Development and the Learning Organisation: an introduction

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> 'If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the best of us walk about well-wadded with stupidity'. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Why development and the Learning Organisation?
Why a *Development in Practice Reader* on development and the learning organisation? We were aware that an increasing number of NGOs, particularly some of the large international ones, as well as some bilateral and multilateral actors, were embracing the idea of 'becoming a learning organisation'. Over the past decade, as NGOs have either rushed into the mainstream in their claims of innovative and effective practice, or have tried to transform themselves to fit new realities, organisational learning has emerged as one way to live up to expectations and needs. Certainly, it is difficult to find organisations that are not touting the importance of knowledge generation and organisational learning in one form or another. We were curious to know how practitioners were approaching the issue of learning in organisations and whether their approaches were yielding positive results. We were especially interested because much of the writing and thinking on learning organisations has come out of the private sector, and we wondered how applicable and how useful development practitioners were finding it in their own field.

This *Reader* is based on a special issue of *Development in Practice*, which we were invited to guest edit. As readers will see, our call for papers for this issue generated an interesting mix of responses and cases, ranging from major organisational transformation efforts significantly informed by learning organisation theory, to micro-level case studies of individual and group learning practice in very specific circumstances. The responses were varied as the literature itself, although the primary focus was on NGO experiences. To help orient the reader, it may be helpful to make some distinctions among terms that are often used interchangeably – the learning organisation, organisational learning, and monitoring and evaluation (learning) systems. Most importantly, there is a need to distinguish between the body of thought that focuses on the 'learning organisation', and that dealing with 'organisational learning.'

The Learning Organisation
Mark Easterby-Smith (1997), in a very useful review article, makes a distinction between writers on the learning organisation and those who focus on organisational learning, and among several strains of thought in the latter category, as well. He notes that the learning organisation, most closely associated with the writing of Peter Senge (1990), is 'pragmatic, normative and inspirational'. The literature is pragmatic in that it focuses on how organisations successfully acquire, share and use knowledge to achieve organisational goals. There is a strong emphasis for creating 'knowledge for action', not

knowledge for its own sake (Agyris 1993). Further, it recognises that organisations are a part of complex social systems, systems over which it is unlikely they can exert control. Rather than trying to isolate or protect an organisation from its environment, an organisation ought to be closely attuned to it, embrace the opportunities that changing circumstances can offer, and, as more recent theorists have urged, 'ride the wave' (Duesterberg 2001, Merron 1997). Another aspect of the pragmatic orientation is that learning organisation theorists, unlike many of their academic counterparts, have also developed an array of techniques and tools for doing diagnostics, examining patterns of behaviour in organisations, and engaging in 'transformative thinking' (Wycoff 1995).

This approach is normative in the sense that there is a strong set of underlying values that inform practice within a learning organisation, which include a commitment to:
- valuing different kinds of knowledge and learning styles and creating a 'learning environment' so each organisational member can realise his/her full potential;
- dialogue and exploration of different perspectives and experiences to generate creative thinking;
- team work and breaking down traditional barriers or blinders within organisations, and so release creative potential;
- fostering leadership potential throughout the organisation and reducing distinctions, such as those between management and staff, between strategists and implementers, between support and professional staff, and so on.

There is also a strong element of 'self-improvement' found in the literature, whereby individuals in a learning organisation are not only in an ongoing quest for work-related knowledge, but also for self knowledge. One aspect of this is the need to understand their own 'mental models' – deeply ingrained assumptions about how the world works, what motivates people, cause-and-effect relationships – and to be open to challenges regarding these assumptions.

The writing on learning organisations is also normative in the sense that it encourages organisations to go beyond 'single-loop learning', which often focuses on finding efficiencies and dealing with first order problems (symptoms), to double- and even triple-loop learning. In double-loop learning, organisations consistently test assumptions, identify the roots of problems, and are open to fundamental rethinking of strategy. Organisations practising double-loop learning are open to examining how organisational practice diverges from 'espoused theory' and addressing these inconsistencies (for example, an organisation that espouses gender equality would be willing to examine the extent to which it lives its own values and make the necessary changes). In triple-loop learning, the highest form of organisational self-examination, people are open to questioning the very *raison d'être* of the organisation.

The learning organisation literature is aspirational in the sense that the models are presented as something of 'ideal types', which no real organisation can realise in full. Individuals as well as the organisation are engaged in an ongoing quest for knowledge,

their struggle to 'unlearn' dysfunctional behaviours is continuous, and because change is a constant, they must constantly change.

Organisational Learning
The 'organisational learning' literature is much more extensive and diverse. Entering 'organisational learning' in a web search generated over 92,000 entries. Just to mention of few of the streams in this literature, we have:

- A management science stream that focuses on the processes of knowledge acquisition and information management. This literature covers a range of topics, from effective management information systems (MIS) design, to more challenging issues, such as the relationship between explicit knowledge (such as that captured by MIS) to tacit knowledge (the know-how in people's heads). It is under this broad stream that the thinking related to monitoring and evaluation systems would fall.

- A sociological perspective that focuses on organisations as social systems with structures and a culture that either enhance or, more often, inhibit learning. As social structures, organisations are characterised by internal politics, conflict, and power differentials – aspects of organisational life that are generally downplayed or ignored by leading proponents of organisation theory – but which have a huge impact on the capacity of individuals and organisations to learn and act on that learning. (It is noticeable that even in this stream of the literature, gender issues are very rarely directly identified or addressed.)

- A third stream relates to how learning contributes to increases in productive output, market share, and/or profitability. It sees organisations as embedded in competitive environments and the effectiveness of its learning systems are judged on the basis of the extent to which an organisation keeps its competitive edge. This stream examines such topics as innovation and adoption of new technologies and practices; behaviour of organisations within a given sector and determinants of decisions to expand or diversify; and the efficacy of joint-venturing.

- Other streams in organisational learning literature include psychological and behavioural aspects of individual learning and cross-cultural comparisons of organisational learning (principally in the USA and Japan, and a few European countries), but these have not been much developed in the mainstream literature.

It should be noted that works cited in the Easterby-Smith (1997) review, from which these categories are largely drawn, as well as other literature reviews, deal almost exclusively with private-sector experience and organisations (although there is a growing literature on the health and education sectors, in which some of the actors are non-profit). In addition, the orientation towards learning in organisations is a modern Western one, with a bias towards dynamism and disequilibrium, rapid response and high performance, and embracing change in part because it is impossible to exert control.

As we mentioned earlier, we were curious as to how this literature has informed thinking and practice in the development field. We also wondered if thinking and experience from the latter might make useful contributions to the theoretical literature. The material fell into five thematic areas, giving us a convenient structure for this volume. The first set of articles deals with the broader dynamics organisational learning and change, including issues of power, culture, and gender. The second set looks more specifically at 'learning in partnership' – organisational learning involving more than one institution or sector, such as academic-practitioner collaboration, bilateral programmes, and those involving the private sector. The third is a set of case studies that reveals the diverse 'levels of learning' within organisations, identifying a variety of effective leverage points for innovation and change. A fourth set of articles looks at learning within the humanitarian relief sector, where a context of conflict, high staff turnover and operational pressures can yield challenging organisational cultures. The fifth and final set deals more specifically with 'ways and means': tools, methods, and approaches that can either inhibit or enable effective learning.

While each of the papers in this collection can be read on its own, if viewed as a whole a number of powerful ideas and questions emerge. We shall comment on three aspects of these papers that drew our attention. The first is the paradox of origins, the second relates to the challenge of complexity, and the third is about the nature of incremental approaches to transformative process.

The paradox of origins
Where and why have development organisations taken up the idea of becoming learning organisations? The diverse views on this are worth untangling. David Kelleher et al. see learning organisation theory as a 'borrowed toolbox', while Vijay Padaki suggests that the learning organisation is simply the latest management fad. Grant Powers et al. argue that '[a]lthough many businesses are modelling learning practices, neither the for-profit environment nor corporate structures fit well with the environmental and organisational forms needed for grassroots development'. The absence of shareholders and profit as priorities for NGOs, as noted by Didier Bloch and Nora Borges, means that values that are related to principles and mission tend to dominate. Yet the concept of 'being a learning organisation' and the transformative promise of effective organisational learning clearly resonate deeply in a great range of organisations represented here, as they do in many others besides. Why should this be so?

First of all, there is a long tradition in the development field of recognising untapped human potential in all human beings as well as the transformative power of learning. Even in the earliest years of international development, significant support was given to literacy and adult education, primary and secondary schools, and to some extent higher education. Beyond valuing education simply as a ticket to a better standard of living, there were thinkers who saw education as more than an investment in skills and capacities; non-formal learning in particular was recognised as a process of sparking critical awareness and consciousness, leading to both individual and social change. Paulo Friere's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is among the most brilliant and influential expressions of this tradition, showing that critical analysis of one's reality can

be a powerful tool for empowerment and collective action. In the African context, the idea that development should be a 'mutual learning experience' was powerfully expressed by Julius Nyerere as early as 1968 (Oakley et. al. 1991, cited in Cornwall 2001). Both thinkers were inspired by Christian thought as well as socialism, and their work – rather than viewing learning in a strictly instrumental way - shared a redemptive vision, as well as a commitment to liberation from oppression in the here and now as the right of all people.

Indeed, these early concepts of learning as a process of personal and structural transformation have nurtured much of today's continued interest in participatory action research, action-learning, and participatory monitoring and evaluation. Broadly, these traditions place value on diverse sources of knowledge, respecting different learning styles and trusting that the inclusion of many players, acting together, will be more likely to generate creative and meaningful change. A key principle emerging from this tradition is that learning and change are mutual processes, affecting both the participants and the agents of change – and by extension the structures and organisations involved. Much of the writing on participatory development focuses on the need to foster creative processes – including more flexible and enabling structures, behaviours, and attitudes – that will enhance participation and integrate different realities (Chambers 1997). The approaches developed by practitioners in these participatory traditions anticipate language and methods that are used in the corporate sector today.

A second aspect of learning organisation theory with which development practitioners should feel comfortable is the emphasis on embracing change. Most people join the development field because they want to change the status quo – whether in a relatively restricted way such as improving nutrition, housing, or educational opportunities, or in a more profound way, such as addressing the root causes of poverty, and challenging those economic and political structures that perpetuate it (see, for example, Hope and Timmel 1984). For the development practitioner, change is both desirable and necessary. Consequently, how to generate 'knowledge for action' and be constantly monitoring a dynamic environment in order to identify opportunities and anticipate challenges have strong appeal. Development organisations themselves are also seeking to embrace change, to become more flexible and adaptive in a rapidly changing global context, and to become more strategic in addressing deeper structural inequalities and policy issues (Edwards and Hulme 1996). For some, organisational learning approaches hold the promise of helping to introduce urgently needed shifts in culture, vision, and purpose.

Another aspect with which many development professionals will identify relates to the focus on changing internal structures and practices that inhibit learning and, in turn, fulfilment of an organisation's mission. An enormous area of work in the development field has to do with 'institution building' or organisational capacity building. The learning organisation literature has the merit of going beyond much of the mainstream capacity-building guides put out by organisational development consultants and technical intermediaries, which often have a prescriptive feel and are not characterised by their sensitivity to different economic, social, and cultural contexts. (For notable exceptions see Eade (1997) and Kaplan (1996).) The limitations of the conventional capacity-

building guides are a function, in part, of the influence of neo-liberal thinking on (and funding for) management and governance. This is particularly pronounced as NGOs have come under pressure to live up to their idealised role of 'providing models of good practice for others to follow' (Cornwall 2001), and to do so efficiently. Learning organisation approaches – with their emphasis on flatter organisational structure, nurturing the leadership potential in all staff, closer connection with and greater accountability to clients, better internal communication, the efficacy of teamwork – may be seen by some as a potential antidote to more traditional organisational practices of many NGOs, which can often be hierarchical, narrowly construed, and non-participatory.

In short, a lot of the thinking that has been done by development practitioners in fact anticipates significant aspects of learning organisation theory. That said, we would encourage you to read the articles by Kelleher et al., Powers et al., and Padaki, who suggest that the theory does not go far enough. As a normative theory, it does not argue explicitly for internal democracy and because it does not examine 'deep structures' and power inequities within organisations, is unlikely to have the transformative impact it aspires to (Kelleher). Related to this, because learning organisation theory emerges from the private sector and consequently is not concerned about development, much less development that is firmly grounded in a grassroots approach, the scope of its interest in transformation is in fact quite limited (Powers et al.). Regarding the degree to which it is pragmatic, Padaki argues that it actually distracts from attention to management fundamentals, and may generate more heat than light. Bloch and Borges, on the other hand, find potential in those strands of organisational learning theory that focus on critical reflection, transforming values and personal behaviour (Agyris and Schön 1974).

The challenge of complexity
In reading these papers, one point emerges particularly strongly: learning is hard to do, both for individuals, and particularly for organisations and groups of organisations. When we do learn, we often learn the wrong things. Huge gaps often remain between our learning and our behaviour or practice. It is important to keep in mind the characteristics of the development and humanitarian work that may present particular learning challenges. We might summarise these as the complexity of the development process; the complexity of accountability demands and duties, the complexity of measurement; and self-inflicted complexity. We will comment briefly on each of these.

The complexity of the development process
David Ellerman notes that '[t]he questions that face development agencies about inducing economic and social development are perhaps the most complex and ill-defined questions facing human kind'. As practitioners know, development is non-linear, unpredictable, and what is needed for sustaining development on a non-trivial scale is poorly understood. In this process, there is only a small range of things organisations actually have any control over, and a great many over which they don't. It is not clear which aspects are most important, when and how they interact, and what downstream effects will be if 'success' or anticipated change is achieved in any one area. This presents a significant challenge to any organisation committed to learning, because it is not always clear what it should be learning about or how to make sense out of what it learns. This is a problem that can be

particularly pronounced in humanitarian work, particularly in situations of complex emergencies or very high degrees of vulnerability (see John Twigg and Diana Steiner; Dorothea Hilhorst and Najda Schiemann).

Ellerman argues that this learning challenge is greatly compounded when development organisations, including some with enormous influence and resources, embrace 'dogma', try to identify the 'One Best Way', and become deeply wedded to these beliefs. This creates significant obstacles to learning, as people focus on explaining away failures (bad single-loop learning) rather than question the dogma or dominant paradigm (double- and triple-loop learning). Bloch and Borges suggest that NGOs tend to get stuck in single-loop learning because their planning and evaluation tools focus on the operational level, and fail to engage people in critical reflection on underlying issues of behaviour, values and agency. They agree with Michael Edwards that the complexity and diversity of the development process 'means that to develop capacity for learning and to make the connections is even more important than accumulating information' (Edwards 1997).

The development effort is also made much more complex because it is not a solo enterprise. Nor is business, of course, and there is a considerable literature on joint enterprise. However, the private sector literature focuses on developing characteristics of a learning organisation in order to maintain an edge over competitors. The competitive lens is not the most useful for analysing actors in the development sector, particularly as collaboration has become increasingly important for achieving development and humanitarian goals. Development and humanitarian organisations in different countries, of different sizes, with different missions, mandates, and accountability structures have to collaborate with each other in the hope of having impact. Even within a given organisation, there can often be many hierarchical levels and a variety of sectors or units, as well as remote offices, each with their own cultural contexts, each of which may have very different worldviews. The challenge in the development field is to instil learning capabilities, including the learning challenge of consistently and effectively working with others, in a range of very diverse organisations, which operate at different and/or multiple levels and in profoundly different contexts.

Several papers tackle aspects of the challenge that collaboration poses for both individuals and organisations. Laura Roper examines academic-NGO learning collaborations and argues that different organisational cultures can undermine partnerships that would seem to have enormous potential. To be successful, there needs to be a clear negotiated agreement about both the ends of the collaboration and the means of reaching those ends, with both parties being aware of the nature of their differences. This message is reinforced by Gelaye Debebe in her paper on a collaboration between a Navajo service and capacity-building organisation and the 'anglo' technical intermediary. Marla Solomon and A. Mushtaque R. Chowdhury also examine the challenges and benefits of a learning collaboration between the School of International Training, a US-based academic institution, and BRAC, a Bangladeshi NGO.

Samuel Musyoki asks whether organisational learning principles are relevant or useful in complex bilateral programmes, looking at a joint rural development effort of the Dutch

and Kenyan governments in Keiyo and Marakwet districts. He examines how participation was institutionalised at different stages of the programme, as both a learning and a conflict-generating process. In the politicised context of bilateral programmes, Musyoki finds that the ability to carry forward any learning from one phase to the next is hindered by high staff turnover, national politics, diplomatic considerations, and shifts in the international development agenda. Learning organisation theory tends to assume some degree of consensus or shared vision, both of which can be elusive in development programmes that involve multiple actors, competing interests, and conflicting goals.

Pauline Tiffen, writing about producing and marketing fair-trade chocolate, documents a fairly complex multi-institutional collaboration and highlights how each participant – from a rural Ghanaian producers' cooperative, to two international technical support organisations, to the UK-based Day Chocolate Company – engaged in strong learning practice. Learning occurred on many dimensions. The cocoa producers learned from past experiences and mistakes in trying to establish a strong, responsive farmers' cooperative. Twin, a specialist NGO based in the UK used research and its experience of working with Latin American coffee, sesame, and honey producers, to support the development of a fair-trade marketing strategy for cocoa. Day Chocolate, among other strategies to promote fair trade chocolates, set out to break down the distance between the faceless producer and the faceless consumer, through a number of interesting innovations.

Complexity of accountability
It became common 'wisdom' in the private sector during the 'go-go 90s' that a company's primary responsibility was maximising shareholder value. This implied accountability and responsiveness to customers, and to a more limited extent to employees, to the extent that doing so served to maximise profits and return on investment. Compared to the NGO sector, private sector accountability is quite straightforward, particularly since there is an arguable congruence of interests among its immediate stakeholders. This apparent congruence can, of course, be disrupted if a company develops a monopoly over the market, if influential shareholders are exclusively focused on short-term profit, or (increasingly rarely) if labour is highly organised in a tight labour market. Today, there is growing awareness in the corporate boardrooms of the need not only to satisfy the shareholders, but also to protect the company's reputation (and deflect public criticism), and to minimise practices that are environmentally unsustainable – the so-called 'triple bottom line' (Elkington 1997).

Accountability is not necessarily so straightforward for NGOs, whether local or international. Powers et al. are most explicit in identifying the conflict of interest between two primary stakeholders of an NGO –its donor institutions and the 'clients' of the NGO's services or actions. Because donors control the purse strings, they often exert undue influence on how the NGO views accountability. Consequently, monitoring and evaluation systems, how reports are developed and used, and criteria for success are determined not by those the NGO sets out to serve, but by the donors. This obviously has consequences for how learning processes are structured and whose interests they serve. Esther Mebrahtu illustrates this plays out across a number of organisations, while the case histories of CARE (Colin Beckwith et al.), Action Aid (Patta Scott-Villiers), Heifer

International (Thomas S. Dierolf et al.), and Médicins sans Frontières (Hilhorst and Schmiemann) deal with the challenges faced by individual international NGOs. These experiences highlight the extent to which the 'development project' remains the currency of most agencies, driven by the transfer of resources from donors to recipients. Reporting systems and procedures are geared to control over resource flows, rather than to learning and innovation.

The accountability challenge is still more complex when NGOs belong to confederations (such as Care International, Oxfam International, or Save the Children Fund Federation); have diverse and segmented publics (different types of donors, volunteers, activists, etc.); as well as having, in some cases, relationships with policy makers, the media, and a range of allies. An NGO often needs engagement from these other stakeholders (free labour from volunteers, the placement of stories by colleagues in the media, favourable decisions or policy positions from policy makers, and so on). These stakeholders are also frequently physically closer and may also be more similar to headquarter staff (for instance in terms of class, ethnic background, education) than are partners or beneficiaries in the South. As a result, the former set of stakeholders are quite likely to be better organised and be more able to exercise voice than are the poor communities on whose behalf we work. As international NGOs, in particular, increasingly take on advocacy and campaigning roles, very close relations may develop with media, sympathetic policy makers, and other like-minded agencies, and opportunities in relation to the domestic public can become more pronounced in driving the organisation, albeit for good strategic reasons. Finding the right balance and methods for handling accountability relationships become a major challenge. Neither the literature on learning organisations nor that on organisational learning deals extensively with questions of accountability to multiple stakeholders, although as the scope of NGO work broadens, this is becoming a more pressing issue. (See Lindenberg and Bryant 2001; Moore et al. 2001; Coates and David in this volume.)

The challenge of finding the right metrics and methods
Development organisations are not producing and selling widgets. They are interested in both process and outcome. Outcomes are multi-dimensional and often not easily measurable. How do you measure organisational capacity? How do you measure empowerment? If a coalition does not achieve its articulated policy change goal, were there other achievements that lay the groundwork for a more successful effort in the future? How do you evaluate a process and even define what a good process is? The things you can most easily count are often things that don't tell you very much. There are fundamental questions to consider about who does the measuring, who benefits from monitoring and evaluation procedures, and whose learning and knowledge is valued (Estrella et al. 2000).

The challenge of metrics and methods runs up smack against the accountability issue. Numerous papers note that their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems are designed to conform to donor demands (Esther Mebrahtu; Sarah Earl and Fred Carden). There is also the organisational imperative, particularly of large, sprawling, multi-million dollar agencies, to try to make coherent sense out of diversity of experience (Scott-Villiers).

There is, however, a good deal of creative work being done in both the development and humanitarian arenas. Marshall Wallace describes the inductive process carried out over several years by the Local Capacities for Peace Project (LCPP) to tackle the difficult challenge of humanitarian intervention in the context of complex emergencies. Mebrahtu also highlights the innovation by field staff, outside the formal demands of the system.

Bloch and Borges, in their work with a reproductive health rights NGO in Brazil, describe efforts to engage staff in deeper reflection on their own values and behaviour, and to build skills for more effective listening, dialogue, and relationships. They link this effort to the NGO's M&E, so that qualitative changes in organisational response and performance can be measured over time, and so that staff can reflect on their own behaviour in the process of defining indicators, documenting progress, and learning from the evaluation process, and so break with 'defensive routines'.

The rapid growth of advocacy work is challenging many development organisations to develop effective ways to monitor, measure, and learn from programmes. Barry Coates and Rosalind David explore the complex and changing nature of advocacy, drawing on experiences of Action Aid and the World Development Movement. They suggest that conventional M&E and impact assessment methods are likely to be inappropriate or even counter-productive. A focus on measuring short-term advocacy impacts, for example, may undermine longer-term aims such as strengthening the capacity and voice of partner groups to effect deeper change. Similarly, causality can be hard to pin down. Efforts to assess the impact of one organisation may create perverse incentives that undermine joint action. Coates and David argue that an analysis of power and power structures should guide advocacy strategy and inform the ways in which advocacy is evaluated. Their review adds to a growing body of work on the challenges of doing and assessing advocacy and policy change work (Chapman 2002; VeneKlasen and Miller 2002; Cohen et al. 2001; Roche 1999; Brown and Fox 1998). To contribute to organisational learning, those applying conventional M&E approaches to advocacy work are advised to join the search for alternative tools and methods.

Self-inflicted complexity.
Development and humanitarian organisations are notorious for the imbalance that is almost inevitably found between aspirations, capabilities, and resources (human, financial, and temporal). As Twigg and Steiner note, '[o]ne of the most significant, and emphatic, findings of our research is that overwork and pressures of work are not minor factors in NGO operations and performance, but systemic weaknesses [which] in our view…is a major obstacle to the uptake of new approaches'. Mebrahtu, Scott-Villiers, and Hilhorst and Schiemann also identify time as a major constraint. Another challenge is staff turnover, especially organisations, such as Médicins sans Frontières and Peace Corps, that embrace voluntarism. Various authors highlight the importance of simply creating a 'space for learning.' It is interesting to note that in the case of the LCPP described by Wallace, space had to be created *outside* the individual humanitarian organisations and that often it was the field staff rather than headquarters who were driving the learning effort.

Despite emphasis on learning and knowledge creation, many practitioners feel themselves to be in a vicious cycle. How many of us work in organisations where we are rewarded for reflecting on our work, for reading and listening to what others have to say, for systematising and sharing our experiences so others can critique our work, both within our institutions and in the broader development community? We are working with ever more ambitious NGO agendas, increasing numbers of relevant actors and stakeholders, and more complex change processes. As we learn by doing, real learning becomes even more important. Yet increased complexity increases demands on staff and strains existing infrastructure, meaning there is even *less* time for reflection and learning. When and how can this cycle be transformed into a virtuous cycle of reflective practice?

Transformation through incrementalism? sustaining learning practice
> 'We are all humiliated by the sudden discovery of a fact which has existed very comfortably and perhaps been staring at us in private, while we have been making up our world entirely without it'. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

The gulf between the ideal type of a learning organisation and the organisations many of us work in is often huge, although there certainly are exceptions. John Hailey and Rick James identify a number of successful South Asian NGOs, characterised by good learning practice, and emphasise the importance of top leaders' commitment to learning and critical inquiry for creating a learning culture. Patta Scott-Villiers deals with Action Aid' attempt to undergo a major strategic transformation through its Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS). A driving force behind this transformation is the decision that Action Aid owes the highest level of accountability to its primary stakeholders – the communities it serves. There are interesting examples of how Action Aid is putting its guiding institutional principles into practice, such as sharing detailed financial information with communities. Although less explicit than in the Hailey and James article, the role of top leadership for moving change through the system is clearly significant.

More often than not, one often finds pockets of good learning practice in organisations whose leadership may either simply allow (as Mebrahtu illustrates in some of her case examples) or may nurture with varying degrees of intentionality. Dierolf et al. describe how Heifer International has created an enabling environment for learning experimentation at the country level, as well as establishing mechanisms at headquarters to foster cross-regional and cross-functional learning and planning. In the case of CARE (Beckwith et al.), the decentralised nature of the system, as well as a mandate coming out of a participatory planning process that, in effect, changes the business model of CARE from a service-delivery agency to being part of a movement for development, has allowed the Latin American Regional Unit to innovate in planning, programming, and learning. The question the paper leaves us with is how an organisation can handle the tensions generated by innovative leadership from the middle that is considerably ahead of the rest of the organisation.

There are also examples where organisations try to take an evaluation process and ensure that it creates a genuine learning moment. The joint evaluation carried out by the School

for International Training (SIT) and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) of its Global Partnership's NGO Leadership and Management Programme, is such an example (Solomon and Chowdhury). The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is focusing considerable energy on developing methods that allow for more effective planning and learning, and we include two examples of the tools they are developing (Earl and Carden; den Heyer and Savard).

While the focus of this *Reader* is on whether and how organisations learn, clearly a key aspect for successful organisational learning is to structure learning processes in such a way as to enhance individuals' learning capabilities and sense of agency. The paper by Charles Ogoye-Ndegwa et al. looks at how learning and participation in a nutrition programme was structured in such a way that students, traditionally the passive recipients of information dispensed by teachers in an authoritarian schooling tradition, became researchers, active learners, teachers of their peers and parents, and contributors to community good through identification and cultivation of nutritious traditional foodstuffs.

Wallace illustrates a process where individuals were brought together outside their organisations to share their individual learning regarding delivery of humanitarian aid in complex emergencies. Through an inductive, iterative process a framework for assessing interventions in complex emergencies was developed which was taken and tested, often by interested individuals or small groups of individuals with a given relief agency. The challenge that many participants were left with was how to institutionalise that learning within their respective organisations, particularly when headquarters staff had not been much involved. An interesting follow-up will be to see which organisations mainstream the model and how they did it.

Debebe details the challenges inherent within a bicultural collaboration that includes participants with very different worldviews and value systems from the perspective of one of the actors who is trying to get a long-stalled project moving forward. It demonstrates a point made by several other authors (e.g. Hilhorst and Schmiemann; Mebrahtu), which is that each of us negotiates our place within systems, often seeking simply to cope. It also illustrates that the extent to which individuals can learn is limited by the extent to which they have insights into underlying issues of values, power, and culture. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Very often, organisational evolution or transformation is derailed by the limitations of key individuals to learn deeply and genuinely.

This is highlighted very forcefully in the papers by David Kelleher et al. and Sara Ahmed, both of which deal with gender relations within organisations and efforts to make organisations more gendered in their policies and practices. To many people, it is, in fact, very threatening to examine the 'deep structure' within organisations, including the position of privileges that men hold and which are reinforced by institutional policy and practice. Those holding positions of privilege in a society (or organisation) may be totally oblivious to its many manifestations. While they can gain insights and are willing to address the more obvious and obviously unfair examples, they may be completely

unaware of other aspects, and cannot recognise them even when they are pointed out. Very often, leaders will embark upon organisational change processes with real commitment to transform the organisation, until they realise how genuine transformation will challenge their own authority and prerogatives. Even when top leadership remains committed, it is often middle-management or upper-level professionals who feel threatened by the constant challenge to basic premises and by the more egalitarian values embodied in learning organisation theory. As Kelleher observes, '[a]s change agents we may recognise that gender equality requires a very different set of power relations in an organisation, but we are seldom, if ever, asked by organisations to lead a cultural revolution'.

Where leadership structures are highly politicised, as in the case analysed by Musyoki, learning and change may be very threatening to the status quo. Commitment to a shared vision may not exist, even nominally, and it may be necessary to create alternative, community-based structures that can build trust and hold officials accountable. Musyoki argues for more rigorous attention to the political and power dynamics at play within and among organisations, and observes that this is missing from much of the writing on organisational learning. He also cautions that even alternative structures and processes of participation can then be formalised in ways that fold them back into the existing power structure, where in the end it is 'political dynamics that determine what is to be learned, by whom, how, and for what purpose'. By understanding these political dynamics, we can engage in more critically reflective and open processes where people can develop their own learning agendas and manage the outcomes.

Conclusions
Obviously, a key challenge, and one with which many development workers are familiar, is how to get those transformative breakthroughs that get us closer to our goals. In the context of organisations, learning organisation theory has been effective in articulating a set of values and practices that has galvanised a lot of creative thinking and basically changed the nature of the discourse on organisational development. It seems appropriate, however, for us in the development sector to push both the discourse and practice even further.

As Kelleher et al. note, given the values that underlie our work, we should also be committed to achieving organisations that are '[s]ufficiently democratic that those ideas with merit can be enunciated with power from all levels of the organisation and evolve into practice', and 'possessing teams capable of functioning democratically and effectively'. We should use whatever tools help us achieve the aspirations of mission-driven organisations, some of which may come from the management literature, while many others have roots in other disciplines and in development practice itself. These traditions, identified earlier in the paper, focus on individual reflection and empowerment for collective action, and on transforming oppressive structures and power dynamics.

As Power et al. argue, if we are truly committed to poor communities and the potential of the grassroots to move a development agenda forward, we have to make the investments in time, resources, and experimentation with innovative learning methodologies to ensure

bottom-up learning, mutual accountability, and a people-driven, rather than donor-dominated, development practice. They warn that this can have profound implications for organisations in terms of their size, their mission, and their organisational drivers. To take their argument a step further, and perhaps return to the thinking of Freiere and Nyerere, should we not be finding ways that poor and marginalised not simply *influence* NGO practice, but actually to *define* the development paradigm, drawing on the richness and diversity of philosophical, religious and cultural traditions? At the very least, organisations should be searching for ways to create space for innovative development and learning practice, sometimes referred to as learning laboratories or communities of learning, that has the explicit intention of challenging standard practice and/or dominant paradigms This includes negotiating with official donor agencies (bilateral and multilateral) so that they in turn could, at a minimum, negotiate with their funders (legislatures and governments, respectively) to allow more flexible application and reporting requirements on at least some of their funds.

A third area in which development practitioners can potentially contribute a great deal to debates on organisational effectiveness and change concerns cultural aspects of organisational learning. The business literature is extremely weak in this domain, although Bloch and Borges find promise in the values-based approaches to learning and change that promote reflection on personal behaviour (Senge 1990, Argyris 1974, 1993).In this era of accelerated globalisation, where multi-institutional collaborations, such as that described by Tiffen, are increasingly becoming the norm, understanding the ways individuals and institutions collaborate and learn in their own settings, as well as how they learn to collaborate across great cultural and economic divides, will become essential for achieving the development breakthroughs needed for significant numbers of people to overcome poverty. International NGOs have a special role to play in this effort because they have feet in more than one environment, and are particularly positioned to bring non-Western understandings of development, management, and cultural practices from a variety of settings that could serve to not only reduce dependence on the overwhelming influence of Western, business-sector theorising, but actually create more hybrid forms of knowledge and theory.

Finally, the papers provide practical insights into what needs to be in place for the generation of knowledge for action and offer the beginning of an empirical base upon which to refine both organisational learning and learning organisation practice in the development field. Time is essential (and one of the most scarce commodities for development practitioners) and neutral space is extremely important, as Wallace's paper attests. The skill and the patience to value contributions from people whose knowledge may have been devalued or ignored for years, as both Tiffen and Ogoye-Ndegwa et al. illustrate, is enormously empowering. There are numerous examples of how development organisations – usually operating in more dynamic, more complex, and more ambiguous contexts than most private sector organisations – identify the need for change and operationalise it (Scott-Villiers, Beckwith et al, Dierolf, et al.)

Many of the examples offered in this *Reader* are documenting early stages of institutional processes. These are worth following over the coming years to gather more empirical

evidence about how these processes unfold, how they affect culture and practice within organisations, how both internal and external stakeholders experience these processes, and finally, whether these organisations become more effective actors.

We therefore close by inviting readers to send us more cases, so that the debates, networking, and the sharing of experience that underpin learning can continue beyond the contribution we trust this volume has made.

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