

# Organisational learning in NGOs: an example of an intervention based on the work of Chris Argyris

Didier Bloch and Nora Borges

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## Introduction

Ten years after the publication of Peter Senge's bestseller *The Fifth Discipline*, organisational learning (OL) appears to be awakening considerable interest in the non-governmental world. 'The learning organisation' and 'learning to learn' are phrases that are increasingly heard in discussions about the third sector. But do the principles of OL as applied in various large corporations over the last 30 years apply to non-profit organisations?<sup>1</sup> Our experience in Brazil might give us some pointers and allow us to draw some initial lessons, though it is not a basis upon which to claim to deal with this complex subject in an exhaustive manner.

The first section of this paper will be limited to a brief description, without any academic pretensions, of the pertinence for NGOs of OL principles, as outlined by the US researcher Chris Argyris.<sup>2</sup> Following this, we will describe a concrete intervention that uses this conceptual framework, based upon work funded by the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) that began in February 2001 with Grupo Curumim, an NGO based in north-east Brazil.

## Organisational learning: what relevance for NGOs?

### *A brief overview of the theory*

For many years, and to a great extent still today, an organisation was understood as the 'rational coordination of activities of a set of people who have a common explicit goal, through the division of work and function, and a hierarchy of control and authority' (Schein 1965, quoted in Weick 1973:2). Organisational theorists such as Karl Weick took a radically different approach, teaching us to see organisations as dynamic systems, analysed in terms of behaviour, processes, and the interactions between actors (Weick 1973).

An interesting point in Weick's perspective is that he lays the major responsibility for an organisation's acts and problems at the feet of its people. We find something similar in the search for professional effectiveness put forward by Argyris and Donald Schön (1974) or in the systems thinking approach presented by Senge (1990): each member of the system should seek to understand his/her responsibility for mistakes; in other words, s/he should see her/himself as a causative agent rather than trying to put the blame on people outside the system. In this way, learning does not just mean the accumulation of information and knowledge, or the solution of problems. Above all, the members of an organisation should 'reflect critically on their behaviour, and identify the ways in which, inadvertently and frequently, they contribute to the organisation's problems, and on that basis change the way they act' (Argyris 2000:186).

Put more simply, we can say that an OL intervention seeks to increase professional effectiveness within the organisation, providing tools to enable people to reflect periodically on their behaviour. In this way organisation members analyse what Argyris terms their 'theories in action' – their assumptions and intentions, strategies and results, and, above all, the deepest held values and beliefs that govern their behaviour.

Argyris suggests three theoretical models of action, which we can call authoritarian (Model 1), paternalist (the opposite of Model 1) and participatory (Model 2). While Model 1 is characterised by unilateral control, intransigence, and open competition, in its opposite, competition and control are camouflaged by the appearance of empathy and open discourse (Valença 1997). Model 2, which the author clearly prefers, has three underlying values: the production of valid information, freedom of choice, and internal commitment to action.

According to Argyris, every person who intervenes should follow these values exactly, trying to ensure that the group is increasingly able to analyse and solve its problems, take decisions, and act on them. For him it is impossible to solve problems without the relevant information. In turn, taking a decision requires not only information but also an environment of trust and free choice. For successful implementation, people need to feel completely committed to these decisions. Helping the group to generate valid and useful information and developing an environment of free choice and internal commitment are what Argyris calls the 'primary tasks' which guide each and every OL intervention (Argyris 1970: Chapter 2). Apart from this, interveners should ensure they enable people to become fully

independent. Thus it is not just a question of applying tools and following principles, but also of ensuring that the organisation can use them effectively, without the presence of external consultants.

Argyris, who led hundreds of interventions in companies and developed theories based on his practice in more than 30 books, affirms that organisations are effective and can learn when they can detect and correct their mistakes. It is worth noting the complete lack of any moral undertone in his notion of mistake. For Argyris, a mistake is simply the difference between the original intention and the actual outcome of the action, the discrepancy between the idealised project and the results. There are thus two kinds of errors. This was well summed up by Antônio Carlos Valença, one of the leading Brazilian academics focusing on the work of Argyris. On the one hand there are those mistakes that are 'linked to operational procedures' and on the other 'those that involve questions that are threatening and embarrassing, ambiguous, paradoxical, contradictory or politically unmentionable' (Valença 1999:16). For Valença, the latter are 'the most serious errors which have the greatest impact, errors which merit the most skilled intervention'.

### ***Lack of information on learning in NGOs***

Our impression is that there are still few, or certainly few accessible, publications on the actual experiences of applying OL in the third sector. On the one hand, the great majority of case studies that are used to illustrate the work of Argyris, Senge, and other theorists refers to large private corporations from the northern hemisphere and, to a lesser degree, to public sector bodies. On the other hand, as noted by Michael Edwards (1997), there is a small but growing volume of NGO literature addressing the process of learning and its results.

One reason for this lack of material is the fact that, despite existing for many years, it has only been since the 1990s that the third sector has been regarded as 'a strategic area for the harmonious development of modern society' (Merege 2000). Management schools have started including specialised courses for third-sector organisations, but this interest is very recent. In Brazil the Getúlio Vargas Foundation was a pioneer in establishing the first such course in 1996, with the justification that:

*[T]raditional management techniques applied to both public and private sectors demonstrate real limitations when they are simply transferred across to the third sector. The absence of shareholders and profit as the main*

*objectives [of the organisation] mean that other values dominate, such as the form of participative management, commitment with the mission and the prioritisation of principles that guide the service to the target group, and where valuing the human person and commitment to others stand out most.*  
(Merege 2000)

### ***The need for an approach that focuses on values***

This focus on values, which is used to justify the founding of specialised training courses, seems to us to strengthen the pertinence of an OL approach in NGOs. In other words, we believe that OL, which has been so well tested in the business world, can also be a relevant approach for NGOs.

We will start by referring to the comments made by Edwards of the World Bank on the subject of learning in international NGOs whose head offices are in the industrialised world (Edwards 1997). Edwards, who has also worked for Save the Children Fund-UK and Oxfam GB, argues that, because of the nature of development and its 'inherently unstable and uncertain contexts, their complexity and diversity ... means that to develop capacity for learning and to make the connections is even more important than accumulating information'. It is a question of learning from experience, rooted in 'solid feedback mechanisms that link information, knowledge, and action', and on skills in 'reflection-through-action'.

Edwards also notes that NGOs 'have a values system that, in theory, encourages learning and communication', which gives them a certain advantage in relation to other organisations. Nevertheless, like their counterparts in the private and public sector, NGOs 'do not like to admit failure or ignorance', and he concludes that '... if NGOs still wish to have a distinct identity as value-based organisations, then they should be particularly well equipped to develop in this aspect'. We interpret these comments as arguments for the relevance of a values-based organisational approach for NGOs.

### ***The difference between stated values and actual behaviour***

An important contribution made by Argyris is the distinction between the theory of stated action (through its discourse and publicly stated values) and the theory of action in practice (the values actually practised, those that shape behaviour). There is always a difference between the stated values and actual behaviour, which he calls 'incongruence'.

For example, when Chris Roche, head of Programme Policy at Oxfam GB, writes that ‘NGOs espouse partnership and the need for synergy’ but that ‘just like other organisations, they tend to blame others and/or the context when things go wrong’ (Roche 2000:50), he is pointing to an inconsistency: I espouse partnership but my concrete action is based on values that do not favour partnership. Roche offers another example when he summarises various critiques of NGOs in the image of a vicious circle made up of five elements, including ‘the nascent learning and institutional responsibility’. He agrees that ‘these elements come together to produce a large vacuum between the rhetoric of the agencies and what they actually accomplish’ (Roche 2000:15), and also notes critiques that highlight the ‘inadequacy of the majority of current attempts to promote institutional learning’, viewing the exposure of ‘the mistakes and uncertainties that are inherent in development work’ as a possible way out (Roche 2000:15–16).

### ***Search for approaches that reduce inconsistencies***

NGOs openly defend values such as participation, democracy, citizenship, and respect for diversity. This is their discourse, their ‘stated theory’. The question is: how are these values put into practice in the day-to-day life of these organisations? Among NGOs? With their partners? Between members of the same organisation?

We agree with Roche that there is a significant difference between the stated values and actual behaviour of NGOs. It is true that no individual, group, or organisation is wholly consistent. Nevertheless, this is a much more sensitive topic for NGOs than for organisations from the first and second sector, for a variety of reasons.

The first reason is that it is precisely these values and their defence in practice that in large part justifies the very existence of NGOs. Take, for example, a piece from the charter of principles of the Brazilian Association of NGOs: ‘ABONG and its members commit themselves to apply the following principles in their daily practice: ethics, impartiality, morality, publicity, and solidarity; to identify and defend alternatives for sustainable human development that take into account equity, social justice, and environmental balance for present and future generations’ (ABONG 2000). These values and principles are commitments made by the most respected Brazilian NGOs, without any doubt made with the best intentions. But we also need to recognise the difficulties inherent in putting these values into practice. Unfortunately, in the absence of certain interpersonal and group skills that are not particularly prevalent

(listening, dialogue, shared decision making, etc.), the best of intentions may not prevent the appearance of undesired and dysfunctional results. Without deep reflection on the 'error' (i.e. the difference between the intention and actual performance), these undesired consequences are all too likely to occur. For example, apart from proclaiming solidarity between organisations, it would be useful to encourage critical reflection on the specific process of engagement between NGOs. This, in turn, could lead to the gradual development of competencies that seldom emerge spontaneously.

The second reason is exactly the fact that, in most organisations in the third sector, the necessary attention is not given to actual behaviour, individual and collective. Hence, the inevitable contradictions between stated values and practice are rarely raised and even more rarely addressed. Given that the values that NGOs defend are their very *raison d'être*, should we not think of mechanisms that could minimise the gap between discourse and behaviour?

Going back to Argyris, learning means to identify and correct mistakes. This can happen in two ways: either by just changing operational procedures, the 'action strategies' (single-loop learning), or, going deeper, by questioning and gradually changing the values and beliefs that in practice govern these strategies (double-loop learning) – though we shouldn't forget that overcoming personal and organisational barriers and acquiring new behavioural skills are very lengthy processes.

Thus NGOs that evaluate the impact of development actions and reflect on their fieldwork with a view to improving operational procedures are engaged in important single-loop learning (external). However, it is equally or perhaps more important to check behavioural realities (internal) and start a process of double-loop learning. Concretely it is worth asking how an organisation that supports participation or the rights of all to have a say deals with cases of arbitrary, controlling, or authoritarian behaviour that may occur in its everyday life. Ignoring such practices would expose the organisation to all kinds of criticism, and we know that NGOs are increasingly subject to attack, whether malicious or well-meaning. Working on actual behaviour and underlying values is thus vital. It just remains to explore how best to do it.

So we come to the third reason why discrepancy between stated goals and actual practice is so sensitive for NGOs. We believe that the tools currently used by NGOs (evaluation, planning, monitoring, etc.)

are often inappropriate for dealing with these contradictions or tackling behavioural issues. They certainly help to improve external operational procedures (single-loop learning). Ideally, they enable the organisation to identify certain symptoms (unproductive meetings, failures in internal communication, lack of trust, etc.), but people are rarely equipped to deal with them effectively. Often they do not even realise that there are certain things that can help them to do so. The result: the same problems keep occurring and the group has increasing difficulty in confronting them. The tendency is to develop dysfunctional patterns of behaviour which become increasingly difficult to challenge and deal with, a phenomenon that Argyris calls 'skilled incompetence'.

### ***Rethinking professional practice in relation to organisational development***

Some NGOs would like to become alternative reference points for organisational issues as well. In ABONG's charter of principles we find phrases like 'internal democratic participation', 'partnership between members', 'harmony and respect', 'point of reference for society'. Internal democracy and participation are, however, the result of processes; they always have to be (re)-constructed. To this extent we believe that a critical examination of external actions and internal contradictions that underlie OL interventions can be of great help.

All of this demonstrates, in our view, the need to find appropriate approaches, to stop and think, to put aside a time and space to reflect on the *action strategies that are actually used* and on the *values that in fact govern these strategies*. We believe that OL is a relevant approach, with its educational perspective, its emphasis on continuous improvement of the (inevitable) mistakes, and its focus on practice and on the values that shape this practice, which can help in generating a more participatory democracy and in promoting a less competitive and more open interaction. Essentially, it can bring discourse and practice closer together in interpersonal relations within NGOs, between NGOs, and between them and the various groups and organisations with whom they engage (beneficiaries, governments, other NGOs, etc.).

And this is precisely what we are trying to do in our work with Grupo Curumim.

### ***The intervention process in Grupo Curumim***

To bring all the above ideas to life, we now describe the first six months of the two-year intervention process with Curumim.

## ***Curumim, a feminist NGO***

Curumim is a Brazilian feminist NGO with its headquarters in Recife in the state of Pernambuco. The group has been working for 12 years in the area of humanising childbirth and women's health, in a country where maternal mortality remains high, and where the rate of Caesarean delivery is one of the highest in the world. Most of Curumim's work is done alongside traditional midwives in north-east and north Brazil.

The team draws on a range of skills (a medical doctor, a sociologist, midwives, health education workers) and works at both a technical level (training of midwives, antenatal care) and at policy level (participation in national and international feminist networks, interventions in public policy) in what is often a hostile context. We should underline that in Brazil, and particularly in the region in which Curumim works, there are many traditional midwives who, despite their unparalleled role serving the poorer population particularly in remote areas, are not officially recognised within the health system. A part of Curumim's work is undertaken in pilot municipalities and consists of organising the midwives in order to ensure their integration into the health system, with the aim of controlling maternal, neonatal, and perinatal mortality in the whole municipality. Furthermore, the study of practices in various municipalities should facilitate the development of a new model of service. Despite the difficult context, it is worth noting that Curumim works within the scope of reproductive rights and women's health, an area in which the Brazilian feminist movement has achieved significant advances over the last two decades.

Having said this, we will see that the plan for the first months of OL intervention was designed above all in relation to the behavioural and organisational issues raised in the initial diagnosis. This diagnosis involved the midwives, who for technical and geographic reasons and lack of finances are not participating directly in the OL process. However, they are benefiting indirectly from this intervention given that Curumim is adapting some of the tools of OL for use in its meetings with the midwives.

### ***The initial diagnosis: organise the variables***

The OL work formally began in February 2001. In reality, however, the work with Curumim started in the first half of 2000, with the examination and diagnosis of the Traditional Midwives Programme,



which, as with the whole of the intervention, took place at the request of Curumim and was financed by the US-based feminist organisation IWHC.

This diagnosis took about two months, during which time information was collected through individual interviews with the members and partners of Curumim and through the reading of reports and publications. There were also several workshops with the whole team, which comprised eight people. A part of the information collected related to the external environment, to Curumim's partnerships, to the influence of the institution on public policy, and its overall effectiveness. Besides this, specific organisational aspects linked to working methods were looked at (planning, monitoring, meetings, etc.) including internal environment (e.g. relations within the team, decision making), human resources (size of the team, skills, training needs, etc.), financial aspects (funding, salaries), and infrastructure (physical space, equipment).

At the final workshop, when the results of the diagnosis were fed back for checking and approval, the long list of variables that reflected the organisation was examined. An exercise of systemic visioning helped to reveal the relation of cause and effect between these variables. Four variables stood out from the mass of information collected, and we called them overall determining factors – those with the most impact on the 'Curumim system'. These four generic variables – internal communication, management model, socio-political training, and resources – and their specific importance for Curumim formed a first set of important information to guide the intervention. In addition, the diagnosis highlighted problems with planning (carried out competently but easily hijacked by immediate demands) and monitoring (which was not systematic). Overall the diagnosis pointed to difficulties in following long-range objectives and agreed procedures.

Between Argyris' three models of action theory, Curumim certainly showed a desire to move towards Model 2 (participatory); however, the diagnosis showed that its practice put it nearer the opposite to Model 1 (paternalistic). Far from being dispirited, the Curumim team saw this situation as an opportunity for growth. After various conversations with the consultants, it was unanimously decided to undergo an OL intervention. Initial funding was requested from IWHC to cover one year's intervention, with the option to renew for one further year. For us, the consultants, the next step was to design this intervention.

### *From diagnosis to design*

One of the key ideas in learning is to enable the organisation to reflect on its performance in concrete situations. In the case of Curumim, this does not mean to encourage an abstract reflection on the concept of monitoring but rather to propose a gradual change of behaviour in practice. Thus when working on operational procedures (fundraising, for example), we can encourage the group to monitor the planned actions (developing and monitoring relevant indicators) and at the same time create an environment that favours reflection on their behaviour in the monitoring process. Can the group define appropriate indicators? Does it encounter difficulties? What is the documentation of the indicators like? Is it worth doing? What is the group learning through doing this?

Basically, the intervention tries to make the group reflect on certain operational questions (fundraising, public policy for midwives, etc.), while the principal focus is on behavioural and relational questions (the effect of personal issues on group dynamics; the ability to listen, discuss, and argue; the fulfilment of planned tasks; the expression of ideas and feelings; decision making; etc.). These questions are not just dealt with in an abstract way – reading a text on leadership, for example – but are worked on by the group through periodic analysis of their own practice and filmed on video.

On the basis of the diagnosis and applying the theoretical principles espoused by Argyris and others, we decided to suggest two consecutive modules of ten months each. For the initial module we suggested a ‘backcloth’ with various themes: mental models, theory of action, personal and group competencies, effective teams, mistakes and defensiveness, systems thinking – not necessarily in that order, depending on the response of the group and on the progress of the intervention.

We also decided to hold monthly two-day sessions with the group, including the following activities. After a short period of relaxation and concentration the participants talk about the ‘current moment’ – and for about an hour, each person can find out about the internal and external comings and goings of their colleagues, about the ideas and feelings of that moment, and about the development of projects and aspirations, be they individual or collective. Thus there is what one of the members of the group described as an ‘unfreezing of the images that we have of other people’. Usually, the consultants then give a *theoretical presentation* of OL. This more reflective part is complemented

by the *observation and analysis of behaviour*, be it of characters in fiction films or of the team itself in experiential exercises linked to the theory being presented. Additionally, the monthly programme includes a *collective clinic* (a filmed session of structured dialogue) to deal with problems raised through the diagnosis, or coming up in the group's daily business. To close the seminar, participants carry out a written *self-evaluation* and *group evaluation*, using a standard form, and take part in a final evaluation, where each one speaks in turn. Finally, between sessions *theoretical tasks* (study and presentation by Curumim of texts on learning) and *practicals* (continuation of the work on operational procedures) are introduced, and the times for feedback during the following monthly sessions are scheduled.

In order to accompany and measure how the group's performance evolved, we foresaw three types of more formal evaluation. The first takes place monthly through a self-evaluation and group evaluation form, in which each participant marks (on a scale of 0 to 4) variables such as listening, focus on the task, free expression of ideas, and so on. The second type of evaluation is also behavioural; however, this time it is carried out by the consultants. In this case the interaction between the members of the group is carefully observed in video-filmed laboratory exercises. Finally, the third type of evaluation takes place each time an operational theme that came up in the diagnosis is dealt with (communication, fundraising, etc.). The group thus develops operational indicators and is charged with monitoring them.

This, at least, is the plan. In practice, in the 'live system', the agenda remains an important point of reference; however, sometimes there are diversions, upsets, or surprises that turn into raw material for the intervention. Below we present some reflections on the experience that is still 'work in progress'.

### ***Slow handcrafted work, enriched by feedback from the group***

During the first seminar, group norms (confidentiality of the sessions, respect for the timetable, etc.) and the calendar of monthly meetings were discussed. The group was also filmed talking about internal communication, dwelling in particular on the irregularity of team meetings.

Between the first and second seminar the team had to produce a plan for internal communication, together with specific indicators. They failed to do so, and this non-action was excellent raw material to develop a preliminary simplified map of the theory of group action. This map showed the assumptions, strategies used (in this case the

non-fulfilment of the agreed task), as well as the consequences for the group. This mapping had almost immediate effects: the following day Curumim met to produce an action plan for internal communication. One of our principal hypotheses was that assumptions such as 'I don't have time' or 'this isn't my responsibility' pointed to more general and deeper behavioural patterns that inhibited the group's effective action. In fact, in another situation three months later, very similar behaviour was repeated and was again mapped and discussed.

This is an obvious but nevertheless essential point: it is not enough to point out behavioural patterns only once if you are trying to promote profound change in the group's behaviour. There are no miracles: changes take time. They do not depend solely on individual or group decisions but require the acquisition of new skills – hence the length of the OL intervention, which in this case will take place over 20 months. Overcoming 'defensive routines' and changing the 'master programme' represent a long journey during which new forms of communication need to be worked on – defending one's viewpoint by reference to observable facts, inviting the others to challenge our reasoning, contributing incrementally – which form part of what Argyris calls Model 2 of theory in practice.

We designed the intervention from one seminar to the next in a very handcrafted way, tailoring it to the group, taking into consideration the context, the theoretical norms (in particular Model 2 participatory and democratic), and the response of the group.

The logic that developed in relation to the four overarching variables we had identified was as follows. First, it was necessary to deal with internal communication at least to ensure that the monthly team meeting would take place. Without such meetings there would be no way the group could deal with any topic. Later on, the second theme proposed was financial resources, given its critical nature – specifically the forthcoming end of core funding. Without some sense of the group's continuation, there was no way one could think of OL or any other type of organisational work.

This is the point we have reached after six months, dealing gradually with these two variables, trying to encourage the group to develop indicators and monitor them. However, often other themes arise during these sessions, altering the order envisaged. This was how a structured discussion developed about the feeling of belonging to the group, for example. On another occasion, we felt it opportune to include in the programme the study of a chapter of Peter Senge's

recent work referring to overcoming the challenge of 'lack of time' in the processes of OL (Senge 2000: Chapter 3).

In the near future, we will address socio-political training and the model of the institutional management, though this plan remains provisional. In truth the dynamic of the intervention means that one variable can hide others and new themes emerge during the process. Thus it is useless to try to predict everything in detail in advance.

### ***Monitoring as a learning tool***

Between the first introductory seminar and the sixth, which was designed as a special moment of feedback from the consultants to the group and vice versa, only four monthly seminars took place. Four months is a very short time in which to see significant behavioural change. But that doesn't mean one can't reflect on some preliminary results, difficulties encountered, and challenges.

At the sixth seminar, a whole day was dedicated to the results of the first six months. The collective interpretation of how the behavioural variables had evolved show that Curumim feels at ease with the experimental environment, but cannot yet change certain behaviour patterns: without the presence of the facilitators. There is still a tendency not to listen and to lose focus, as the group educator admits: 'I am really clear that something very good has happened, principally in relation to self-confidence and respect for differences. The word "building" is key; I am not yet ready to solve certain problems without the help of the consultants.'

Despite the difficulties, the group attributes some qualitative advances to the intervention of OL; for example, members cite greater confidence in negotiations with funders, or the unprecedented integration of the whole team in the strategic planning process. The overall feeling is of empowerment, thanks to the greater alignment of the group around its institutional project, which its members have experienced more intensely as group building: 'At the end of the second day of the seminar, there is certainly a shared sense of building an ever clearer vision of what we need to do to reach new levels of relationship, and to be more effective in our work and in internal and external communication.' The first tangible advance was when the group, for the first time in years, managed to meet for a whole day each month for three months in succession. It doesn't seem much, but the physical presence of everyone in the same space at the same time is a first condition for the existence of a group, especially a small group like Curumim.

Other advances related to the way Curumim works with the beneficiary groups were also noted. Curumim, which campaigns to make childbirth more humane, seeks to change practices which are deeply engrained among doctors and midwives. After six months the OL intervention triggered reflections about the importance of *experiencing* changes and not just preaching about them. From that point, one idea that came to the group members was to promote deeper work on the values underlying the practice of health professionals. Thus, without this being explicitly planned, the concepts, principles, and instruments proposed during the OL intervention were adapted and used not only within, but also beyond, Curumim. The coordinator of Curumim thinks, for example, that the session on the current moment 'was a huge discovery: we have always used it in activities within and outside Curumim. This has really improved interaction and we can see a greater effectiveness when dealing with operational issues.'

One of the greatest difficulties of the group is still the design and use of operational indicators. After four sessions dealing with the theme of internal communication, nothing emerged that would enable the monitoring of the development of team meetings. There is a veiled reluctance in this domain: nobody openly opposes the value of such monitoring; however, nobody takes any initiatives in this direction. For this reason we find the reaction of the group to the feedback of the self-evaluation at the sixth seminar interesting. For this session we made a simple table of the facts registered by the team members themselves, who at the end of each seminar had filled out a form marking themselves and the wider group against various criteria. Graphs showing the development of each of these dimensions (ability to set objectives and reach them, focus on tasks, contributions made, etc.) and in various situations (seminars, everyday work, preparatory tasks) were discussed.

This feedback session aroused a lot of interest and seemed almost to shock the team. 'I thought it was boring filling in the form, doing it because I had to, but from now on I will pay a lot more attention to it' is the comment which best captures the overall feeling. With the table the group was shown all the potential that creating and accompanying indicators can have, so long as this task is considered a moment of reflection on the team's practice. In other words, the team realised that if monitoring is understood and practised as a learning exercise, it could become a powerful tool to analyse their achievements. However, in order to reach this conclusion the group has to *experience* a positive

'laboratory' experience. From then on, we believe that they can value monitoring in other spheres, internal and external, or even challenge the relevance of monitoring, but this time with solid arguments based on actually doing it. The most important step is to move away from a pattern of defensiveness and omission to a point where they can actually feel the relevance (or lack thereof) of monitoring in practice.

We can conclude, then, that the group has undergone some behavioural advances, but that these do not yet clearly appear in the formal evaluations. As a team member put it: 'we are still learning what not to do, then we can discover what to do differently'. After six months of work, encouraging indicators emerged, such as, for example, 'less dispersion in day-to-day activities and a greater sensitivity in relation to shared decision making'. It remains to be seen what the impact of this learning will be in terms of relationships with partners and beneficiaries, i.e. how behavioural advances translate in terms of how effectively the institution's mission is achieved. Some advances can already be seen by the coordinator:

*Looking at the negative points raised by the diagnosis, we feel that we have improved a lot in our communication with other NGOs and with our interlocutors in the municipalities, and we are dividing our time better between the women's movement and the work in the municipalities. On the other hand we still need to improve in terms of recording and systematising, as well as in monitoring our activities.*

We would add that before being able to note significant changes, Curumim faces one of the greatest challenges of OL ahead: to express intentions through better strategies will call for the development of new skills.

### ***Developing new skills***

An initial impression by any outside observer would suggest that interpersonal relationships in Curumim could be classified as 'good'. But this assessment would be different if we took effectiveness as a criterion, defined as 'more productivity with less psychological cost' (Valença 1997:45) or if we used Argyris's Model 2 as our guide, in which participation means listening and dialogue, taking on one's responsibility and skilled analysis of others' actions. From this perspective, new personal and interpersonal skills should be developed, for example, to deal better with information (ideas and feelings) minimising inferences, ambiguities, and contradictions.

The development of skills, which already forms part of the ten seminars, will be a special focus of the second module. Identifying the technical and relational skills and gaps already existing in the team, and developing new skills (of relating, analytical reasoning, etc), and seeking skills outside the group to carry out certain tasks in partnership – these are some of the challenges for the next phase of work with Curumim.

The second module will also focus on two huge topics: explicit monitoring of external activities that the group considers are critical, and the progressive building of a new management model.

### ***Encouraging the pendulum swing between research and action***

We are optimistic regarding the future of OL in NGOs. On the one hand we believe that there is in Curumim, as in various other third-sector organisations, a real commitment to its stated values and a certain willingness to question its own practices. On the other hand, while private-sector companies are caught up in fierce competition and the public sector is tied up in legislative strictures, the third sector faces fewer such constraints. NGOs' flexibility and their defence of public interests together form a powerful duo, in harmony with the criteria which according to Argyris should guide the interventions of OL: effectiveness and justice – and, of course, *learning*.

Developing mechanisms through which to analyse one's own actions, learning through mistakes, equipping oneself to reduce the distance between stated values and concrete actions, promoting a system of norms and rewards that favour learning, are all favourite themes in OL, which we believe offer principles and tools that match the lofty ambitions of the third sector.

Model 2 of participatory, democratic behaviour remains utopian. As with all utopias, it is a kind of distant star that one never reaches, but which shows the direction forward. For Argyris, conflicts, mistakes, and problems – the raw material of an OL intervention – will never stop happening: once one error is corrected it is inevitable that another will appear. Learning means just not repeating the same mistake all the time. It means, above all, learning to learn, learning to deal in a group, and, with a constantly changing environment, establishing mechanisms for collective feedback and action.

We believe that Curumim is learning little by little, and learning to learn about itself. Our experience is that in the medium term this learning will spread to the activities carried out with the midwives and other groups with whom Curumim works. We hope that this article provokes reflection and critical reaction that can help us correct our



mistakes, improve our practice, and refine our thinking. As Argyris himself suggests, the theory will continue in this way to be tested in the real world, in a continuous movement of the pendulum between research and action, thus generating new knowledge.

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## Notes

- 1 We use the terms 'non-governmental organisation', 'third-sector organisation', and 'non-profit organisation' interchangeably.
- 2 'To intervene is to enter a system of relationships already in process, come clear to people, groups or objects with the aim of helping them' (Argyris 1970: Chapter 1).

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