IDS PRACTICE PAPER IN BRIEF

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Learning about How to Communicate 'Learning' from and Within a Multi-sited Organisation

This paper draws on a study conducted on capturing innovation and lessons from across a 'multi-sited' organisation. The lessons in question were about effective social protection programmes, however the paper focuses on the general principles of learning in an international organisation spread across many countries. The study was undertaken in collaboration with UNICEF and Irish Aid. The implementing team developed an action research programme exploring how to capture, share and use findings and lessons, in an organisation like UNICEF. The paper describes the processes and limitations of studies like this in building an institutional learning environment.

Introduction

Responding to poverty and vulnerability is a dynamic and constantly evolving area of work. No-one is more aware of this than the practitioners involved in the day-to-day response on the ground. Development agencies often possess valuable tacit knowledge and expertise of addressing poverty and vulnerability at the field level. However, they often pay insufficient attention to translating this field knowledge into policy and wider practice.

In 2010 Irish Aid, the Centre for Social Protection at IDS and UNICEF formed a partnership to explore how field practitioners knowledge could be identified and documented, making it available throughout the organisation as policy or the principles of progressive practice.

There were a number of challenges to negotiate around this exercise, many of them revealing tensions in the operational contexts of development organisations and trends in research, learning and communication.

The first of these challenges relates to recognising what lessons or practices were transferrable. This is of particular concern given how dynamic local environments can be. This is something we are increasingly aware of when discussing evidence in policy making. Cartwright (2011) has identified that there are three elements to translating field evidence in one place to another. The first is to acertain whether the practice that worked in location A had an impact. When this has been established there is the key challenge – what were the contextual or supporting factors that were drivers and barriers for this particular success and can those context factors be disaggregated into general principles. Even if they can, the policymaker or practitioner seeking to apply the lesson in location B then needs to ask whether sufficiently similar contextual and supporting factors are in place in location B for this practice to work.

Cartwright (2011) puts it as three distinct kinds of causal claims: (a) It works somewhere; (b) It works: it plays a causal role 'widely'; (c) It will work here.

The question is further complicated by politics. The need of UNICEF to work in partnership means that even if the practice is seen to be desirably transferable, political realities sometimes do not allow for what is technically optimal. This means that compromises in planning and implementation might lead to inefficiencies in delivery for the sake of shared ownership, which should facilitate sustainability.

Secondly we recognised that even within one organisation there were a number of audiences for this material. How to communicate the lessons effectively and how to enable application is not a single audience, single medium exercise.

Related to this is the current trend for evidence to become interchangeable with learning and lessons. The dominance of the normative agenda for evidence-based policymaking has affected expectations of what constitutes learning. For those of us involved in learning and capacity development, the challenge then is to design rigorous research processes which will allow for the codification of important tacit knowledge (ways to make internalised lessons objectively verifiable) amongst those working in the field or in disciplines other than academia, meaning that the learning is valued as clearly derived from empirical evidence. The challenge for traditional researchers is conversely, to frame their findings and process as continuing professional development – moving beyond presenting findings for academic audiences to also demonstrating how it affects the work of practitioners directly.

The dimensions of communicating knowledge in the field

In the above we have identified two broad challenges to the study: (a) identifying best practice and codifying tacit knowledge alongside supporting factors, i.e. capturing innovation, and (b) communicating those lessons effectively across a wide range of audiences. With this in mind, the team configured a set of research questions around two dimensions which we see as fundamental to the process of building an institutional learning environment.

a) Capturing innovation

Which of the two scenarios below is best at stimulating sharing?

- Researcher led i.e. an external facilitated process
- Participant led i.e. embedding space for reflection

b) Communicating innovation

What stimulates demand for information and which of the two scenarios below is most effective?

- Using different channels – written; multi-media; online; event specific
- Emphasising different content – results; 'how to'; challenges

Capturing innovation

This work sought to experiment with ways through which capture of information and experience can be stimulated. We tried to understand which of two processes was the most effective way to engage knowledge-holders and facilitate the sharing of their knowledge.

Researcher led information capture

Through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and data analysis our researchers worked with an array of stakeholders to capture as many viewpoints and experiences as possible that could contribute to the identification of lessons of good practice. There were also validation workshops in which the findings were discussed. We tried to find a consensus around the most significant lessons of good practice. This more directed process was effective in investigating specific issues that were identified as being of interest during background discussion and analysis of the projects. It was also important in identifying critical capacity for successes, the contextual and supporting factors, which are key to determining the viability of 'transferring' lessons.

While this methodology, to some extent, restricted the subject area of capture to specific pre-determined areas of enquiry, the benefits of this approach were that rapid and focused examination of key aspects of the programmes were facilitated and time-constrained. The project was of finite time, and this put pressure on the researchers to facilitate capture of innovation as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The problem however is that learning is not something that can be done on someone's behalf. Extractive albeit facilitated documenting of good practice does not necessarily mean that practitioners have internalised or operationalised the findings, so the generation of 'findings' may be relatively quick but unsustainable.

Participant led information capture

This involved providing identified stakeholders with the opportunity to reflect and share their experiences and opinions in an unstructured and less restricted way; in this case the research team provided cameras and training for video journaling, with no other directive than a request that any material be shared four weeks later. This provided an opportunity for stakeholders to reflect and communicate without the censure of research intermediaries.

The short 'video diary clips' are hosted on an internet site from which the research audience and others could access. Participants were advised this would be the case and given the possibility to opt out, so the programme had a small self-selecting sample.

This participant-led information capture encountered a number of obstacles that limited the uptake and impact of this work.

- The material that was recorded often lead down pathways of discussion and reflection that were not pertinent to the central research question.
- The discussions captured in the diaries were not always verified by evidence and demanded some form of further work for verification.
- The spoken spontatenous video diaries often assumed a level of familiarity with programmes and context which was a struggle for some audiences to understand without mediation.
- Even with these volunteers being self selected a number later complained that it was difficult to make the time for making a video recording.

While the first three points might be addressed by clearer guidelines and a framing of what should go into the video diary, the latter point is interesting. UNICEF works, by definition, in a sector where emergencies and urgency is the day-to-day demand. Without managerial and institutional support to specifically put aside reflection time, it has been and likely always will be difficult to get people to take the time out for reflection. This is a perennial problem regarding 'learning' in most sectors, and depends on the commitment by the organisation to learning.

Communicating innovation

Having included two processes to experiment around ways of capturing information, the project also included experimenting with how this information may be communicated. The project team tried to increase understanding of what can both motivate and facilitate people to share the captured information within an organisation. The project started with the premise that what stimulates demand of evidence and good practice from the field is perceptions of reliability, utility and accessibility.

By using different media – written, multi-media, online, event specific, interpersonal communication – we sought to increase an understanding of what media are relevant and effective to the needs of different stakeholders within multi-sited organisations. Also, by understanding the needs of different audiences we have tried to consider how presenting information differently and emphasising different content for different audiences enhances its uptake. This could include emphasising results or technical information on implementation or for a different audience emphasising a reflection on challenges. These different communication emphases explored how we could increase our effectiveness in engaging audiences.

The two emphases, point to the difference between 'showcasing' which might privilege results and 'mainstreaming' which focuses on in-depth implementation.

To respond to this the project team produced written reports and briefs. Crucially however, the team also prepared a research briefing in a video format. The video was produced in modules, each module focusing on a different type of content (as above.) These modules can be viewed separately either online or in special presentations. See: www.ids.ac.uk/research-teams/vulnerability-and-poverty-reduction-team/centre-for-social-protection/csp-videos

Reflecting on the project process

Throughout the implementation of the project, a number of issues surfaced which offer lessons for communication practitioners generally.

Communication for representation vs communication for learning

There is tension between communication for presenting the best of the institute and communication for learning. There are normally significantly more resources dedicated to external communication than communication for internal learning. There may be a number of reasons for this but among them are two key ones.

First, sustainability of development organisations depends on a funding stream from donors and supporters. Donors and supporters respond well to stories of success, and, it is thought, not so well to admittance of failure. At a time when finance is limited, the branding and 'success stories' are often carefully managed by communications department.

Second, internally another force is in play. The processes of policy development are not actually well understood in organisational culture at large. Many assume that policy development has been mainstreamed, and that a combination of management decision-making and informal processes ensures that organisations have the right policies in place. To engage the communications department in a planned process of internal communication for lesson learning, and ultimately for policy planning is unusual. Indeed mobilising communication resources to produce a research brief such as in the case of this project on social protection was seen as an innovation by UNICEF and its comparators, a change from the more typical advocacy outputs.

Learning agendas are not shared

Those initiating the study were confident that there would be widespread enthusiasm for the work. While no-one disputed the value of tacit knowledge in the field and the need to be reflexive about practice, and to capture innovation, there were different ideas about who needed to be involved, why this field knowledge was important, and how we might move forward with the information. For instance staff in-country may place greater importance on sharing learning with partner governments than with colleagues in head office.

Action research on using field knowledge

A series of presentations were made at the UNICEF Head Office in July 2011 about the findings from the first objective of the research on social protection (www.ids.ac.uk/idspublication/lessons-from-social-protection-programme-implementation-in-kenya-zambia-and-mongolia). These presentations provided an opportunity to complete the final stage of our action research on communicating knowledge from the field. Two questionnaires were presented to staff who attended the main debrief. One was completed before the presentation and sought to understand knowledge management behaviour while the second asked for their reflections on content and process. Key findings from this process are reflected below.

Key findings and implications

i) In highly networked or highly distributed organisations such as UNICEF with several offices and thousands of partners around the world, the diversity of learning expectations and processes would suggest that learning works more effectively when the institution establishes an enabling environment, instead of top-down planning to redress specific pockets of deficits.

Most staff felt that infrastructure and incentives are key for effective learning. However, the relatively poor uptake of video journaling amongst the stakeholders of the social protection programmes we explored was significant. The study provided equipment and training and allowed respondents to self-select, so only those with some interest were expected to participate. The fact that even these interested people found it difficult to find the time and motivation to be reflective suggests that infrastructure on its own is not enough to facilitate reflexivity.

Implications:

- Infrastructure and lack of disincentives are necessary but insufficient to generate conditions of effective knowledge sharing and learning within institutions.

All the staff who attended the findings seminars in New York said that they would prefer to use evidence as identified by colleagues and partners in 'the field' where they could. This suggests that the moral imperative for learning is already high in the UNICEF Head Office. The presence of a moral imperative is important. It suggests that creating an economic incentive for learning will be counterproductive. A number of studies on behavioural economics suggest that trying to incentivise behaviour which is already seen as a moral obligation can be undermining. One of the most famous cases is what happens when nurseries start to penalise parents for collecting their children late. Where before the moral imperative restricted the number of parents who turned up late, the imposing of a financial penalty was seen by parents as a mechanism to pay for their lateness. Since they were paying for their lateness they lowered their moral incentive to turn up on time, and more parents turned up late (Levitt and Dubner 2006).

Implications:

- Incentives can be moral, and as such should be part of a core vision of the institution which is easily felt and communicated across networks and distribution.

ii) Organisations such as UNICEF are more complex policy environments than many advocacy models suggests. (For instance, it is often assumed that those who draft, ratify and implement policy are one interchangeable target demanding relevant information.) It was a minority of participants at the seminars in the UNICEF Head Office who said they use evidence or learning to directly create policy pronouncements or to solve a pre-determined problem. Instead the majority of participating staff said they used evidence to increase their understanding of the issues and particularly to share it with colleagues who might appreciate it or who they would like to influence. The use of evidence is, in practice, neither instrumental nor linear. This is consistent with Weiss' seven models of research utilisation (1979). According to this framework most staff in the sample use research for tactical reasons or general enlightenment.

Weiss's seven models of research utilisation

- Knowledge driven: a linear view that research findings may be communicated to create action;
- Problem solving: a policy-driven, linear view that begins with the end users of research and problems they face before tracking back in search of useful findings;
- Interactive: here the set of non-linear, less predictable interactions between researchers and users, with research influence/impact happening through complex social processes of 'sustained interactivity';
- Enlightenment: this model eschews the notion that research influence/impacts are simple and instrumental in effect; instead research is seen to effect change through 'the gradual sedimentation of insight, theories, concepts and perspectives';
- Political: research findings seen as ammunition in adversarial systems of decision making;
- Tactical: research to be a resource to be drawn on whenever there is pressure for action on complex public issues, and may be used not just to bolster decision making but also to stall and deflect pressure for action.
- As part of society's intellectual enterprise: research is a 'dependent variable' alongside journalism, philosophy and technology which shape conventional wisdom. In this view, certainly social science and policy interact to influence each other.

To demonstrate the significance of this framework of diverse research usage, no clear preference for a format to share evidence was identified amongst participating staff. The project used an innovative video format to deliver a policy briefing – making it available on multiple channels and editing it so it could be watched in bite-sized modules. However, while some staff appreciated this because it could be screened at high-level meetings and they could engage with it while multi-tasking at their desktop, others said that a video was inappropriate because it was difficult to cite or reference in crucial documents.

Implications:

The diverse expectations and application of research and learning suggest that if evidence is to be used or internalised in highly networked institutions like UNICEF, one needs to allow for repackaging and repurposing of material. One format will not meet all needs within a single multi-sited organisation.

Organisational steps to support learning from the field

So how then are we to apply these insights to the day-to-day operation of a multi-sited organisation?

Audience disaggregation is crucial as in other communication activities

When it comes to knowledge-sharing or evidence use, often we find fairly simplistic models of usage. These are generally based around the assumption that all policy audiences want evidence to make policy pronouncements.

In reality every policy sphere has audiences with differing needs. In the section above we presented Weiss' model and noted that many of the UNICEF Head Office people were using captured evidence and good practice for tactical reasons or general enlightenment. We need therefore among other factors to be mindful of distinguishing between showcasing (where an idea is introduced to a new audience) and mainstreaming (where the objective is to explore the practicalities of implementation).

Advocacy works for learning too

The three key elements of advocacy are legitimacy, credibility and accountability. These ideas can be applied to a learning strategy. We need to recognise that everyone will not be committed to the same learning strategy. Due to the diversity of roles within a multi-sited organisation, and the diversity of ways people handle policy and practice, we will need to work towards building a broad ownership of a learning agenda which such highly distributed organisations require. Advocating a learning agenda to build that ownership will need credibility, legitimacy and accountability.

Credibility – will the learning be genuine, failures transparent, will it be verified? Legitimacy – will the learning be supported by management, by the Board, is finding reflective space part of a job description? Accountability – when learning doesn't take place, does anyone follow up; will learning be seen as a good use for money?

Regarding building ownership of learning, it is also worth noting that drawing on Communities of Practice as coalitions has proved a fruitful strategy for some programmes.

Learning as part of institutional brand

All organisations seek to be 'successful' and it is important that our organisations are externally associated with success. However, there is an alternative approach where showing donors and supporters that we are a learning organisation is in itself a strength. It is true that admitting failure could risk exposing our organisation's reputation, and this could be critical in an increasingly competitive environment. However, at the same time, genuine learning, which carries with it a necessary openness, transparency and authenticity, is an important step on the pathway to 'success', i.e. to increasing effectiveness and efficiency. Failure combined with learning can be a launch point for improvement.

The external brand then does not come under threat. We can manage our external brand by including and promoting the organisation as a learning organisation. One that is seeking improvement. It is hard to criticise learning as an institutional priority. If one can demonstrate a commitment to learning convincingly, it could serve as a way to reconcile the challenge of a learning agenda with the pressures of maintaining a positive profile.

Support processes where you find them

We need to focus on the notion of making learning an enabling environment – instead of a programme with shifting targets. It is not good practice to set targets for X number of learning products. Similarly setting learning goals in a top-down manner, meant to respond to predetermined deficiencies, can make building a learning environment more difficult. Instead learning needs to be an organisational attitude. This means: making space for reflecting, sharing and processing. This is as fundamental as infrastructure, incentives or the rhetoric of a vision.

Explore 'value for money' framing

Investing in learning and the uptake of evidence has to be a cross-institutional commitment. There are a number of ways to approach this, the first may be normative, where this is seen as part of the organisational values. The second is more instrumental. Learning can be seen as a key for determining the most effective interventions. This 'value for money' framing can be a powerful argument in some political climates.

Conclusion

While its focus was on capturing innovation in social protection programmes within UNICEF, it has been a platform for some more generalised study on how learning processes can work within multi-sited organisations.

In terms of capturing innovation, the researcher-led model can extract information and document tacit knowledge, however it is not a sustainable model, and rarely leads to sustainable learning. On the other hand, the study found that without a suitable institution-wide learning culture, that even self-selected participant-led learning stumbled on a number of factors, mainly participants finding the time to reflect.

In terms of communicating the captured innovation, we found that multiple media was required. We had started with assumptions about the demand from the audience. The project started with the premise that what stimulates demand of evidence and good practice from the field is perceptions of reliability, utility and accessibility. However, in discussion particularly with headquarters staff in New York, it is clear different people had different ideas about utility and accessibility. The study found that some people were interested in the captured innovation for tactical reasons or general enlightenment. Some found the video inappropriate because it could not be cited in the written word, while others found the video informative and useful for high-level meetings.

In reflecting on the process we found that

- infrastructure and lack of disincentives are necessary but insufficient to generate conditions of effective knowledge sharing and learning within institutions
- incentives can be moral, and as such should be part of a core vision of the institution which is easily felt and communicated across networks and distribution

- and similar to the above paragraph, the diverse expectations and application of research and learning suggest that if evidence is to be used or internalised in highly networked institutions like UNICEF, one needs to allow for repackaging and repurposing of material. One format will not meet all needs within a single multi-sited organisation.

We conclude that there needs to be a decision as to whether learning becomes part of the institutional brand. By making learning part of the brand, we believe it can strengthen the external profile of the organisation as well as create the momentum for improvement of practice that leads to genuine improved value for money. To do this we concluded that learning is about creating an enabling environment for reflection and sharing, rather than creating targets or the rhetoric of a vision. Advocating this learning environment will need credibility, legitimacy and accountability.

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What makes development research accessible, relevant or appropriate for people outside the research community? Does development research get its due in policymaking and practice? What would be value for money in research communication?

The Impact and Learning Team at IDS are interested in how communication of research brings about change - in particular, what happens when people and technology mediate between researchers and decision makers. We use the term

'intermediary' to describe people and technology acting in this way. We think they play a critical role in making knowledge accessible, relevant and responsive to demand.

The work we are doing in the Impact and Learning Team (ILT) is exploring and testing this assumption using action research. We support people to think about the difference they want to make as well as how they are going to go about it. We draw insights and approaches from IDS's history of research, and the fields of marketing, strategic planning and evaluation, and capacity development.

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This Practice Paper In Brief was written by Nick Ishmael Perkins with input from Simon Batchelor. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDS or any of the other institutions involved.

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