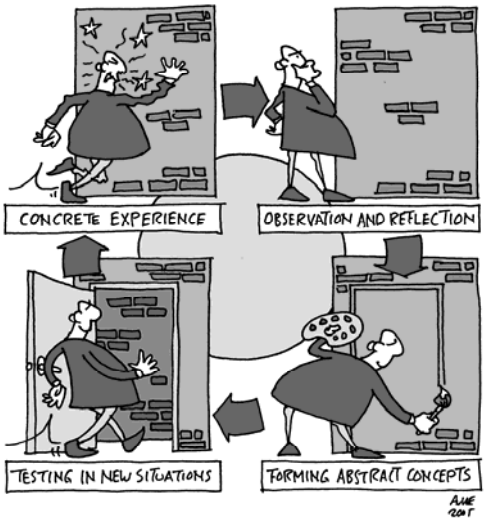
Praxis Paper No. 16

We're Too Much in 'To Do' Mode:

Action Research into Supporting International NGOs to Learn



Cartoon: Auke Herrema

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Executive Summary

International development organisations are continually urged to do things better by learning more from their experiences. For this, organisational learning is crucial. But developing organisational learning capacity does not just happen: it requires a conscious effort, which at its core involves jointly making sense of experiences. This Praxis Paper takes the stand that self-knowledge — understanding how you learn — is an essential first step in improving your own learning processes. At the same time, the way people commonly understand 'learning' inhibits them from reflecting on their experiences and thereby learning from them. Therefore supporting people and organisations to reflect on their own learning processes and capacity is central to assisting people and organisations to learn. Action research, in which the researcher and respondents in an organisation jointly make sense of their organisational learning, can then be seen as a valuable way of promoting the learning capacity of the organisation.

With this in mind, this paper explores the organisational learning processes of development NGOs in the Netherlands. The organisations are all member organisations of PSO, an association of 45 Dutch NGOs all striving to build the capacity of development organisations in developing countries. The paper investigates how these organisations think and talk about learning; how they learn in practice; and how action research can help support organisational learning.

Related to the discourse on organisational learning, this paper concludes that most organisations in this study did not appear to have a clear concept of what learning is, or an explicit organisational learning strategy. However, they did have many implicit ideas about what learning is, and how their organisational learning can be supported. For example, for some international development organisations, supporting learning means giving training: 'giving' knowledge. Knowledge —– interpreted as information

— will ‘automatically’ ensure that people improve their work and become more effective.

The way international development organisations think and talk about learning influences the way they shape their organisational learning. Overall, promoting organisational learning is something that remains a vague overall goal, without ‘hands and feet’. Most organisations categorise themselves as having an activist learning style. Joint reflection on experiences is not common practice. The case studies showed that reflection is mostly informal and project-related.

Using action research as a way to support organisational learning proved to be worthwhile. For the action researcher, respondents are seen as co-researchers with whom they can jointly explore what organisational learning means to them and obtain insights into how they learn. This is essential for research into organisational learning, as respondents’ ideas on how they learn are not yet explicit. For almost all respondents, talking about learning in this way was a new experience, and helped them to look at their organisation with new eyes, stimulating self-reflection. Making organisational learning concrete by looking at learning experiences in practice made the subject of organisational learning come alive for respondents, and triggered ideas and enthusiasm on how to learn more.

The paper ends with some practical implications for those involved in organisational learning processes in international development organisations: learners, managers, consultants and researchers.

Contents

Acknowledgements

This research project is seemingly about organisational learning processes. Whilst this is true, I have personally learned as much from the process of conducting the research as from the findings of it, and that good research is more than asking a few questions here and there: it can facilitate change. Furthermore, it made me understand more about my own learning process. It made me realise that experimenting with new behaviour is part of life, and is a good thing even (or especially) when it has unexpected results. 'No stress from the learning process' has therefore become my personal motto.

In carrying out this research project, several people were incredibly supportive, and I would like to thank them here. Saskia Tjepkema from Kessels and Smit, for 'thinking with me' at all times, for the articles and 'food for thought' you sent, and for being the personification of the principle 'practise what you preach': always exploring and learning with others. In the final stage, your assistance in articulating the conclusions was extremely valuable for me! Russell Kerkhoven from the PSO Knowledge and Learning Centre, for sharing his knowledge about learning processes and action research, for being enthusiastic about the research and thereby motivating me to go on, for the countless times you gave feedback on this paper, and for always believing that I would pull it off, even when I myself doubted it. Bram Langen, for being such a great sparring partner and for helping me to laugh about the hurdles in finishing this research. The whole team of the PSO Knowledge Centre for providing me with the space and support to continue my research even when other work was piling up. Rebecca Wrigley from INTRAC for her valuable comments to restructure this paper. Susie Prince, also from INTRAC, for waiting patiently for a long time to find this paper in her inbox.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank all of the co-researchers on this research project: people from PSO member organisations who enthusiastically explored with me what learning meant to them.

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1 Introduction

Notwithstanding over 50 years' experience in development co-operation, the urgency for development NGOs to improve their effectiveness, efficiency and impact is enormous. A wealth of experience has been built up over the years. Some of the innovative approaches of yesterday are now common practice — and some of yesterday's mistakes and dilemmas have hardly changed. Do we learn from our own and others' experiences in order to improve our effectiveness, efficiency and impact? And, if the answer is yes, do we recognise what we have learned, and how?

PSO,[1] *capacity building in developing countries* is an association of 45 development NGOs in the Netherlands. Development NGOs in the Netherlands, as across the world, are continually urged to do things better by learning from their experiences. Many of PSO's members have therefore concluded that they need to learn more from their own experiences and build their capacity for organisational learning. This need is driven by organisations' own internal motivation, but also by donor funding requirements. But what does 'learning from experience' or being a 'learning organisation' mean in practice? Approaches to organisational learning in NGOs are derived primarily from the private sector, but do the same principles, strategies and processes apply to the international development sector?

Through its Knowledge Centre, PSO facilitates knowledge sharing and joint learning by its members, in order to improve the quality of their capacity-building support to NGOs in developing countries. Through this work, staff of the Knowledge Centre realised that to be able to help PSO member organisations to learn, they first needed to know *how* they learn. What is their organisational learning style? What enabling and complicating factors for learning are they dealing with? And who plays a role in their organisational learning processes? On the basis of these reflections, the research process described here was initially conceived to explore the following question:

- *Question 1: How do international development NGOs learn in practice?*

More questions arose during the research — it became clear from a literature review on organisational learning and from initial interviews that how people think and talk about learning (the discourse they use) strongly influences the way they are able to shape organisational learning in practice. Therefore a further question was added:

- *Question 2: How do international development organisations think and talk about learning — what is their discourse?*

[1] PSO members are a diverse group of organisations, differing in thematic focus (humanitarian aid, gender, human rights, alternative economies, environment, health, children), size, structure and budget. What unites these NGOs is that they all aim to contribute to the structural alleviation of poverty throughout the world by strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations in developing countries. For more information on PSO see www.pso.nl.

In designing the research process, it also became clear that people generally find it very difficult to describe and reflect on their own or their organisation's learning processes. This raised a dilemma for the research: how can we understand learning processes if those involved do not yet have an explicit understanding, or way of articulating, their own learning? To address this, an action research methodology was adopted in which people were supported to reflect on their learning processes. The methodology was used both as a means to an end, to find out how organisations learn and how they think and talk about learning, and also as a learning process in itself. This led to the third question explored through the research process:

- *Question 3: How can action research help to support organisational learning by promoting joint reflection on organisational learning processes?*

This paper provides a reflection on both the process and outcomes of this research. Section 1, while not a comprehensive review of literature, aims to shed light on the concepts and perspectives of organisational learning that have been most influential on this research. It explores schools of thought on learning and the influential models of how we learn. It goes on to discuss the link between how people are able to think and talk about learning, and how they learn in practice. Finally, it suggests what this might mean in practice for those who are supporting organisational learning processes.

Section 2 describes the key characteristics of the action research methodology adopted, and offers a critique of how the methodology worked in practice. The research process had two phases: an interview phase with 14 organisations, and a case-study phase with three organisations. In both phases the three questions above were explored. During the interviews the focus was mainly on people's discourse on learning, whereas the case studies also gave some insight into organisational learning practice.

The main outcomes of the research are presented in Section 3, which describes the findings of the interview and case-study phases, and Section 4, which provides overall conclusions based on the insights gained into organisational learning. This section also reflects on the added value of using an action research process as a way of catalysing people and organisations to learn. In Section 5, the implications of the research for strengthening organisational learning capacity are explored.

2 Perspectives on Organisational Learning

'Do we put our energy into our own projects or do we look at experiences of others? We have so little time! Now, the last has lower priority because we have to show results ourselves. Although it would be more efficient.'
STROhalm (Social Trade Organisation) staff, 2005

As this quote suggests, there are many dilemmas and questions associated with organisational learning. We know that to improve our work, we need to learn more. But somehow there always seem to be other priorities. How do we move from talking about organisational learning to actually doing it? This basic question was posed to the international development NGOs that took part in this study. But for many NGOs the concept of learning remains vague and the goal of strengthening learning capacity lacks clears vision and strategy.

While not a comprehensive review of the literature, this chapter aims to shed light on the concepts of organisational learning that have been most influential on this research. Various schools of thought are outlined relating to learning, the individual learning cycle and the organisational learning cycle. The ways people talk and think about learning are outlined, and it is argued that misconceptions about learning influence the ways that people are able to strengthen their own learning. Finally, some basic principles for supporting others to learn are identified.

Guiding this argument is a comment of Pearn *et al.* (1995, in Britton 1998) on the difference between 'a learning organisation' and 'organisational learning'. He warns against focusing on the learning organisation, as it is not a 'steady state which one reaches and remains at unless there is a "fall from grace" '. Instead, he argues, we should focus on the process of organisational learning, rather than the state of being a learning organisation (in Britton 1998). This being noted, let us take a closer look at the process of organisational learning.

2.1 Schools of Thought on Learning

If you ask people 'what is learning?', the answer you receive will probably depend on who you ask. Within the extensive literature on learning, at least three different schools of thought have influenced how we think about learning: behaviourism, cognitivism and social-constructivism (Ertmer and Newby 1993).

- ***Behaviourism*** understands that behaviour is central to learning. The way human beings or animals acquire new behaviour is basically the same: they learn by associating responses and stimuli. Learning happens when a 'good' response is followed by a pleasant stimulus from the environment, such as rats learning to press a button to be rewarded with food.

- ***Cognitivism*** says that the mind is central to learning. Learning is a mental activity in which the mind functions like a computer: it processes information in a logical way. It is about acquiring knowledge, which is the same for everyone. Knowledge is like a gift that can be encoded and structured in and by the mind of the learner.
- ***Social-constructivism*** places personal interpretation of information at the centre of learning. People learn by giving meaning to their experiences and relationships. Learning is an active process, during which knowledge is constructed rather than acquired. Although all three schools of thought can still be seen in the current literature on learning, social-constructivism is the youngest and currently the most influential school. It is also the paradigm that has influenced this research and the following explanation of learning.

But how do these schools of thought influence how we learn as individuals and as organisations?

2.2 How Do We Learn?

Learning is not something you do only in school or during training. As a child, you learn to walk and talk. You learn to connect with other people. As a carpenter, you learn basic skills during your education, but improve on them daily, for example while making furniture, long after you have received your diploma. As a professional working for a development NGO, you learn how to translate abstract theories about development to skills that enable you to assess development project proposals. In other words, learning is inherently linked to changes in behaviour — doing things better than before. It is more than collecting knowledge. In the words of Wierdsma and Swieringa (2002): 'when someone's head is filled with knowledge, but his behaviour does not change, he has not learned anything in the eyes of his colleagues'.

Learning is something you can do alone (individual learning), or with others (for example, organisational learning or team learning). A number of influential models have helped us to understand learning processes at both these levels.

2.2.1 Individual Learning

A useful model for understanding how individuals improve their practice by learning from experience is Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (Figure 1). In this influential model, learning is depicted as a cycle. First, you do things. Then you observe what you have been doing and reflect on it. Next, you analyse these observations, linking them to theories or concepts while trying to understand them. Lastly, you decide what you will be doing differently and how (or set up an experiment), after which the cycle is repeated again. For learning (changed

behaviour) to occur, people have to go through all phases of the learning cycle. Where you start in the learning cycle is different for everyone and for every experience. Furthermore, most people have a preference for one of the phases in the learning cycle. Some prefer doing (activist learning style), some prefer reflecting (reflective learning style), some conceptualising or thinking (theoretical learning style), and some prefer to decide by trying out new ways of working (pragmatic or experimental learning style) (Kolb 1984).

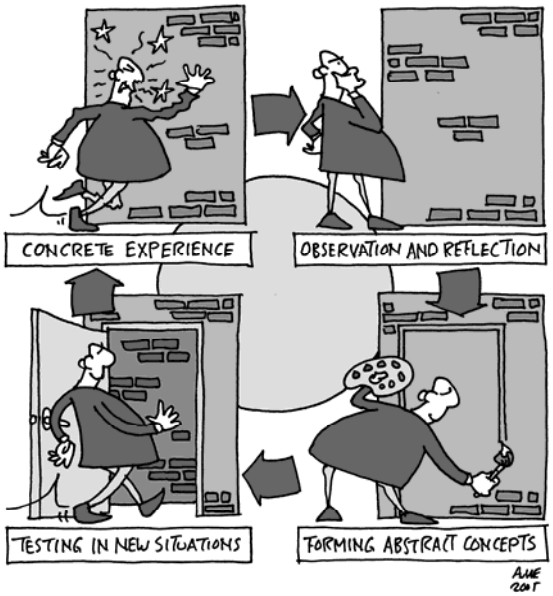

Figure 1: Kolb Individual Learning Cycle
Cartoon: Auke Herrema

2.2.2 Organisational Learning

As with individual learning, organisational learning comes down to changing the organisation's behaviour. Organisational learning is more than every staff member in an organisation going through his or her own individual learning cycle. Even when everyone in the organisation learns, this does not automatically lead to the organisation improving its behaviour. For this, changed behaviour of one staff member needs to influence the behaviour of other staff members. Wierdsma and Swieringa (2002) quote the example of a soccer team: even if the best 11 players from the Netherlands are playing in one team, this does not automatically lead to the team always beating teams with lesser players. It is about learning to do things differently together. Individual learning is a precondition for organisational learning — if nobody can play soccer, the team will never win, no matter how well they play together.

The example of the soccer team shows that organisational learning does not just happen. It is a long-term process, which at its core involves jointly drawing the meaning from experiences. Dixon (undated) has translated this perspective into an organisational learning cycle. She describes organisational learning as a cyclical process of knowledge demand and supply. The supply side involves making sense of experience, translation and spread, while the demand side involves scanning, obtaining assistance from one's peers and adaptation. This is illustrated in Figure 2 and described below.

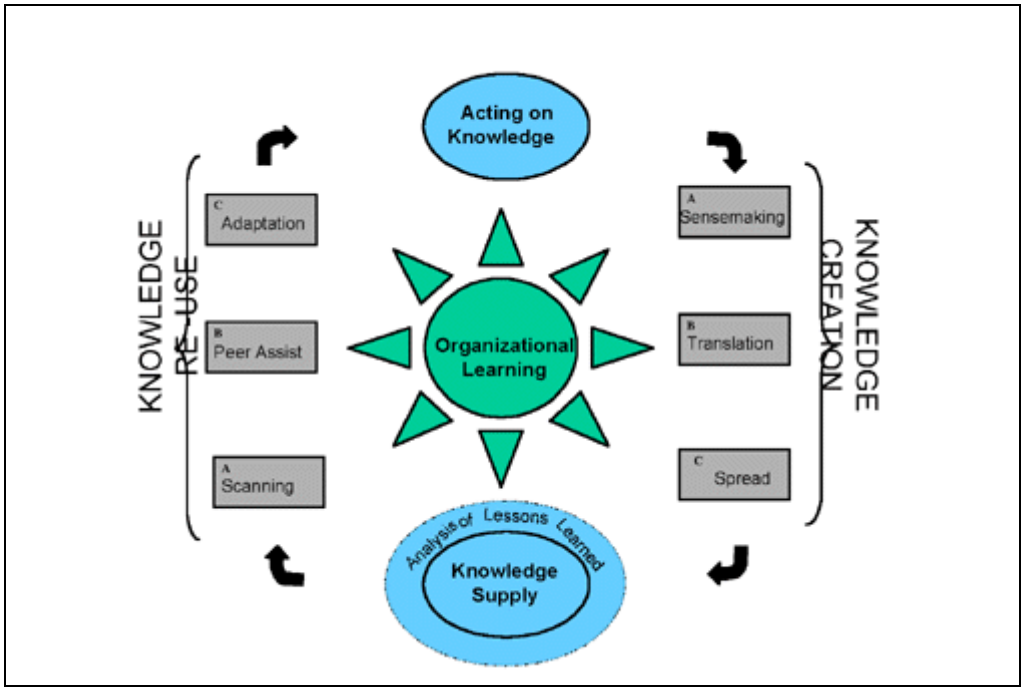

Figure 2: Dixon's organisational learning cycle <www.kwork.org/Stars/dixon.html>

Supply Side:

- **'Sense-making'** describes the process by which information becomes knowledge that guides actions. Organisational learning requires various team members in an organisation to go through this process of making sense of experience and creating shared meaning together. The premise is that each individual has a (different) perspective on the joint experience. Through exchange of these multiple perspectives, a deeper understanding is developed.
- **Translation** — once a team has developed this understanding, they will need to think about which part of their common knowledge will be of most value to others. This requires a team to listen carefully to others in the organisation, or to peers outside, in order to understand what others need to know of their project and lessons learned, so that they can use them in their work. Explaining what the team has learned and engaging in dialogue with others will also further improve learning by the original team.
- **Spread** is the means by which, and form in which, the knowledge is shared so that others are able to re-use it. Often people first think of writing down their lessons learned, but there is a wide range of possibilities, including presentations at conferences, video, exchange meetings and information databases. What works best is to hear stories in the first person from those who have lived the experience. Dixon (undated) stresses that 'spread is the movement of knowledge from person to person and that happens primarily through relationships'. In other words, spread requires trust.

Demand Side:

- **Scanning —** the demand side of organisational learning starts with a question: who has had an experience that we could use in our work? The premise here is that 'knowledge won't be re-used unless a team has a need, something they are struggling with'. This, Dixon writes, is a fundamental obstacle for learning in many organisations: they are not 'asking' or actively seeking something of value.
- **'Peer assist'** involves a process of using, or interpreting and adapting, what others have learned to your own context. A fundamental question in this phase is who makes the translation: the knowledge-holders or the knowledge re-users?
- **Adaptation** involves putting new ways of working into practice, taking into account what others have learned. The experiences this generates will start a new cycles of organisational learning.

The models discussed above can be valuable for understanding organisational learning. But many practitioners involved in organisational learning base their knowledge on experience, rather than the literature. How does this influence the discourse they use — the way they talk and think about learning? This is explored in the following section.

2.3 Talking and Thinking about Learning

Why is it important to know how people think and talk about learning? Perhaps because our knowledge about learning, and about how we learn, tends to be tacit rather than explicit (Polanyi 1966). Tacit knowledge is highly personalised and hard to formalise, may be unconscious, and/or is difficult to express verbally. It is therefore knowledge that is difficult to communicate and share with others. Explicit knowledge can be expressed more easily in words and numbers, and shared between people using written or verbal means. This complicates research into organisational learning, as people find it difficult to communicate with others about how they learn.

Even where people's knowledge about learning can be articulated or made explicit, research has shown that several common misconceptions are expressed about learning (Simons 1999). These misconceptions are strongly related to the behaviourist and cognitive schools of thinking about learning, and include (Simons 1999):

- learning is something that is natural
- there is only one way of learning
- learning is an individual process
- learning means studying
- learning is something you do in an institution
- to be able to learn, you need to be smart
- you cannot organise experiential learning
- failing to learn is due to lack of competence.

An inability to explicitly discuss learning, combined with misinterpretations about what learning is, can make it difficult to recognise, analyse and therefore to change processes of organisational learning. For example, only when you can discuss existing patterns of learning within an organisation can you propose ways to improve them. And only when you believe in the value of experiential learning will you create the conditions within an organisation that enable reflection on practice. However, tacit knowledge can be shared and learned through personal observation or shared experience, which is why working alongside (shadowing) an experienced colleague or going on field visits can be such powerful ways of learning (Britton 2005). This affects the way that learning is most effectively supported within organisations.

There is a negotiation process between teachers and learners about how learning should be supported. If learners feel that learning is studying books or hearing the stories of experts, they will not appreciate teachers who want to help learners reflect on their own experience. In the end, the learning process that occurs between teacher and learner is the result of an (implicit) negotiation process (Simons 1999).

2.4 Supporting Learning Processes

It is argued in this paper that there is a strong link between the way people are able to think and talk about learning, and the way they learn in practice. This suggests that supporting people and organisations explicitly to recognise, reflect on and have conversations about their own learning is a central element of improving the effectiveness of organisational learning processes. It can show how learning capacity has been improved in the past, and offers insights into how to improve learning capacity consciously, and thereby more effectively, in the future. Learning how to learn is a precondition for learning on any specific subject. So how do we help others to learn? It appears that the following principles form the basis of any attempt to supporting others to learn (Dixon 2001; Wierdsma and Swieringa 2002):

- nobody can learn something for anyone else, but you can help others to learn
- self-knowledge is essential in learning to learn — that is, knowing how you learn
- start with the seekers of knowledge, not the providers
- the primary way people in organisations gain knowledge is by talking with peers — this requires trust
- if conversations are central to knowledge-sharing, helping to improve conversations is a crucial element in supporting learning.

Based on these principles, Wierdsma and Swieringa (2002) distinguish four types of ‘facilitators of learning’, each type focusing on different phases of the learning cycle.

- **Coaches** help reflection, e.g. to make unconscious (tacit) knowledge about learning more explicit.
- **Teachers** support conceptualisation, offering new conceptual frameworks and theories. For example, many people have behaviourist or cognitivist views on learning; offering alternative, social-constructivist models of learning can help people see their own learning processes from a different perspective.
- **Advisors** support experimenting or planning, e.g. they support decision-making and developing action plans, and generally help get a grip on the new task ahead.
- **Trainers** assist in doing: they offer alternative behavioural patterns and train this new behaviour, e.g. through putting new learning strategies into practice.

Looking at Dixon's organisational learning cycle, a fifth type of helper can be discerned:

- **Brokers** know who are the seekers and providers of different types of knowledge. The phases of spreading what was learned, and scanning for experiences of others that can help your organisation's learning process, cannot be assisted by trainers, coaches, teachers or advisors.

Although various types of helper are identified with their specific approaches, in practice someone who help others to learn (either from inside or outside the organisation) may assume one or all of these roles. The intention is not to choose one role, but rather to understand the spectrum of interventions involved in supporting people to learn — as external advisor, manager or team member alike.

3 Using Action Research to Understand and Support Learning

In the previous section it was argued that gaining a more explicit understanding about your own and your organisation's learning processes is an essential step in improving upon them. It was also discussed that the tacit nature of most people's understanding of learning processes complicates research into organisational learning, as it is difficult for people to communicate how they learn. However, the process of researching learning can be seen as a way of enabling people to gain a more explicit understanding of their own learning processes. The premise of the methodology used in this study is that research into organisational learning is more effective when it is carried out together with the people in the organisation concerned, as part of a process of action and reflection. This is rooted in the tradition of action research.

The principles of action research and the methodology used for this study are described in this section, along with a critique of how the methodology worked in practice. Lastly, the role of the action researcher as a helper in learning is explored in more detail — what values and skills are important?

3.1 What is Action Research?

As the term indicates, action research pursues two goals at the same time: action (or change) and research (or understanding) (Dick 1999). In essence, during an action research process the researcher (either from within or outside an organisation) works with a group of people to identify a problem that affects them, and undertakes joint research with them to discover the causes. Crucially, the group then sets about finding a solution to the problem, acts on this, then analyses any impact that this action might have had. It is the focus on using findings in order to take corrective action that sets action research apart from other research methods.

Action researchers put an emphasis on equal partnership between researcher and participants, or more accurately a research facilitator and co-researchers. The facilitator attempts to gain an understanding of the specific social context and types of interaction, so as to be able to work on an equal footing with co-researchers and facilitate an investigative process that will improve their situation.

What is most important is the way in which co-researchers gradually increase their understanding of their social context or of the workplace, and the way it affects them or their work. It would be inappropriate for a researcher to enter an organisation already clear about what the principal problems were and how they should be addressed. Generally speaking, the researcher is invited by the group into the organisation to help them sort through the issues they believe to be hindering their

work or livelihoods. It is only through a collaborative consultation and reflection process that key research questions begin to emerge and feasible interventions, based on the competences of participants, are identified.

3.2 A Methodology for Action Research into Organisational Learning

The research project consisted of two phases: an interview phase and a case-study phase. In the interview phase, organisational learning was discussed in semi-structured interviews with representatives of 14 Dutch development NGOs who are members of PSO.[2] The case-study phase was used with three of those organisations[3] because it was felt that, by writing down stories of learning rather than just lessons learned, the subject of organisational learning becomes more vivid. This is especially important for a subject such as organisational learning: for many people it remains a vague concept, and difficult to imagine what it looks like in practice. Another reason for including case studies is the researcher's personal conviction that lessons learned are most valuable when placed in the context in which they arose.

In the following section, all the methods used in this research project are examined in more detail: individual interviews; analysis of documents, provided by member organisations, that they considered showed their learning processes; observation during events that member organisations considered beneficial for learning; and several ways of carrying out focus group interviews. It was not a matter of choosing the 'right' method: data derived from each of the methods validate or complement the data derived by other methods.

3.2.1 Individual Interviews

How they were set up...

Semi-structured interviews[4] give insight into how people talk and think about learning. They can also give insight into learning practice. However, for this to occur,

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[2] The organisations selected for this research were the majority of members that entered the Association from 2001–04: NOC*NSF, Pax Christi, Green Development Foundation (GDF), Terre des Hommes, International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), STROhalm, Humanistisch Overleg Mensenrechten (HOM), Mama Cash, Stichting Kinderpostzegels Nederland (SKN), Fair Trade Association (FTA), Wemos, Milieukontakt Oost Europa (MKOE), Nederlands Agrarisch Jongeren Kontakt (NAJK) and Warchild. Those interviewed were contact persons for PSO within their organisation. In some cases they are directors or management team members; in others they are programme staff. They vary from small to medium-sized in terms of both staff and funding, and most have a single thematic focus (health, environment, women, alternative economies, etc.). What they have in common is that they all strive to build the capacities of their partner organisations in developing countries.

[3] Three principles guided the selection of organisations for the case studies: (1) they had to be motivated to participate and interested to know more about learning and invest time in the case-study process; (2) they had to have different learning styles in order to see differences and similarities in their learning discourse and practice; (3) they had to include not only a professional development organisation, but also an organisation for which development co-operation is not core business (as PSO expects that in the coming years, more of these non-traditional actors in development co-operation will be entering the association). The organisations thus selected were Milieukontakt (for its activist learning style), STROhalm (for its more conceptual and experimental learning style), and NOC*NSF (as an association of sport federations).

[4] See Appendix 1 for a detailed interview guide.

respondents need to have a framework of learning in their heads, which they can use when looking at their own learning practice. Interviews, therefore, can be seen not only as a way to understand how people think about learning, but also as a way to influence respondents' mental models about learning. Interviews about organisational learning can further be seen as a joint exploration of the researcher and his respondents in the process. It is a process of interaction, in which both have something to give and take. Researchers offer their models and concepts of learning and capacity to facilitate joint reflection. Respondents act as co-researchers, who offer their experiential knowledge on how learning occurred in their own organisation. In this research, the interviews had three main characteristics.

- **Semi-structured —** questions focused on learning styles, the enabling and complicating factors for learning, who plays a role in learning, and the organisation's learning questions. However, they were not limited to these questions: when the respondent or co-researcher 'discovered' something about his organisation's learning processes, this discovery was discussed in more detail.
- **Concrete learning experiences** were central to the interviews. This was done because most people find it difficult to answer questions directly about how they have learned, while implicit learning processes do become visible and conscious through storytelling (Verdonschot 2005). Respondents were asked to describe the process of several learning experiences, on the basis of which topics such as enabling and complicating factors for learning were discussed.
- **Introducing a language of learning —** it was thought that offering words to respondents to use in describing their organisational learning processes would help them build up their own conceptual framework for learning, facilitating their self-assessment of the organisation's learning practice. For example, the terms 'learning experiences' and 'learning questions' were somewhat vague for people. By asking them to name developments and challenges in their organisation, and rephrasing these into learning experiences and learning questions, I introduced a new way of talking about learning. The Kolb learning cycle was introduced to rephrase the learning experience they described, in order to see whether a different 'lens' or concept would encourage respondents to look at the learning experience in a different way.

...and how they worked in practice

The interview methodology used was valuable in creating enthusiasm for learning. Using Kolb's learning cycle to stimulate reflection on learning worked quite well: it helped respondents to find the language to describe their organisation's learning style, and gave them new insights. However, the findings remain somewhat superficial: more time for the interview, or other interview tools involving more people in the organisation, would be needed to deepen the findings. Similarly, formulating learning questions turned out to be new and quite difficult for some member organisations. Gathering learning questions from member organisations thus requires time,

especially for those with a tendency towards using an activist learning style. Furthermore, their learning questions are highly personal. A constraint in the interview methodology was that it was unclear whether the learning questions mentioned were shared by others in the organisation.

3.2.2 Document Analysis

How it was set up...

Documents reflect the organisation's thinking and talking about learning on paper. This discourse can be either explicit (e.g. in a policy paper on how organisational learning will be promoted in the coming years), or implicit (e.g. through the metaphors on learning in a report of a workshop or exchange meeting). Maybe even more important than the document analysis itself, is the conversation between the researcher and respondents about which documents could give some insight into their organisational learning processes. Their selection gives indications for how they think about learning.

...and how it worked in practice

The document analysis gave a brief glance into the organisation, which helped my preparation for the group interview. It also served as a validation of data gathered through interviews and observation. For the case-study organisations, no documents with an explicit learning strategy were available, indicating a lack of explicit strategies. However, through reading and analysing the documents that the organisations themselves thought demonstrated their learning, a first impression of organisational learning culture could be distinguished.

3.2.3 Observation

How it was set up...

Respondents can talk about their learning practice, but a researcher can also observe learning practice. Erlandson *et al.* (1993) make a strong plea for placing more emphasis on observation as a research tool: 'Much is to be gained by looking, listening, feeling, and smelling rather than by merely talking'. However, the fact that organisational learning involves a variety of partially invisible processes (communication, reflection, experimentation) makes observation complicated. The trick is to see observation as the start of a research process: it gives clues for interviews. Lincoln and Guba (in Erlandson *et al.* 1993) argue that at the beginning of a research process, observations should be relatively unstructured. This permits the researcher 'to expand his or her tacit knowledge and to develop some sense of what is seminal or salient'. The observations give rise to many questions that give further focus to the research. The researcher in this process can choose between being an observer from the outside, participating in the event, or switching between roles.

...and how it worked in practice

Observation provided a wealth of information on the culture, manner and content of exchange and reflection and learning questions. For example, observing the so-called 'monthly progress meeting' of one organisation was informative because:

- staff members explained the goal and working methods of meetings within the organisation, as well as developments in this over time
- the meeting gave an insight into how joint reflection takes place, e.g. how team members interact, which issues they reflect on and which they do not
- it was an excellent opportunity to get to know the organisation much better: its culture, the people, organisational dilemmas, etc.
- it provided an entry point for further questions that I would not have thought of, and so gave rise to conversations and information that would otherwise have been missed
- it was good to get to know people in the organisation a little before facilitating a group session with them.

Although observation is a valuable method for research on organisational learning, it turned out to be crucial to triangulate it with other methods, in order to validate findings from the observation with the respondents, for example by following up with focus group interviews. However, this was not always possible.

3.2.4 Focus Group Interviews

How they were set up...

The focus group interviews were designed based on two principles: that the primary way people in organisations gain knowledge is by talking with peers; and that if conversations are central to knowledge sharing, helping to improve conversations is a crucial element in supporting learning. The methods used are described in Box 1.[5]

Box 1. Methods for focus group interviews on learning	
Creating a storyline	**Discussing the Kolb learning cycle**
The most important events in a learning experience are jointly written down, and people are asked to score how satisfied they were with how team learning occurred during the various events. The joint reflection focuses on the high-scoring events. The storyline is then used to generate reflection, and to show the different perspectives on the case and on learning that exist in the organisation.	The Kolb learning cycle is introduced (after the storyline is created) and every staff member is asked what had been the most important phase for his/her own learning during a particular learning experience. A joint reflection on the different learning styles follows.

[5] For the more detailed set-up of these group interviews, see Appendix 2.

Looking at learning principles Each staff member is given a list of 16 important learning principles. Examples of learning principles are: 'work is the most powerful learning environment'; 'people learn from feedback, from falling down and getting up again'; and 'reinventing the wheel is necessary to learn'. Then they are asked which three principles make them most enthusiastic. The joint reflection focuses on the overlap between the individually chosen learning principles and why they are so important for each team member.	**A radar of learning strategies** People in pairs 'buzz' on important learning moments in the past month. In a joint reflection, learning strategies are deducted and depicted in the form of a radar on a flipchart. The group members are then asked to score on the flipchart the extent to which each learning strategy: (a) motivates them; (b) has been effective in changing behaviour; (c) is used by themselves; and (d) is used by the organisation. This is followed by a joint reflection. Central in this reflection are questions such as: where do you see overlap and differences between individual scores? Where are the overlap and differences on motivation, effectiveness and use of the various learning strategies?
Making recommendations on learning capacity A meeting ends with staff making recommendations to themselves and their organisation on how to strengthen learning capacity.	**Reflection: how was it to talk about learning?** A meeting ends by asking staff to reflect on the methods that have been used, and how they felt about discussing learning in general.

…and how they worked in practice

From all the methods used in this research, the group interviews provided most of the data. It was evident that organising a group meeting to reflect jointly on organisational learning was not only a way of gathering data, but also an intervention to enable first-hand experience with organisational learning. The interviews were an opportunity for staff members to hear from each other what helped them learn, and why. For example, staff from one organisation were enthusiastic to discover that there was a lot of similarity between the learning principles they had chosen individually.

Similarly, they found the meeting not only useful, but also inspiring. The meeting created enthusiasm to learn more about learning, to be more conscious in learning, and even to use similar methods with their partners. A staff member of one organisation exclaimed: *'I am surprised that discussing learning instead of looking at content is very good'*. By providing space and time to reflect on organisational learning, which would not occur normally as part of daily work, participants were able to develop new ideas for promoting learning, some of which are now being carried out.

However, in both group interviews staff members had to leave before the end of the meeting due to work pressures. There was also a difficulty that the language of

learning can be confusing and unclear for people who are not used to it. For example, some felt that my introduction at the beginning of the meeting was rather vague.
Also, some of the expressions and questions I used, such as 'which learning strategy was most useful for you in changing your behaviour', were not clearly understood, for example, some asked what 'more effective behaviour' meant.

4 Research Findings

The previous chapters have highlighted that the way people talk and think about learning influences their capacity to shape organisational learning in practice. This chapter presents the findings of both the interviews into development organisations' discourse and practice on organisational learning, and the case studies.

4.1 Interview Outcomes: Discourse and Glimpse of Practice

The conversations held with 14 member organisations of PSO during the interview phase of the action research reflected their discourse and, to a more limited extent, their practice in relation to:

- their organisational learning style
- the enabling and complicating factors for learning
- who plays a role in their organisational learning.

The most important outcomes are summarised in this section.

4.1.1 Learning Style

The organisations in this study characterised themselves as having an activist learning style. Thinking and doing are thus somewhat separated, or as Britton (1998) writes, compartmentalised. However, many respondents also explained that they have become more aware of the importance of reflection. They described their development towards becoming an 'all-rounder' in their own learning cycle, having moved from being focused on action towards recognising the importance of all stages in the cycle.

This reflection seemed more often to start at higher levels in the organisation. For one organisation, for example, staff were described as mostly doers, while the management team were more focused on reflecting. This was also described within a network, where members of the network were focused on experiencing while the secretariat staff did more of the reflection. The content of the reflection also varied. One development organisation with regional field offices explained that most reflection on capacity building takes place in regional offices, rather than at the headquarters. It therefore seems that different levels or departments within an organisation can have different functions in the learning cycle.

Over half the respondents found their capacity to conceptualise to be the least developed phase in the learning cycle. Some organisations are now trying to develop

this, for example by developing models. One organisation explained that it was initially focused on experiencing and experimenting. Through following a course on organisational assessment, they were forced to reflect more. Now they are developing a model for organisational analysis with their partners. *'Through the model, we are forced to reflect and conceptualise more.'*

4.1.2 Enabling and Complicating Factors for Learning

When discussing enabling and obstructing factors for learning, most members were able to give a long list of factors they deemed important. Several factors were salient.

- Lack of time was the factor most mentioned as obstructing learning. Respondents observed that making room for reflection is difficult when day-to-day processes are pressing — *'developing the model is an extra task, so you have to create time that you would normally use for your primary processes'.*
- Field experience appears to be crucial in gaining new experiences from which to learn, either through communication between head offices and field staff/partners or through field visits. A condition for learning from field experience is time and trust in each other — *'you gradually learn more as you get to know and trust each other more'.* The physical distance from the field complicated this, partly because of difficulties in communication.
- The isolation of project staff was also seen as an obstructing factor for learning, giving some the impression that they are working on their own island, with little opportunity for exchanging and sharing learning.
- New staff entering the organisation was mentioned most often as a factor promoting learning, as it brings in new expertise and a fresh, critical view. However, in some cases it can obstruct learning when new staff are too keen to make their mark on an ongoing learning process.
- Funding was a factor relevant for learning, both positive and negative. Some felt that a lack of institutional funding ensured a dynamic vibe, while others felt that institutional funding created more room for reflection. Having unrestricted funds can enable an organisation to stick to its own goals, and potentially leaves more room for experiment and innovation, but can also mean there is no necessity to monitor and evaluate.
- Monitoring and evaluation were hardly mentioned as an enabling factor for learning. Although, in theory, monitoring and evaluation are coupled with learning, when looking at concrete learning experiences, they are regarded as being of little importance.

4.1.3 Who Plays a Role in Organisational Learning?

Involving others (individuals and organisations) in the organisation's learning did not appear to be an explicit strategy for most respondents, but at best it occurs unconsciously. Even when relating to other like-minded organisations, it seems that they are not always seen as resources. Furthermore, many of the organisations in this research appear to be rather internally focused. In involving external parties in their learning processes, they face two main obstacles: not knowing what to look for, and not knowing where to look.

The first category of resource persons is the organisation's own staff, or its partners in the South. Involving other organisations in the Netherlands mostly occurs with organisations that have the same thematic focus and expertise. In finding resources, a common ground is thus being sought, and this is mostly in the thematic area of the organisation. However, as a director expressed it: *'When you look at the activities, my organisation could be part of several networks: the training network, environmental network, international development network, Eastern Europe network. These networks are all, for a large part, separate. I sometimes get crazy with all the opportunities that are out there, but have little time to get to know all of these networks.'*

4.2 Case-studies: Stories on Organisational Learning Practices

Case studies were used as part of the research in order to make the subject of organisational learning come alive for both readers and researchers. The case studies of Milieukontakt Oost-Europa (MKOE), STROhalm and NOC*NSF provide a wealth of information, quotes and stories. In this section the three organisations are introduced and the design of the case studies detailed, followed by a description of how these three organisations talk and think about learning and their learning practice.

4.2.1 MKOE

MKOE was founded by the environmental movement in the Netherlands in 1988 to stimulate similar movements in Eastern Europe. Today, MKOE identifies its mission as follows: 'MKOE supports ecological sustainability and therefore identifies and supports partners working towards a sustainable, democratic and environmentally benign society'. In 2003, there were 13 staff on average with funding of around €1.5 million a year: mostly government funds, some funds from major Dutch development organisations, and some private funds and donations.

Talking and thinking about learning

MKOE does not have an explicit concept of, or strategy for, promoting individual or organisational learning capacity. The group interview showed that 'supporting learning' was considered by some staff as giving/receiving training. At the same time however, they considered most training as ineffective in promoting learning. MKOE staff are enthusiastic about understanding more about organisational learning in general, and their own organisational learning capacity in particular. This was shown, for example, by the Director's motivation in devoting his staff's limited time to the group interview, as well as the staff's enthusiasm during this meeting.

Although MKOE does not have an explicit concept of learning, the implicit concept appears to be that learning by doing is most effective. The fact that staff actually do things during their field work (give training) was seen as an enabling factor for learning. Some felt that learning is something that can be pushed — someone has to be in charge. Individual and organisational learning are mixed in their discourse.

MKOE Quotes on Learning

'Learning in an organisation means to collect experiences and bring them over to others, but they only sink in when you are actually working with them!'

'You are too much in the do-mode when you're in the middle of a project.'

'We involve each other, even if there is no structure for it.'

'Things come as they are experienced, you can't make a rigid form for joint reflection.'

'I realise myself that I rarely talk with my colleagues as a team. The last time is more than 2 years ago, and then it was a policy day, it was not about us (...).'

Learning practice

MKOE clearly has an activist learning style. Reflection is mostly informal, and often limited to specific projects with partner organisations. Although MKOE holds strategic meetings, meant for formal reflection among other things, these do not stimulate reflection on topics outside specific projects. In an organisation working at a fast pace, such as MKOE, the risk is that reflection is lost in everyday business. There is certainly innovation — new approaches and practices are being developed — but these are not always the result of a conscious strategy. For example, MKOE staff's understanding of what constitutes a good manual turned out to be shared by all, and had developed in practice over time. However, this was discovered in hindsight during the group interview when the development of MKOE's use of manuals was discussed, rather than being a outcome of conscious learning. This is an example of how a lack of conscious learning strategy slows down the pace of MKOE's organisational learning.

Observation: informal exchange over lunch

Not everyone arrives at the table at the same time, some come earlier and some come later, but in a period of an hour around six people are constantly at the table. Through many discussions and jokes, information is exchanged, with many references to 'mistakes' in the past and differences of opinion. A short brainstorming is held on what the Director should say in a radio interview later in the day. In short — a lot of informal exchange.

Box 2. An MKOE success — experience in joint reflection

When starting a new project, a staff member from MKOE wanted to use the knowledge and experiences of a colleague in a similar project. She asked her colleague to write down her experiences and lessons learned. Both learned much: the writer, because through her colleague's question she was forced to reflect on her experiences; and staff member, because she could benefit from her colleague's experiences. They recommended asking each other to write down dos and dont's more often, in order to stimulate reflection and enable sharing of experiences.

Lack of time, or lack of priority for reflection and learning, seem to be the most pressing complicating factors for learning in the case of MKOE. Frequent field visits, MKOE staff's ability to speak local languages, and the strong drive of staff to improve their work are strong enabling factors.

4.2.2 STROhalm

STROhalm has its roots in the environmental and anti-nuclear movement. It now focuses on setting up alternative monetary systems to promote sustainable economies, both in the Netherlands and in developing countries. STROhalm is a small organisation with four project staff plus support staff.

Talking and thinking about learning

The focus of STROhalm's work, promoting alternative monetary economies, is complex and carries potential risks for the target groups. Each context requires a new approach. Therefore STROhalm staff feel that everything they do is new. STROhalm starts with existing experiences and theoretical insights, then tries to translate these to new contexts through setting up pilots. The goal of these pilots is not to generate a huge impact, but rather to learn what determines success of the pilot project. So the experiences from the pilot projects are generalised again to develop the methodologies. A STROhalm staff member asserts: *'it is like we are describing a bicycle to people that do not yet know what the bicycle should look like'.*

The discourse on organisational learning of STROhalm is not in terms of learning strategies, learning style or learning cycle, but in terms of 'pilots' and 'monitoring and evaluation'. They consider themselves an organisation with an experimental learning style, and argue that learning ought to be their core business.

STROhalm staff embrace several learning principles. First, the feeling that their work is important gives them a powerful drive to experiment continually with pilot projects and thereby to improve their projects and methodology. Furthermore, they stressed that although successful experiences are important (*'the energy to step over problems arrives from former experienced successes!'*), learning from problems or failure is too. Learning by doing, or learning in work, is also powerful principle for STROhalm, as they are pioneering in promoting alternative monetary systems.

STROhalm staff use several learning strategies in their work. They regard close contact with the field as an important learning strategy '*as you gather and share the specific knowledge that you need'* and because *'seeing partners teaches you to think of them in your work'.* Brainstorming is regarded as a good learning strategy, because it '*generates new ideas, but also a lot of motivation!'* Reading as a learning strategy is valued, but with a warning: *'reading is only effective when you combine it with another learning strategy'.*

The challenge STROhalm faces in promoting further organisational learning lies in systematising the lessons learned: *'we use a lot of learning strategies, but we don't always do something with our learning afterwards. We have to start using our experiences in a more systematic* way'. Furthermore, STROhalm staff feel that having more staff would help their organisational learning processes because it creates more time and space for reflection.

Learning practice

STROhalm experiments. For the staff, this means observing in close detail what happens in their pilot projects. A lot of informal reflection takes place: *'Because we are with so few people, the learning process/information exchange is primarily informal: we are all three in the same room, we forward e-mails, we take each other's phone calls, we do brainstorm sessions on methodological issues that suddenly arise, etc.'* However, formal reflection is regarded as a necessity and takes place in monthly progress meetings which the team call an *'idea-machine'* — '*I often hear something that I can take along in my own project*'.

Box 3. STROhalm's formal reflection: the monthly progress meeting

One of the ways STROhalm tries to stimulate reflection on and development of its methodology to promote alternative monetary systems is the monthly progress meeting. During this meeting, STROhalm staff discuss the monthly reports made by advisors in the field for each pilot project. In these reports, the goals of the pilot projects each month are given, as well as an analysis of problems that were experienced in order to stick to these goals, commitments of partners and consultants, and a section on lessons learned. On the basis of these reports, STROhalm staff in the Netherlands write a short reflection document. They value these reports and meetings both because of the opening they provide for advisors in the field to signal problems on which they need feedback, and because they enable STROhalm staff in the Netherlands to monitor the whole process, learn from it, and adapt their methodologies further. During the two-hour meeting, most important developments are explained and advice or action plans are formulated.

The way the monthly progress meetings were set up changed over time, with some interesting effects. For example, the frequency has become less (first monthly, later bi-monthly) because of the time pressure, and because two of four methodological staff are often in the field. However, according to STROhalm staff this has not led to a lower quality of reflection: the reduced frequency helps to look more at tendencies over time, rather than incidents. The reports have increasingly become focused on 'lessons learned', to push the advisors in the field to write down general findings rather than only the details.

STROhalm's recommendations for strengthening learning practice were as follows.

- To systemise lessons learned from the various learning strategies more effectively. *'We have too many ideas; we need a moment to systematise our experiences (not just think and brainstorm).'* One idea was to start by writing down the products of reflections (as individuals or as a group, brainstorming sessions, best practices). These lessons leaned could then be incorporated into a planned manual for promoting alternative monetary systems.
- To be open for ideas from others both inside and outside the organisation. *'Sometimes we have too many internal brainstorms, but we are not always open for ideas from other people',* a staff member exclaimed. Because of time pressure and the limited expertise on the subject internationally, STROhalm is clearly predominantly internally focused on its own team in the Netherlands, but also the advisors and partners of the pilot projects in the field.
- To recruit more staff so that time would be available for reflection and learning, as this is the core business of STROhalm.
- To keep the energy and motivation high, as *'this is THE strength of STROhalm'.*
- To ensure better communication with the world outside STROhalm. Partly because of the complexity of the subject, communication is difficult, but essential. STROhalm staff think that: *'when you systemise experiences, communication can become easier'*.

4.2.3 NOC*NSF

The Netherlands Olympic Committee * Netherlands Sport Confederation (NOC*NSF) is an umbrella organisation for sports, and as such is one of the few PSO member organisations with a mission and core business unrelated to development co-operation. However, in 1998 NOC*NSF initiated sport and development projects in developing countries. Nowadays, the goal of the international sport and development work is to support members in this field and promote the social significance of sports in developing countries, both as a means and an end.

Talking and thinking about learning

NOC*NSF questions how much should be invested in promoting learning on capacity building in developing countries for sports organisations, which do not have development co-operation as their core business. NOC*NSF sees its task not so much in supporting sports organisations to build up their skills for writing project proposals, but rather enabling them to understand the complexity of development co-operation and make a balanced decision whether to proceed on this path or invest energy and resources elsewhere. Sports organisations find it hard to get to grips with the context of projects, and do not understand their importance. According to the NOC*NSF staff member, when sports trainers visit the field, they do not pay much attention to asking questions in order to understand the context: they want to give training to sports

trainers! Other sports organisations engage in international sport and development projects only when they themselves have something to gain.

Some sports organisations, such as the Royal Netherlands Football Association (KNVB), do have significant international experience and expertise. However, there was hardly any exchange on the subject between KNVB and other sport organisations. Therefore NOC*NSF set up a meeting together with the National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (NCDO) in order to make sports organisations enthusiastic for development and to facilitate exchange between them.

NOC*NSF is an active participant in the national platform for sport and development co-operation, which meets twice a year with the goals of bringing sports organisations and development organisations into contact with each other; facilitating their exchange of experiences; and promoting co-operation.

Learning practice

For NOC*NSF, fewer data were obtained than for the other two case studies because there was no group interview/intervention. However, observing a study afternoon for sports unions did provided some useful information. The meeting had two goals: to motivate sports federations to take up activities in developing countries, and to facilitate their exchange of experiences.

It seems that staff responsible for activities in developing countries are often working alone on this within their organisations. They are motivated and willing to take action, but as it is not the core business of their organisation, they face a lot of obstacles. Therefore sitting together with others who have a similar drive and face similar problems was very motivating.

The exchange of experiences worked less well as one group wanted to discuss funding while another wanted to exchange experiences. Due to time restraints and a relatively small group, the two groups were put together. The result was that the second part of the afternoon was dominated by complaints about the lack of funding opportunities and the bureaucratic nature of development organisations, rather than looking at their own practice. There was hardly any debate on quality improvement of the activities of sport unions in developing countries. So whether the exchange of experiences contributed to learning, and thereby to better practice, is doubtful, although the meeting could lead to a joint lobby. The event triggered a number of key questions on learning capacity.

- Facilitating the exchange of experiences is more than bringing people together and letting them talk. Do NOC*NSF and NCDO have the capacity to develop and organise events in which exchange and joint learning can occur?

- Sports federations seem to have delegated the responsibility for facilitating exchange and learning to NOC*NSF. What happens outside this framework? Do sports federations visit each other and learn from each other outside the context of NOC*NSF/NCDO-organised events? Are other, experienced sports federations not closer to their own practice than development organisations?
- Some sports federations have built up a level of expertise and experience in projects focused on sport and development. To what extent are they used as resources by other, less experienced, sports organisations?
- What exactly is the motivation of some of the sports federations to engage in activities in developing countries: 'interested in going there'; 'bringing them fish'; or 'teaching them how to fish'?
- In the learning cycle, sports federations clearly have a preference for 'doing'; or an activist learning style. To what extent does reflection take place?
- During the study afternoon, the motivational goal of the event seemed to have been reached. Motivation can be a precondition for learning. To what extent was it so here? The aim of exchanging experiences was lost. Is this typical?

5 Conclusions: Insights into Organisational Learning

Organisational learning is crucial for any organisation that wants to do things better. However, current literature on organisational learning shows that developing organisational learning capacity does not just happen: it requires a conscious effort, which at its core involves jointly making sense of practical experiences.

Not everyone understands learning and knowledge in the same way. In this paper, a social-constructivist view on learning is taken: people learn by giving meaning to their experiences and relationships. Learning is then an active process during which knowledge is constructed, rather than acquired. Information becomes knowledge only when it is linked directly to action. The study shows that this perspective is not commonly held. This section draws conclusions from the study in relation to each of the research questions:

1. How do international development NGOs talk and think about learning (or, what is their discourse)?
2. How do development NGOs learn in practice?
3. How can action research help support organisational learning?

Some challenging implications are raised for those involved in supporting organisational learning in development organisations.

5.1 Question 1: Discourse: Talking and Thinking about Learning

The member organisations involved in this study do not seem to have a clear concept of learning, nor an explicit organisational learning strategy. However, they do have many implicit ideas on learning.

One of these implicit assumptions is that you learn by doing things. Thinking and doing thus seem separated in the discourse of member organisations. When exploring Kolb's learning cycle, people said that different departments in their organisation had different functions: the management team does the reflection phase, others do the action phase. Processes of reflection and conceptualisation are seen as extra tasks. The task of learning is compartmentalised, and not seen as a responsibility for all.

Another implicit assumption of member organisations has to do with their understanding of the concept of knowledge. Knowledge seems to be interpreted as information; as an object that can be transferred from one person to another. Learning is thus about disseminating information. This reflects the cognitivist

approach to learning, and has several implications for learning in practice. For example, people see their colleagues as sources of knowledge, rather than people with whom you can explore things and construct knowledge together. This, in turn, implies that learning is an individual process.

In their discourse, member organisations also make implicit assumptions about how organisational learning should be promoted. They feel the need to focus on systematising learning experiences and knowledge by writing them down. However, when looking at their organisational learning practice, they value talking with others, especially during field visits, as the most effective learning strategy. This, too, can be regarded as a contradiction between what people feel are the most effective learning strategies they are currently using (talking), and the way they think that organisational learning should be promoted (writing down knowledge, storing information and disseminating it in a systematic way).

Members see partner organisations in developing countries as important — maybe even the most important — to involve in their own organisational learning. However, distance and lack of time make it difficult truly to learn from each other. It is striking that, when asked for enabling factors for learning, few respondents mentioned monitoring and evaluation of projects and programmes. Colleagues within one's own organisation are also valued as sources of knowledge.

Member organisations strongly associated supporting learning with training and giving knowledge or information. This 'automatically' ensures that people improve their work and become more effective. In short, the way the international development organisations in this study think and talk about learning strongly influences how they shape their organisational learning, and what they expect of those supporting learning. The following section explores how this lack of strategy and the misconceptions about learning impede organisational learning in practice.

5.2 Question 2: Learning in Practice

Most of the organisations in this research categorise themselves as having an activist learning style. Progression in the learning cycle from reflection to conceptualisation does not happen automatically. Joint reflection on experiences is not common practice. The case studies showed that reflection is mostly informal and project-related.

Although the motivation to learn and do things better is certainly present, so far promoting organisational learning is something that remains a vague overall goal. It is great when staff members are motivated to learn and reflect — but when there is no time in their busy schedules, reflection and learning is not in their job description, they do not have the capacity to organise reflection meetings in which joint learning

can occur, and there are no resources for training and learning, the drive to enhance organisational learning cannot become a reality. The enabling and complicating factors for organisational learning in member organisations include the following.

Enabling factors

- New member organisations have a drive and motivation to learn and thereby improve their practice.
- Field visits to meet partners and talking with them face-to-face are both motivating and valuable for knowledge sharing.

Complicating factors

- There is little time for (or priority given to) reflection. This conclusion applies to project-related reflection, but even more so to wider organisational reflection. Consequently, only a few members consciously take the 'profits' of their learning with them in order to experiment and develop new practice.
- There is a lack of capacity to design meetings in which reflection and learning — rather than exchange of information — are encouraged.
- The island culture of developing NGOs (every staff member has their own projects) means that people are not used to doing things, or learning, together.
- New member organisations are internally focused. The role of others in promoting organisational learning is therefore limited, which includes the role of PSO and its members. Valuable experiences of peers are therefore missed.

5.3 Question 3: Promoting Self-reflection on Learning through Research

Using action research proved to be a valuable way of gaining insights into and promoting organisational learning capacity. The researcher offers his or her models and concepts of learning and capacity to facilitate joint reflection and sense-making of organisational learning experiences. The co-researchers offer their experiential knowledge on how learning occurred in their own organisation. For almost all respondents, talking about learning in this way was a new experience. Providing organisations with language on learning helped them to look at their organisation with new eyes, thereby stimulating self-reflection. Exploring practical organisational learning experiences made the subject come alive for co-researchers. It made the process a positive experience because exchange was connected to 'real work', thereby enforcing motivation and inspiration to improve organisational learning further.

This was most visible in the group meetings, where several new ideas came up for stimulating knowledge production and learning. In addition, because organisations often lack the time or priority for more formal reflection, the mere fact that the

researcher organised a meeting itself created a space for reflection and learning that may not normally have occurred. Observation of learning events proved to be a valuable preparation for the researcher to understand the learning culture better and thereby ask critical questions during other interventions, such as a group interview. Stories also appeared to be very powerful: just reading their own story in the form of their case-study report helped organisations to understand their own practices better.

As a researcher on organisational learning, several issues stand out. The researcher supports organisational learning by taking the role of a teacher (offering theoretical frameworks on learning); as a coach (helping to reflect on learning processes); and as an advisor (helping to make plans on how to strengthen organisational learning). By thinking along with co-researchers about their experiences, the researcher can combine these roles not only to collect data, but also to facilitate learning. With all these roles, the facilitator's own skills and values are crucial. With hindsight, I can make some personal reflections on these values and skills.

- Understanding more about learning (e.g. through the Kolb learning cycle) was a powerful way to improve my own learning capacity.
- Experiential learning triggers change, for example learning more about our own learning as a team enabled us to improve our work.
- Seeing this research as a joint exploration led to me continually to adjust my own misconceptions about learning. While I was going through my personal learning cycle, I redefined the research questions, goals and methodology accordingly.
- It was important to be open, to show by example and 'practice what you preach'. For example, during one group interview I was accompanied by a colleague to take notes and observe how I facilitated the meeting. When participants suggested they could learn by accompanying each other more often to their different project sites, one mentioned: '*like you have done with your colleague'*.
- It is important to identify where people/organisations are already learning, and stimulate them to go on from there. This involves stressing what is going well, as well as what could be done differently. For example, at the end of one meeting my personal opinion was asked and I stressed the positive: their motivation to do things better, their large capacity for informal learning. One of the participants concluded: '*we're not so bad in self-learning!*'
- Using a variety of methods appears to be most effective: document analysis and observation provide a wealth of information that can be used during the joint reflection sessions.

6 Implications for Strengthening Organisational Learning Capacity

What do these findings mean for those involved in organisational learning within development organisations? This paper suggests some important implications for learners as well as those involved in facilitating learning and research.

6.1 Recommendations for PSO's Role in Supporting Learning

Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that PSO, in support of member organisations, can play the following six roles in stimulating organisational learning.

- As a teacher, PSO can offer new conceptual frameworks and theories on learning. In providing this new discourse on learning, PSO should, as far as possible, connect to member organisations' current worries and understanding of learning if it does not want to alienate those it aims to help.
- As a coach, PSO can help organisations to reflect on their own learning processes, as the capacity to jointly reflect or make sense of your organisation's experiences is central for organisational learning.
- As an advisor, PSO can help organisations to experiment and plan various types of learning strategies. Given the activist learning style of new member organisations, this is a crucial task.
- As a funder, PSO firstly enables member organisations to build up experience in capacity building. A reserved budget for experimental capacity building could be a great way to promote innovation, as few member organisations consciously experiment. PSO can assist experimentation further through supporting close reflection on the experiences the experiment generates.
- As a trainer, PSO can help organisations actually to practise new learning strategies. It is crucial to relate any training to real work and real problems, questions and dilemmas — in other words, taking an action learning approach.
- The sixth role, as broker, is a crucial one for PSO. PSO member organisations hardly know each other, but are interested to learn from each other and share their own experiences and expertise — the linking of member organisations is essential.

6.2 Understanding What Learning is and How We Can Support it

Regarding the issue of discourse on learning, the research findings suggest that development organisations frequently lack self-knowledge on how they learn. Implicit and unhelpful assumptions on learning, such as 'learning is the same as transferring information', are quite common. As these assumptions have a considerable impact on the learning strategies that learners employ and the support that they seek, it is very important to address them directly. It is not uncommon for organisations to choose ineffective learning strategies because of the tacit assumptions they hold. Therefore it seems worthwhile for organisations that wish to increase their capacity for organisational learning to investigate their own assumptions on learning, and compare them with how they actually learn in practice (for example, by reflecting on recent learning experiences). Then strategies can be chosen that fit the actual learning practice of that organisation. This is especially important because organisations do not all learn in the same manner: things that work for one may not be helpful for another.

This finding also has implications for consultants, managers and others who seek to assist in building organisational learning capacity. What is asked of them is to 'dig deeper' in the case of a request for training or for building a knowledge system in order to facilitate knowledge sharing. What is the organisation really after? How does the organisation actually learn? And what strategies fit that learning style and learning question? Merely asking such questions can help the organisation to increase its self-knowledge on learning. This paper provides several ideas on how to jump-start the conversation on learning (for example, using the Kolb learning cycle, and starting with concrete learning experiences). Talking about learning was part of a study in this case, but it is easy to imagine the same conversations as the start of a learning process. This presupposes an investigative attitude on the part of the learning facilitator. In other words, the facilitator also has to be a learner — not applying standard solutions that have worked elsewhere, but identifying the specific learning needs and styles of the learner involved, and creating matching learning interventions.

Experiences from the action research made it clear that it is very rewarding to reflect on organisational learning practices together with those involved. The researcher did not analyse *for* the organisation, but rather *with* organisational members. This in itself not only increased the quality of the analysis, but also made the analysis a natural starting point for new learning initiatives. Once people discover what works for them, this realisation is so powerful that they immediately start to make new plans in order to improve current practices. In the case of Milieukontakt, for instance, organisational members decided on the spot to do more projects together in order to facilitate informal learning.

Organisations such as PSO, as an association of development organisations, can play a vital role in promoting this kind of reflection, not only on the micro-level (one organisation) but also on a larger scale (cross-organisational). It seems that we still do not know very much about how learning in our sector actually occurs, and as organisational learning is talked about more and more (every organisation seems to have it as a strategic objective), it is essential to address this lack of knowledge. Otherwise, if one-liners are endlessly repeated, and assumptions are passed on but never checked, there is the risk that some unhelpful misconceptions on learning will get stuck in our system, and learning will become part of our discourse without actually meaning anything.

6.3 Improving Organisational Learning Capacity: Think Big, Start Small

When it comes to organisational learning practices within development organisations, several inhibiting factors came to light in this study. Some of the implications these raise for those seeking to improve organisational learning practices are as follows.

- Investing in reflection on implicit and explicit concepts of learning is central. The special bonus for the sector is that, if we understand our own learning processes and are able to investigate them, we are better equipped to help partners in the South investigate theirs, gaining not only knowledge about learning, but also the competence of joint reflection on learning.

- Improving organisational learning is often an abstract notion: a distant 'spot on the horizon', too vague to have any real appeal to people, and difficult to translate into concrete actions. The challenge of becoming a learning organisation can seem overwhelming: the problems appear so big and the behavioural patterns (such as not taking time for reflection) so deeply ingrained in the organisational fabric that it is hard to see how this could ever be turned around by any intervention. The antidote seems to be simply to 'think big and start small': create a vision of learning on the one hand, and on the other seek out opportunities to foster learning that are large enough to make a difference, but at the same time small enough to start tomorrow. Only if we downsize the concept of the learning organisation in this way, and give it 'hands and feet', can we make it fit our daily realities.

- In the whole constellation of people who fulfil a role in organisational learning in international development organisations (learners, consultants, staff from partner organisations, colleagues), managers to play a special role. Organising the conditions in which organisational learning can occur is thus a central task for the management. Much is expected from them when it comes to stimulating organisational learning or eliminating inhibiting factors. In this sense, they can

fulfil the role of a catalyst in organisational learning. However, in placing the responsibility for driving learning processes with managers alone, staff and colleagues may dismiss or sideline their own roles in catalysing and generating learning activities.

6.4 Recommendations for Researchers

In this paper it is argued that in action research, one of the goals of the researcher is to facilitate a learning process with all those involved. Our methodologies can still be improved and fine-tuned regarding this objective. How can we use research techniques in such a way that respondents get more grip on their own realities (while at the same time adding to the general and collective 'knowing')? And how do we report back to them in a way that promotes their learning? It seems worthwhile to add innovative and effective reporting methods to our toolkit.

In this study, stories appeared to be very powerful: just reading their own story in the form of their case-study report helped organisations to understand their own practices better. In future research efforts into this topic for our sector, it would be a good idea to reserve room for such stories (case studies) alongside larger-scale (quantitative?) research. The sector is still in need of rich narratives, providing practical descriptions of what organisational learning looks and feels like in order to give the concept its much-needed 'hands and feet'.

Researchers — either from within or outside the organisation — who take on this challenge of doing research and supporting learning at the same time will notice that the border between being a researcher and being a consultant becomes somewhat blurred. It is not always clear where one stops and the other begins. Some will regard this as a bonus, whereas others may not feel comfortable with it. In either case, it is a fact that demands more discussion and reflection among researchers in order to investigate what this new role asks of us, and how we can meet these standards.

Finally, in doing this type of research, the researcher becomes part of the story. The researcher is not an onlooker, but participates in the process of analysing and making sense together with the respondents. At the very least, this requires researchers to make their actions and decisions very transparent and to discuss their choices conscientiously, so that they provide insight to others. I have tried to do so in this report.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Data Collection and Interview Guide

Data collection

Contact details

1.1 Name of organisation
1.2 Address
1.3 Phone
1.4 Fax
1.5 Contact person
1.6 Job description

Organisational features

Organisational structure
2.1 Number of employees
2.2 Age and life phase of the organisation
2.3 Type of organisation (membership organisation, professional organisation)
2.4 Governance
2.5 Background employees (education, work experience)

Funding
2.6 Turnover
2.7 Percentage overhead
2.8 Source of financing (donations, government, ...)

Goals
2.9 Mission
2.10 Primary goals
2.11 Focus on innovation (in policy documents)
2.12 Type of activities (financing partners, financing field offices, lobbying, ...)

Capacity building
2.13 Extent of focus on capacity building
2.14 Active within PSO network/activities?
2.15 Reason for entering the association of PSO

Learning
2.16 Learning climate

Interview guide

Explanation of research process

- Explanation of PSO Knowledge and Learning Centre
- Explanation of research
- Why is the research important
- What will we talk about in this conversation?
- Learning is both organisational and individual learning

Learning questions with regard to capacity building

- Current external and internal developments
- What do these mean for the organisation?
- What does the organisation do in response?
- Enabling and complicating factors (name their learning questions!)
- Who plays a role?
- Support by PSO members and office (do you ask for it? do you get it?)
- What else do you need to support your learning processes?

Learning experiences

- Important learning experiences with regard to capacity building
- Immediate cause
- Process
- Enabling and complicating factors
- Who played a role?
- What does it mean for your current practice? What are you doing differently now?
- Is it representative for your place in the learning cycle? Why? What was the crucial phase?
- Examples of learning experiences with other crucial phases in the learning cycle

Closing

- Thanks
- Did I forget anything that is important?
- Are you interested in participating in a case study? Explain.

Appendix 2. Set-up of STROhalm's Group Interview

Duration: 2.5 hours
Participants: Four STROhalm staff
Materials: Flip-charts, watch, markers, tape, hand-out of learning principles, coloured cards

PROGRAMME

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

- Explain the programme of the workshop
- Short introduction on learning:
    - effective learning results in action
    - learning is a process

2. Working with learning principles (30 minutes)

- Give hand-out with learning principles
- Take some time individually to see which three learning principle inspire you most
- Give this back to the group: why do these learning principles make you enthusiastic?
- The list that emerges: these are the STROhalm learning principles. This is what you find powerful as a team.

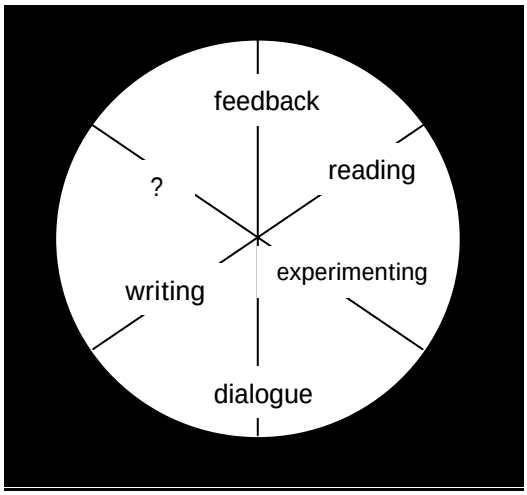
3. Learning strategies (60–90 minutes)

Dialogue in pairs

- Think of three experiences over the past month during which you feel you have learned a lot.
    - What happened? What did you do?
    - What made this experience such a powerful learning experience for you?

Joint reflection

- Give back to the group what you learnt from your dialogues
- Which learning strategies can we distil from these dialogues? (reading, writing, dialogue, reflection, experimenting, feedback, ... whatever emerges from the group)
- Put these strategies in a learning radar, such as the one overleaf:



Scoring

- We make four flip-chart pages with this radar; then everyone gets four stickers. Each person has a different colour so we can trace back who the various stickers belong to
- Each participant gives a score on each radar on the basis of the following four questions:
    - Which of these strategies do you personally find most motivating/inspiring?
    - Which of these strategies do you feel is most effective in changing actions/behaviour? Why?
    - Which of these strategies do you use most often?
    - Which of these strategies do you see used most in your organisation?
- The closer you place a sticker to the outer side of the circle, the higher the score.

Joint reflection

Some support questions for the facilitator:

- What do we see here? What is salient?
- What do we see when we compare our scores on the most inspiring or motivating strategy and the most frequently used strategies?
- What do we see when we compare our scores for the most effective strategies and the most frequently used strategies?
- What do we see when we compare the team members' scores? Overlap, differences. What does this mean for promoting learning in the team?
- If we look back at the learning principles we have chosen, what do we see? For example what do we see when we compare this with the strategies we find most effective in promoting learning?
- Which principles do we already use? What do they look like in our own practice?

4. Reflection: how can we strengthen our team learning? (15 minutes)

- Everyone has two coloured cards. On one card, write a recommendation on how you can strengthen your own learning. On the other, write a recommendation on how you can strengthen learning with others in your team.
- Give your recommendations back to the group, share them

5. Evaluation (10 minutes)

Support questions for the facilitator:

- How do you feel about the ways we have used to look at our own and our team's learning?
- How was it for you to talk about learning in this way?
- What do you take away?
- I would like to get some feedback on the way I facilitated this meeting — what went well, what can I improve upon?

Appendix 3: Set-up of MKOE's Group Interview: Making a Learning History

Duration: 3 hours
Participants: 10 employees from MKOE; PSO colleague as an observer
Materials: Flip-charts, big table with chairs, flip-chart learning cycle, flip-chart programme of the day, flip-chart timeline, watch, stickers, post-its, markers, tape

PROGRAMME

Before the meeting

Before the meeting, the team had discussed what learning experience they had had as a team, that they would like to explore together in order to reflect on how their team learning had occurred in this example.

1. Introduction by facilitator (15 minutes)

- Research into learning processes
- Goal of today: jointly reflect on your learning processes as a team. 80% of all learning occurs informally, let's make these processes visible.
- For me as a researcher this will generate information for my research on how PSO member organisations learn. For you as a team it will generate a dialogue about your own learning, and recommendations by yourselves to yourselves on how to strengthen your learning capacity even more.
- Programme outline
- I've asked a colleague to observe me as a facilitator to get some feedback to help me learn as a facilitator

2. Making a storyline/learning history (2 hours 35 minutes)

Step 1: Making a timeline of the learning experience (30 minutes)

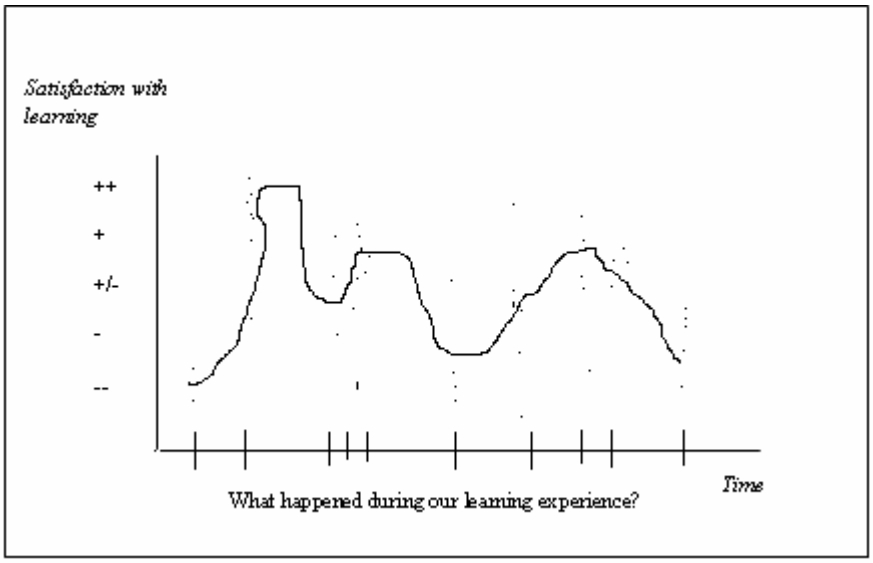
- Make sure you have sufficient space to make a timeline. Several flip-chart pages side by side, or wallpaper a couple of metres in length
- Facilitator writes what comes out of the group on the timeline (*x*-axis). This can become messy!

Support questions for the facilitator:
- What was the period of the learning experience?
  From when until when?
- What happened during this period?
  Which specific events/activities did you undertake?
  Put these on the timeline

Variations
- When the first timeline gets too messy, make a second one and focus on the milestones
- Use a sticky wall, ask participants to write important events on cards and then jointly organise these on the timeline

Step 2: Scoring satisfaction with the learning process (15 minutes)

- The *y*-axis is drawn. This axis stands for the level of satisfaction with the learning process of the team (– –/–/+ –//+/+ +)
- Every individual has as many stickers as there are events on the timeline. The question for participants is: score how satisfied you were with the learning process of the team for each of the events you have just put on the *x*-axis.
- Start from the present, work back to the past
- The scoring is done by each individual



Step 3: Joint reflection (40 minutes)

- Jointly draw a line through the stickers. For an example of how such a learning history looks, see the sketch above.

Support questions for the facilitator:

- Where does the line rise (where were we very satisfied with how we learned?); where does the line fall?
- What happened there? Where do you see differences in scoring? Where did you all score similarly? What does this mean for you?
- What made you learn much/learn little?
- What are important factors in your learning process during this experience?

Tips for the facilitator / researcher

- Facilitator writes ideas from the group dialogue on a flip-chart
- It is not necessary to get group consensus: the idea is to promote a dialogue on learning by the team: hearing each other's perspectives is enough. Make different perspectives explicit.
- Focus the dialogue on the milestones
- Make explicit the learning principles that you hear during the group dialogue
- Stress that everything people say is legitimate: this is what occupies them, what is important to them — what is good or bad is not relevant!
- Focus on the positive, make this explicit: 'what I see is that as a team, you learned to... / you got much better in...'

Break (15 minutes)

Step 4: Learning cycle (5 minutes)
Facilitator introduces the Kolb learning cycle (action, reflection, conceptualisation, planning an experiment)

Step 5: Scoring: what was an important phase for you personally? (15 minutes)

- If you look at your joint learning experience, for which you have just made a timeline, and your personal experience within that joint experience, and then look at the learning cycle by Kolb — do you recognise the learning cycle? What was an important phase of the learning cycle for you?
- Put a sticker with this phase
- Joint reflection: what do we see?
- While the group discusses this, the facilitator may bring in more information about learning styles (most people have one; this is your strength, which you may develop further, but you may also wish to develop more in other styles; people with different styles can complement each other when doing a project together, ...)

Step 6: Looking at the future in pairs (15 minutes)

- In pairs, make recommendations about how you as a person, and you as a team, can strengthen your learning capacity. When you do this, do not think from the perspective of your organisation, but from your own personal perspective. What is important to *you*? In pairs, help each other think this through.
- Write your personal recommendations on post-its:
    - What do you need to strengthen your own learning? What do you need to develop yourself in other learning styles (if you wish to so do)?
    - Taking this into account, what do you need from your team and from the management team to support your own learning?
    - Try and make this concrete: think of a specific project you are working on now — how can you and the rest of your organisation learn even more during and from the project you are working on now?

Step 7: Inventory of recommendations, conclusion (20 minutes)

- Participants put all the post-its with recommendations on flip-charts, grouped per question (see questions in step 6)
- Group reflection: what do we see?
- Ask each participant to tell the group: what idea do you especially like? Why this idea? What will you take with you tomorrow?

3. Evaluation (10 minutes)

Support questions for the facilitator:

- What do you think of the methods for dialogue we used today?
- Could you image doing something like this for another learning experience?
- How was it for you to talk about learning in this way? Was it new or not? Were there any differences from how you've spoken about learning before as a team?
- I would like some feedback on my own facilitation — what did you like? How can I improve?

Praxis Paper No. 16

We're Too Much in 'To Do' Mode:

Action Research into Supporting International NGOs to Learn

Maaike Smit

International development organisations are continually urged to learn more from their experiences. But the ways in which people commonly understand 'learning' can inhibit them from reflecting on their experiences and learning from them. Action research, in which a researcher and those within an organisation jointly make sense of their learning strategies, is a valuable way of promoting organisational learning capacity.

This paper explores the organisational learning processes of some development NGOs in the Netherlands — how they think and talk about learning; how they learn in practice; and how action research can help support their organisational learning. Making organisational learning concrete by looking at learning experiences in practice made the subject of organisational learning come alive for those involved in this study, and triggered ideas and enthusiasm about how to learn more. Discover how to unearth the same energy and enthusiasm for this process that is fundamental to the health of any organisation.

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