff members but has been able to scale up the NPM approach through its network of grassroots organisations. Donor

Promoting farmer innovation in India

agencies can often play an important role by being active members of a learning alliance. One donor, for example, facilitated a popular SRI internet group in India, and invited all its partners to participate, as well as many other actors involved in promoting SRI across the country. The learning alliance concept will continue to evolve in various sectors as the participants gain experience in how best they can be facilitated, and in managing the new expectations that they are creating.

Learning together often pushes existing institutional arrangements to become more open. The results can be surprising, sometimes leading to reversals of traditional roles – extension agencies and civil society organisations doing research, and research institutions repositioning themselves as knowledge brokers. They could lead to new learning laboratories and platforms where researchers can learn, reflect and report even if they do not have all the answers. This can lead to new knowledge emerging from healthier and more equal interactions among hitherto powerful scientific hierarchies. All of these changes are to be welcomed if we are serious about addressing the complex challenges facing the 'bottom billion' in the future. <

Further reading

• *Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) initiative:* www.cgiar-ilac.org
• *M. Lundy and M.V. Gottret (2005) Learning Alliances: An Approach for Building Multi-stakeholder Innovation Systems. IDRC.* www.idrc. org.sg/es/ev-104473-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html
• *C. Shambu Prasad, K. Beumer and D. Mohanty (2007) Towards a Learning Alliance: SRI in Orissa. Xavier Institute of Management/WWF Dialogue project.* India. www.wassan.org/sri/documents/SRI_in_ Orissa.pdf
• *L. Watts and D. Horton (2007) Institutional Learning and Change: An initiative to promote greater impact through agricultural research for poverty alleviation. Paper presented at the workshop 'Farmer First Revisited: Farmer Participatory R&D 20 Years On', IDS.* www.future-agricultures.org/farmerfirst

Learning for organisational development

Robust concepts and dedicated willpower

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The Community Development Resource Association is a South African NGO that serves social development and civil society initiatives around the world. Sue Soal describes CDRA's approach to organisational learning.

Organisational learning should be an integral and continuing aspect of development work. At the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) we are trying, through our work in the field and internal learning and evaluation, to contribute to the development of our own practice and assisting others, both clients and colleagues, to do the same. We do this is through regular 'homeweeks', when we perform all of our organisational strategising, maintenance and integrating activities. At the heart of the homeweek is space for practitioners to share with each other and learn from practice.

Homeweek activities can vary. Sometimes we carry out a complete review of practices, which are written up in reports that are tabled and processed collectively. At other times, we focus and report on an issue in the broader environment, in the field, or in our strategy. Our planning and evaluation cycles very often begin with these reports. At other times, one or two practitioners will present a case from the field for the whole team to work on. Programmes can also be reviewed and designed during homeweeks or the time used to provide individual supervision. We may invite visitors to share their perspectives with us, and in our book club, we share useful articles and books. These sessions are extremely valuable and are not run as staff perks, or as a holiday from 'real' work in the field.

During the homeweeks we also take care of business. We discuss requests and initiatives and assign responsibility to individuals. These meetings are also useful for picking up new trends and collectively considering our commitments. The debates about what work we do, what requests we pursue or decline serve as a vital, constantly renewing connection to the values and mission of the organisation.

In homeweeks, a melting pot is created, where individuals share their experiences, which are then actively forged into something else, something organisational.

Five elements of learning

Five elements characterise our approach to organisational learning.

The first element is space, and the determination to make *space*, hold it and use it. Not all organisations and practices need one week each month. Many meet for a few days every quarter or perhaps just one day a month. The point is that learning only happens with dedicated space. It is a distinct activity in its own right.

Second is *rhythm*. Learning is best done when there is experience to learn from. Just as experience is constantly changing and accumulating, so learning should be continuous too – a steady presence that keeps pace conceptually with the ongoing emergence of practice.

Creating any new culture and discipline requires practice, persistence and adaptation. To get through the early stages, especially, a *champion* is needed. Responsibility for ensuring that learning happens cannot be delegated to people who do not have the authority to make it happen. These processes demand huge investments, with important strategic and operational implications. If the leader is not behind them, they are unlikely to work.

The fourth element is *approach*. For us, the primary value is on learning from experience, collectively. This means rendering that experience transparent. The 'inputs' that this requires are also the 'outputs' – trust, confidentiality, warmth, respect, and listening without judgement.

Working meaningfully with these qualities requires a rigorous method, which is sometimes belied by the ease and informality of our meetings.

In our internal processes we use multiple methods which in turn have multiple purposes. In CDRA, peer supervision, strategising, accountability, information generation and team building all happen through our learning processes. The trust and mutual understanding built up during these learning processes generates a robustness that carries over to other meetings, where more direction, discrimination and judgement are required. It seems that doing business is far easier when the relationships and the values between people are clear.

Finally, there is the shared sense of *collegiality* that the homeweeks create. Our sense of accomplishment or failure comes from the extent to which what we do is in keeping with the requirements of the practice we are building. Our colleagues mediate our relationship to that practice, but they do not control it. When we are learning together in our homeweeks, we are building that practice. <

Further reading

• Community Development Resource Association (CDRA): www.cdra.org.za
• This article is adapted from Sue Soal (2007) *Towards 'better evaluation': An account of one internal practice*. Keynote address to the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) Conference, Melbourne, September 2007.

Ron Giling/Lineair

Building alliances in Mexico

Collective learning for advocacy

In 2006, following the elections in Mexico, 14 sexual and reproductive rights organisations met to develop strategies for an advocacy campaign. Julián Portilla and Sylvia Aguilera describe the collective learning process.

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The Centro de Colaboración Cívica (Centre for Civil Collaboration) is an NGO working to reinforce democratic change in Mexico through dialogue, collaboration and conflict management. In October 2006 the Centro de Colaboración Cívica (Centre for Civil Collaboration) facilitated a workshop for 14 organisations that were about to launch an advocacy campaign to influence relevant government bodies and ministers on issues relating to sexual and reproductive rights. The organisations analysed the political context, based on which they could develop their collective strategies. In this process, three tools proved particularly useful.

The tool used for context analysis was a 'political map' setting out the positions of relevant officials in the various branches of government with regard to sexual and reproductive rights. Prior to the workshop, the facilitators interviewed representatives of the 14 organisations, and identified the groups to be targeted in the campaign. The facilitators compiled brief profiles of each of the target groups identified by the 14 organisations. They mapped their attitudes, based on previous voting records, public statements and, where possible, personal interviews. Note that the authors of the map offered no conclusions prior to the workshop.

During the workshop, participants were divided into groups. They were asked to review the map and to identify opportunities for advancing the group's agenda as well as possible threats. They were also to note any surprises in the map, such as perspectives that might have not have been expected from specific individuals. The map thus revealed areas where increased efforts by the group might yield favourable results, and where they would be wasted.

Any group or network working towards a common goal needs to avoid the duplication of efforts, and to identify any gaps. To address these challenges, the facilitators drew up a simple matrix in which the participants wrote the name of their organisation next to the groups they would target in their activities. Finally, the group used an abbreviated version of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) method to highlight the capacities of their organisations. Everyone present was asked to think of a moment of excellence in their work, when they felt connected with their mission and proud of their achievements. The participants told their stories in pairs, and then in groups of four, eight and 16. Later, they listed the practices that had made those moments possible.

Through this exercise, many stories of success in difficult political circumstances emerged, making the current situation seem less daunting. In the process, the dominant narrative gradually changed from one of doom and gloom, to one of possibility. The participants made a collective inventory of their best practices, which generated a great deal of motivation to work together to face the challenges ahead.

Collective learning and advocacy

Based on our experience in facilitating this collective learning process, we can draw a number of conclusions:
• Collective analysis can generate a process of learning that is not possible in other settings. All the participants were able to broaden their perspectives, and to benefit from their colleagues' informal knowledge.
• Context analysis is important, but is not often done. The workshop allowed the organisations to take time to reflect on the context of their campaign, and to plan accordingly.
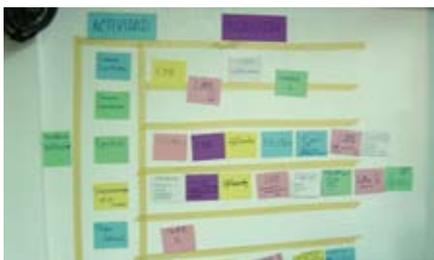• A common document or proposal is useful for organising the group discussion. Without such a document, in this case the map, from which to work, the meeting might have become an excruciating exchange of opinions that would have been difficult to ground in any kind of common understanding.
• Consensus, while useful, should not be required. Although the group engaged in a shared analysis of the context, it did not necessarily reach consensus on what was going on, why, and the implications. Nonetheless, the insights gained enabled the participants to develop promising strategies.
• Stereotypes must be challenged. The importance of building coalitions across party lines cannot be overstated – preconceived notions of who may or may not be friendly to one opinion or another may hinder the ability to build winning coalitions.
• The narrative constructed around the possibilities for action matters. Perceptions can become reality as people act, or not, based on what they believe to be true. At the workshop, the transformation of the mood in the room after the AI exercise was palpable. What had seemed impossible suddenly became possible. <

Links
• Centro de Colaboración Cívica/Centre for Civil Collaboration: www.colaboracioncivica.org

Creating the matrix using masking tape and coloured pape

Network advocacy matrix

Target groups	Organisations engaged with target groups			
Lower House of Congress				
Upper House of Congress				
Executive ministries				
Independent executive agencies				
Judicial branch				
State-level agencies				
International agencies				

Overcoming barriers to learning

Learning in teams

Moussiliou Alidou, an independent consultant based in Benin, has many years' experience in capacity development with various organisations. Here he identifies the barriers to team learning, and ways to overcome them.

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Development organisations are increasingly recognising the benefits of 'on the job' team learning. Individuals who attend workshops and training courses rarely apply or share their newly acquired knowledge. Learning in teams, or 'action learning', can generate solutions that are more likely to be applied in practice, but which pose their own challenges.

Most organisational learning occurs haphazardly. I previously worked with a project team in Benin. We used a logical framework to plan and report our activities, but our learning needs were not directly linked to the project goals. We organised learning sessions, but did not specify where the improved skills should lead, and so we were unable to measure their effects. Team learning processes must be set up in a systematic way, starting with well defined individual or team goals. Outcome mapping frameworks can be helpful in the design, structuring and monitoring of the learning process.

The advantage of learning in teams is that members can help each other, especially in solving problems. They can take a detached view, and help put a problem in perspective. Team members can also act as coaches, a role that is not always well understood. As an example, a development advisor confided in her colleagues that she had a problem with a client and had decided to end the relationship. They explained that the relationship was important, and advised her to continue. Thus they offered a quick solution rather than helping her establish the cause of the problem, and an opportunity to learn was wasted. Colleagues should help each other to reflect on their experiences, find appropriate solutions, and so learn as a team.

In many organisations, another barrier to learning is lack of time, which is related to a lack of incentives to learn. Staff will not engage in learning unless they are assured that the effort will be valued just as much as other activities. Management should make it clear that staff are expected to learn and to reflect on their performance. It is essential that this is supported by appropriate incentives, and that time is made available for writing.

Organisations often try to introduce reflection and learning as part of regular staff meetings, but this simply doesn't work. During meetings, people are in action mode rather than learning mode. Short meetings are more suitable for planning day-to-day activities, while reflection and learning require longer sessions where issues can be discussed in depth. Merging the two is not satisfactory.

Cultural barriers to team learning

There are a number of cultural factors that inhibit team learning. In some societies, like Benin, people do not like to share knowledge and experiences with others because they want to keep it to themselves. In other cultures seniority goes hand in hand with an attitude of distance to junior staff, thereby avoiding opportunities for mentoring and helping younger colleagues to learn and grow.

Giving feedback is interpreted differently in different cultures. In Mali, for example, it is assumed that giving positive feedback encourages the receiver to become arrogant, or to act like a chief. Also, asking for support or feedback may be regarded as a sign of weakness.

Another cultural barrier to learning, related to the oral tradition, is the aversion to, or even fear of writing. The importance of documenting experiences for collective learning is recognised, but individuals with good writing skills are rare. During several missions in West Africa I asked people to write down their experiences, but they would reply: 'you've listened to me, so you can help and write it'. Thus, many good practices remain undocumented, and newcomers are destined to repeat the same mistakes. Yet those who do make an effort to write and ask colleagues for feedback are often frustrated by the lack of response.

Organisations can take various steps to overcome such barriers to learning. They can reward staff who do document their experiences. They can organise internal workshops to help to demystify writing, and to teach staff how to write case studies or reports describing their experiences.

Within larger organisations there are opportunities for teams to learn from other teams. For those with access to the internet, it is also easy to learn from other organisations. Unfortunately, a 'we-know-best' attitude often stands in the way of benefiting from knowledge that is within reach. Practitioners have to learn that, 'as fire, knowledge is borrowed from neighbours'. <

Further reading

- International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Outcome Mapping: www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26586-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html
- E. de Haan (2005) *Learning with Colleagues: An Action Guide to Peer Consultation.* Palgrave Macmillan.
- G.F. Shea (1992) *Mentoring: A Guide to the Basics.* Kogan Page.

A mutual feedback exercise

Linking learning and informed action

Learning how to learn collectively

CABUNGO, a Malawian NGO, recently evaluated its own performance using the Most Significant Change approach. Rebecca Wrigley describes how, with the support of stakeholders, CABUNGO learned to improve its services.

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Organisational learning requires both individual and collective learning processes that purposely work towards changed organisational behaviour. In practice, there is often a focus on the information-based dimension of learning, characterised by the increasing adoption of knowledge management strategies among NGOs. This focus can underestimate the significance of the personal, relational, contextual, intellectual, formal and informal dimensions of collective learning processes.

In 2006 I worked with CABUNGO, a Malawian NGO, to design a self-evaluation process with the explicit purpose of 'enhancing CABUNGO's learning in order to improve performance'. This was not a requirement for external donor funding. We decided to use this opportunity to trial the use of the story-based Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology to evaluate the organisational development services provided by CABUNGO.

Stories of significant change
The MSC process involved four steps:
- *Establishing domains of change:* these are relatively broad and 'fuzzy' categories that help define important areas of change for stakeholders. Through discussions, CABUNGO staff defined two domains: changes in the organisational capacity of local organisations, and changes to improve the quality of CABUNGO's practice.
- *Collecting stories of significant change:* over a period of two weeks we interviewed 32 stakeholders, including staff, board members, client organisations, donors that fund CABUNGO, and other capacity providers. The interviewees were asked to describe stories of most significant change relating to each of the two domains.
- *Selecting and analysing the stories:* The MSC approach involves a hierarchical process of selecting and analysing the most significant stories collected. Within this pilot experience only one level of selection was used. Key stakeholders were invited to a one-day 'evaluation summit', where they were given time to read and think about the stories, discuss their reactions and decide which three stories best represented the most significant changes in organisational capacity. Discussing the stories chosen helped CABUNGO gain a clearer understanding of the 'essence' of changes brought about by its interventions. One story, for example, highlighted the importance of creating a space for people to reflect on, and then potentially shift, the relationships between leaders, staff and board members. Reviewing the stories of change relating to the quality of practice helped CABUNGO to prioritise where improvements could be made.
- *Feeding back stories to stakeholders:* On completion of the process, an evaluation report was produced and shared with all stakeholders.

Participants felt that the MSC process was an effective way to evaluate capacity development. While time did not allow the process to be applied comprehensively, it was relatively straightforward to implement. Using a story-based approach was useful in helping CABUNGO understand the impact it was having on the organisational capacity of its clients. By reflecting on and prioritising the stories, the participants gained a rich and shared understanding of the systemic, multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of organisational change. This re-conceptualisation was then used to develop a more explicit theory of change, which in turn provided insight into how CABUNGO could improve its services. Effective organisational learning can therefore be seen as a collective adaptation of the individual experiential learning cycle.

What is less clear is whether the findings of the evaluation would satisfy the requirements of some donors for specific data. In those cases where data are required, it may be possible to combine the MSC approach with other, more quantitative evaluation methodologies.

A positive learning culture
The experience gained through using MSC to evaluate capacity development demonstrates that specific evaluation methodologies can enhance organisational learning. However, working with CABUNGO also demonstrated that these methods achieve little on their own. They must be supported by an ongoing organisational commitment to nurture a positive learning culture and healthy internal and external learning relationships. There are no 'quick fixes' to achieve this, but some of the factors that have helped CABUNGO to learn effectively include:
- ensuring a supportive leadership and balanced power relations,
- developing a common understanding of learning and its purpose,
- championing a culture of openness and trust.
- creating formal and informal spaces for learning;
- valuing diverse knowledge and learning styles;
- allowing time and flexibility to observe, reflect and adapt;
- encouraging dynamic learning relationships, both internally and externally;
- accessing, sharing and internalising sources of external learning; and
- establishing effective systems for managing and communicating information. <

Further reading
- This article is based on three papers written as part of INTRAC's Praxis Programme (www.intrac.org/pages/praxis_papers.html):
- B. Britton (2005) *Organisational Learning for NGOs,* Praxis Paper 3.
- S. Prince and R. Wrigley (2006) *Organisational Learning in Civil Society,* Praxis Paper 13.
- R. Wrigley (2006) *Learning from Capacity Building Practice,* Praxis Paper 12.

Jørgen Schytte/Still Pictures/Lineair

Capacity, change and performance

The hard and soft sides of capacity

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A wide range of characteristics, both hard and soft, together make up effective capacity. Niels Keijzer describes a novel framework that organisations can use to assess their own capabilities, and if necessary refocus their efforts.

Since 2004 the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) has led a major study on capacity, change and performance, involving 16 case studies of organisations and networks around the world. One emerging finding of the study is that organisations often fail to recognise the wide range of characteristics that make up effective capacity. Among these are 'hard' aspects related to tangible 'deliverables' and associated technical skills. But there are also softer, more intangible aspects, such as leadership, staff motivation, shared values, etc., that relate to the 'why' and the 'how' of capacity development.

Analysing these hard and soft sides in a balanced manner can help organisations understand the ambiguous, nonlinear effects that typify capacity interventions. One example of the benefits of taking such a balanced view is discussed in the case study of the Rwanda Revenue Authority. In just six years, the Authority became an effective, respected institution that increased tax revenue collection from 9.5% to 13% of GDP. To do this, the organisation addressed both the hard aspects – getting the structures, systems and procedures right – and the softer aspects, such as the leadership needed to nurture a distinct identity and value system.

Five core capabilities

Drawing on the case studies and the literature on capacity development, the study identified five core capabilities that, to the degree that they are developed and integrated successfully, contribute to the overall capacity or the ability of an organisation to create value for others. All five core capabilities are necessary; none is sufficient by itself (see figure).

These five capabilities can be used as criteria that an organisation can monitor in order to learn about changes in its capacity and performance. Assigning subjective 'scores' to these capabilities, and discussing these scores through dialogue can help an organisation, with its stakeholders, to learn from what it does. One way to assign these scores is to define 'pointers' for each of the five capabilities that are seen as most relevant and useful for appreciating how capacity evolves over time. These pointers are 'lenses' that can help capture relevant qualitative information. Note that these pointers are different from indicators, which tend to be less 'dynamic' and are used for quantitative measurements.

Possible pointers that could be used to assess the capability to adapt and self-renew, for example, include the following:
• does management encourage and reward learning?
• are all staff members able to learn and absorb new ideas?
• is change positively valued?
• is there a fruitful balance between stability and change?
• is the organisation able to adapt and respond to opportunities?
• is the organisation able to assess trends or changes and anticipate them?

Applying the framework involves five steps:
1. **Explore** the situation and purpose of the assessment, and identify who will take part, and how.
2. **Calibrate and agree** on the framework, and on the choice, interpretation and use of the pointers.
3. **Gather evidence** about and assess the organisation's capacity by scoring its performance on each of the pointers.
4. **Discuss** the draft results with stakeholders to ensure that the results paint a fair picture of the organisation's capacity in terms of their own experience.
5. **Distribute** the results among stakeholders.

Such an exercise could, for example, enable an organisation to realise that it is capable of better performance, but that it needs to do better at convincing its funders of this. Or it could conclude that despite its remarkable ability to survive, it has now drifted away from its core mandate (so-called 'mission creep'). The use of the framework might also encourage reflection on how the organisation could 're-invent' itself in order to deal with a changed political situation, or to increase its impact through better coordination, more collaboration with others in the field, or greater efforts to provide feedback to stakeholders.

This framework can also be regarded as an *aide memoire* to check that the organisation's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts address all aspects of capacity. Any approaches to assessment developed on this basis should complement what is already in use. Some organisations are now experimenting with the capabilities framework in the context of project development and M&E. <

Further reading
• A. Land (2004) *Developing Capacity for Tax Administration: The Rwanda Revenue Authority*. ECDPM Discussion Paper 57D. www.ecdpm.org/dp57d
• P. Morgan (2006) *The Concept of Capacity (draft)*, ECDPM.
• This article is based on P. Engel et al. (2007) *A Balanced Approach to Monitoring and Evaluating Capacity and Performance: A Proposal for a Framework*. ECDPM Discussion Paper 58E. www.ecdpm.org/dp58e
• ECDPM study on Capacity, Change and Performance: www.ecdpm.org/capacitystudy

Capability to survive and act:
What do we need to be good at in order to act effectively? Are we already good at it?

Capability to adapt and self-renew:
What internal or external factors trigger change and innovation? Do we respond to them?

Capability to achieve coherence:
What? When? With whom? How?

Capability to generate development results:
What results do we need to achieve? Are we already achieving such results?

Capability to relate:
What relationships do we need to maintain in order to achieve our objectives?

PUBLICATIONS

This section offers a selection of publications related to capacity development. A more extensive list can be found at www.capacity.org.

Using Training to Build Capacity for Development: An Evaluation of the World Bank's Project-based and WBI Training

Aliza Belman Inbal et al., World Bank IEG, 2008

This evaluation found that while most of the training financed by the World Bank has resulted in demonstrable learning, this learning frequently did not lead to real changes in workplace performance. Often the content of training is not relevant to the needs and goals of institutions, or the trainees lack incentives or resources to apply their learning in the workplace.
www.worldbank.org/ieg/training/index.html

When Will We Ever Learn? Improving Lives through Impact Evaluation

Report of the Evaluation Gap Working Group, Center for Global Development (CGD), 2006

Each year billions of dollars are spent on social programmes in the developing world, but very few benefit from studies that could determine whether or not they actually made a difference. This absence of evidence is an urgent problem. In 2004 the CGD convened the Evaluation Gap Working Group to investigate why rigorous impact evaluations of social development programmes are relatively rare. This final report of the working group contains specific recommendations for stimulating more and better impact evaluations.
www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/7973

If Relationships Matter, How Can They Be Improved? Learning about Relationships in Development

K. Pasteur and P. Scott-Villiers, Lessons for Change in Policy and Organisations no. 9, Institute of Development Studies, 2004
ActionAid, DFID and Sida collaborated with the Participation Group at the IDS to explore understanding of learning and to document innovative approaches. This paper offers a new perspective on how a development agency can approach learning so that its staff can examine and improve their performance by attending to their interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships.
www.livelihoods.org/lessons/Learning/Ifrelations.pdf

Learning in Development Co-operation

L. Wohlgemuth and J. Carlsson (eds), proceedings of the seminar 'What do Aid Agencies and their Cooperating Partners Learn from their Experiences?', Expert Group on Development Issues (EGDI), Sweden, 2000
Do aid agencies and their counterparts learn from their experiences? Is knowledge gained fed back into improved practices? The introductory chapter deals with learning in development cooperation from the perspective of practitioners. The authors of the 16 chapters offer their personal reflections and ideas on questions such as how do we learn, from what sources, and how do we use that knowledge?
www.egdi.gov.se/publications14.htm

Going against the Flow: Making Organizational Systems Part of the Solution rather than Part of the Problem.

R. David and A. Mancini, Lessons for Change in Policy and Organisations no. 8, Institute of Development Studies, 2004
This paper looks at the origins of the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS), a revolutionary approach to managing the learning and relationships introduced by ActionAid, an international NGO. Starting with the origins of ALPS in the late 1990s, the paper describes the false starts and the factors that mobilised change.
www.livelihoods.org/lessons/Learning/GoingFlow.pdf

Learning for Development: A Literature Review

K. Pasteur, Lessons for Change in Policy and Organisations no. 6, Institute of Development Studies, 2004
Organisational learning is increasingly viewed as key to improving development performance and impact. However, there is still confusion about what the term means and how it translates into practice. This literature review aims to provide some insight in this area.
www.livelihoods.org/lessons/Learning/LitReview.pdf

Capacity for Development: New Solutions to Old Problems

S. Fukuda-Parr et al. (eds), UNDP/Earthscan, 2002
A team of development professionals and economists examine the lessons learned from recent capacity development efforts. They emphasise the importance of learning, which they describe as 'an imperative for economic survival in today's knowledge-based market environment … For individuals, for institutions and for societies, this demands a continuous process of learning and relearning – from each other and from the world around them'.
http://capacity.undp.org

ORGANISATIONS, NETWORKS AND INITIATIVES

This section offers a selection of organisations, networks and initiatives concerned with capacity development. A more extensive list can be found at www.capacity.org.

Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)

ALNAP is a collective response by the humanitarian sector to improve performance through increased learning and accountability. Members include NGOs, Red Cross/Crescent, the UN and independent organisations. ALNAP uses the experience within its membership to produce tools and analyses relevant to the sector.
www.alnap.org

Evaluation Gap Working Group

The Evaluation Gap Working Group was convened by the Global Health Policy Research Network as an initiative of the Center for Global Development, to remedy the lack of knowledge covering the effectiveness of social programmes in low- and middle-income countries, and to develop practical recommendations to solve the problem.
www.cgdev.org/section/initiatives/_active/evalgap/about/

Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev)

KM4Dev is a community of international development practitioners who are interested in knowledge management and knowledge-sharing issues and approaches. The main discussion forum is the KM4Dev mailing list, where members sharing of ideas and experiences take place. To join the mailing list, send a blank email to: subscribe-km4dev-l@lyris.bellanet.org
www.km4dev.org

Learning Network on Capacity Development (LenCD)

LenCD is an informal network of analysts from bilateral, multilateral, government agencies and NGOs engaged in development cooperation (primarily DAC members) promoting capacity development learning. Their aim was to provide greater form and visibility to capacity development, both as part of the work of the OECD-DAC Network on Governance (Govnet) and beyond.

Aid agencies and the search for knowledge

Why truth and power don't mix

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The recent National Intelligence Estimate of the US intelligence agencies concluded that Iran had abandoned its nuclear weapons programme in 2003. This remarkable 'exception that proves the rule' shows that it was indeed possible for intelligence agencies with enough independence to make factual judgements at odds with the 'Official Truths' of those in power.

Lessons about the adverse effects of the usual mixing of truth and power are hardly new. Over the centuries, much has been learned from the success of the sciences about the search for knowledge, and how science is corrupted by the incursion of those in power who think they have the Truth. Examples include the Soviet Union declaring that Lysenko's genetics was 'Soviet science', and the Catholic Church's clash with Galileo.

Power corrupts the ecology of knowledge – the conditions under which knowledge grows and flourishes. Those in power in an organisation tend to enshrine their views as the Official Truths. Experimentation, debate, and the exercise of critical reason are curtailed to stay within the Official Wisdom. To those in power, staff members who argue against Official Truths only reveal their unreliability, their inability to play with the team, and their lack of fitness for positions of authority. Insiders who argue against Official Truths outside the organisation – particularly in public view – are in effect traitors; they are ipso facto disloyal to the organisation itself.

Thus critical reason yields to bureaucratic conformity, a community of development researchers becomes a company of intellectual clerks, and honest and open debate gives way to an organisational ideal of agreement, accommodation, and 'going with the flow'. The result is a society satirised by Kant as the Arcadian ideal where people would be 'as good-natured as the sheep they tended'.

Barrington Moore, a Harvard social theorist, noted that 'among contemporary social arrangements the modern Western university … has endeavoured to make intellectual criticism and innovation a legitimate and regular aspect of the prevailing social order'. The university does not set itself up as an arbiter of truth; it takes no Official Views. There is no official Harvard theory of this, or Oxford theory of that. The university, ideally, is an arena in which contrary theories can be examined and adverse opinions can collide in open debate. This means open intellectual competition instead of bureaucratic accommodation. Thus there seems to be little reasoned basis for an agency that is dedicated to promoting development knowledge to adopt, explicitly or implicitly, Official Views on the most complex and subtle questions facing humankind. It is unclear, at least to the author, which part of this argument the leaders of development agencies don't understand or accept.

How development agencies might work

The agency should see to it that clients hear the best arguments on all sides of complex questions – and make the final decisions. Albert Hirschman argued that it was also imperative to 'divorce the exchange of opinions about suitable economic policies from the actual aid-giving process'. It is important that clients are genuinely committed to reform and to learning, even with Incorrect Views (e.g. China), and that mechanisms of learning from experience by the client and the agency are part of the project.

Finally, on the complex questions of development where knowledgeable people differ, alternative approaches should be allowed to compete and be implemented within the confines of the same open learning organisation. There is no royal road to learning, no road that bypasses real competition and local experimentation – even within the agency itself. Those in power should heed Keynes' admission that 'we all hate criticism. Nothing but rooted principle will cause us willingly to expose ourselves to it'. Instead of aspiring to Official Truths, the agency should aspire to a self-critical fallibility or Socratic humility of knowing that one does not know, and then on the basis of 'rooted principle' to promote the knowledge processes that have been shown to be so fruitful for achieving genuine progress in problem solving. <