

Improving your Programmatic Learning Journey

A Resource Guide for HDP Nexus
Practitioners

*Module: 2. Methodology and
Definitions*

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Module Summary

This module provides brief background on the methodology used to research the issue of programmatic learning. It provides a working definition of the concept of “programmatic learning.” It also provides a brief one-page survey of the seven case studies that formed the backbone for thinking about these topics; for more information on any of the cases the user may consult **Annex 7.3: Case Study Snapshots**.

2.1 Methodology

The following research question was developed with KPSRL and guided the collaborative study:

*What insights about **informative, innovative, successful and impactful programmatic learning** can selected case studies provide, and how can these insights be shared in an accessible manner that will encourage consideration, thoughtful deliberation and practical and meaningful uptake by policy makers, programming partners and KPSRL?*

A variety of data collection methods were used to begin to answer this question.

A **literature review** was conducted to survey a wide range of material relevant to the topic of programmatic learning. The review was not intended to be comprehensive but indicative (due to the scope of relevant topics and literature), with a focus on intriguing, innovative and impactful reports that would be of potential interest to the PLI, the KPSRL and its members. This review was presented to the Platform’s Reference Group in an online discussion October 2023, and was enhanced through additional identification of useful references through the end of data collection and the sense-making workshop. A bibliography is available in **Annex 7.4: Bibliography**.

An initial round of **interviews** (see **Annex 7.2: Interviews and Learning Calls**) was conducted at the beginning of the study to both capture an initial set of insights on the topic of programmatic learning from a wide range of interlocutors, as well as to assist in the process of potential case study identification. A few additional targeted interviews were held as the study progressed, for a total of **18 expert interviews**.

In-depth learning from **case studies** form the backbone of this resource guide. Based on the interviews, deliberation within the study team, and discussions with the KPSRL, an initial list of potential case studies was developed, with seven ultimately selected to enable a deeper dive into the experiences and recommendations of experts and practitioners in relevant fields. Criteria for case study selection included the following: a confirmed willingness by the case study organisation to participate in all aspects of the study; relevant experiences important to the study; and broad geographic and sectoral diversity. There was also an interest in different types of cases – of organisations, networks, communities of practice, etc. The seven case studies can be considered to

be illustrative and indicative of emerging trends and experiences with programmatic learning.²

A total of 21 interviews were held with individuals involved in the case studies. In addition, a 2- 2.5 hour group learning call was organized for each case study, with a total of 33 people participating in the learning calls. This focus group style format of open discussion and consultation facilitated vibrant interaction among participants and yielded useful findings which were later fed back to the participants for their review and additional comment and clarification.

An overview of the seven case studies and some top-level takeaways about their experience with programmatic learning is providing in the reference chart below. A two-page summary sheet for each case study is in **Annex 7.3: Case Study Snapshots** to provide more detail and context about their experiences with and thoughts on programmatic learning.

² While they were not a case study, the organisation Voice Global kindly contributed their time in interviews and follow-up discussions, and some of their experiences are shared in this guide as well.



Figure 2: Case Study Comparative Overview

	Case Study	Key PL Methods	Challenges	Recommendations
Communities of practice	CoP on Environment, Climate, Conflict and Peace (ECCP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standing “brain trust” • Multi-level reflection & evaluation based on Impact Pathways to avoid silos • Info sharing as info & network strengthening tool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language limitations, dominance of English • Artificial time pressures that affect collaboration & community building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize grassroots priorities & time frames • Engage meaningfully • Incentivize sharing of lessons to be learned
	Network for Women Professionals on P/CVERLT in CA*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing peer to peer learning in Network & with another regional network • Multi-year establishment process greatly boosted by in-person working conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological burnout from with working on difficult issues • Project thinking rather than impact thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share research; don’t simply extract experiences & knowledge • Facilitate learning by doing • Talk about what didn’t work & why
Knowledge platforms	ConnexUs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crowd-sourced Knowledge Platform to enable info sharing & collaboration • Grounded Accountability Model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Info silos & competition among (potential) partners • Language/translation limitations • Limited access to IT/ connectivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss what didn’t work & why • Integrate AI in a considered way to increase reach, being mindful of tech limitations
Implementers and donors with a co-creation focus	BSocial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-creation & social innovation; highly consultative with local communities • Knowing what <i>didn’t</i> work, to support transformation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research & Projectitis fatigue • Lack of donor understanding of social innovation • Dominant hierarchical structure of donors/IOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-creation gives back to communities; two-way learning rather than one-way extraction • Measure impact as defined by people affected
	Karibu Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory grant-making • Reflection questions: Liked, Learned, Lacked, Long For 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balancing participant & donor legal considerations • Ensuring flexibility & simplicity throughout grant cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be ready to support social movements • Intermediary organisations need models to address risk & power
	Kvinna till Kvinna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalized in-person, online & written learning fora • IT for info sharing & collaboration • Thematic learning days & practice groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners work in difficult & precarious environments • Staff & partners want to learn but are limited by money & time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term bi-directional partnerships yield the most impact • IT has benefits, but keep in mind security & accessibility
	Peace Direct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locally-led MEL working group • Online text-based exchange forum • Friday “internal learning days” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Localized approaches limited by template mentalities • Hunger for quick “results,” not structural & relational impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication & learning platforms are key • Support true bidirectional partnership

* P/C VERLT = Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism; CA = Central Asia

A **sense-making workshop** was held on February 19 -20, 2024, in which a representative of each case study, representatives of three of the PLI pilot projects, KPSRL staff and its Reference Group and representatives of the Dutch MFA participated in a highly interactive process of making sense of the research question and preliminary findings, as well as probing deeper into certain issues arising from the research. The objective was to meaningfully engage the diverse actors to review and validate some of the findings, while also eliciting additional input that naturally grew out of the consultative and participatory process. The learning calls and related feedback process, and the two-day participatory sense-making workshop provided co-creation space which contributed to the structuring and analysis of many of the elements in this guide. This has also included a process of sharing of interview findings, and validation by key collaborative study stakeholders.

The chance to delve deeper on these issues is "useful for my soul"

-Sense-making workshop participant

Based on their own experiences in working on sensitive issues and in sensitive contexts, a number of values and principles were maintained throughout the initiative, as summarized below.

Figure 3: Key Values Underlying the Collaborative Study

Key Values Underlying the Collaborative Study

- ▶ The need to understand the resource, time, and opportunity constraints that characterize the work environments of organisations receiving funds, as well as the volatile, sensitive and insecure contexts in which many operate
- ▶ The need to appreciate, recognise and acknowledge the power imbalance that can exist between those disbursing and those receiving the funds; while at the same time recognizing the potential of framing such funds not just as humanitarian donations but as investments in global comprehensive (human) security and prosperity
- ▶ The impact of power imbalances on communication and learning, as every step of programme design and implementation is affected by these dynamics, and that even seemingly "objective" indicators may reflect a bias
- ▶ The need to be aware of the reality of the continued impact of colonialism (often evident today as the unidirectional transmission of technical practices and operational assumption of what constitutes knowledge and how learning should happen in the field), the subsequent and ongoing processes of decolonisation, and the complexity of the subsequent dynamics, both at the international and the domestic levels
- ▶ The importance of a process of co-creation as a joint collaborative endeavour between and among stakeholders, that requires open, reflexive and interactive spaces among all actors. These principles were applied in the creation of this resource guide, with respect for limitations related to time and availability of respondents and participants.
- ▶ The need for applying systems thinking to understand the challenges and propose ways to improve the HDP nexus ecosystem through learning and effective uptake
- ▶ The value that both sides of the equation could yield by a fundamental rethink of learning, reflection and uptake through a process grounded in **reciprocal accountability** based on trust and shared values, rather than on micromanagement and oversight

2.2 Definitions

KPSRL's definition of "programmatic learning", summarized in the figure below, provided a starting point for the collaborative study.

Figure 4: KPSRL's Programmatic Learning Instrument

The Programmatic Learning Instrument (PLI)

PLI defines programmatic learning as "the process of capturing and distilling insights to drive adaptive programming and portfolio management, and doing so informing partners, donors and the wider SRoL sector through KPSRL's network."

"The overarching goal of the PLI is to enable stakeholders working in the SRoL sector to enhance the quality and impact of their policymaking, programming, implementation, and learning by facilitating and incentivising the co-creation and collective implementation of improved approaches to programmatic learning."

From The PLI Learning Journey, KPSRL

From this starting point, the term "programmatic learning" can be understood as shorthand for three interrelated concepts:

- ▶ **Learning**, or the process of taking an action, identifying how it unfolded and worked, and determining how to potentially do it better in the future based on the experience;
- ▶ **Reflection**, or the process of assessing information on a contemporary action and output/outcome, considering it on its own and in light of past similar experiences, and determining and analysing (often as a group), the why, how and "so what now?"
- ▶ **Uptake**, or the process of integrating what was understood through learning and reflection, into work methods, strategies, procedures, etc.

Conversations with and feedback from the case studies and other experts added further depth to understanding this concept in varying contexts. The integration of the tenets of co-creation enables additional insight and nuance. The lengthier definition and conceptualization provided below can both reveal the learning that came out of this collaborative study, and also provide the user of this guide with an additional conceptual foundation.

Annex 7.1: Glossary also briefly describes a number of the terms and concepts encountered and used throughout this resource guide.



Figure 5: Unpacking the Concept of Programmatic Learning

Unpacking the Concept of Programmatic Learning

Programmatic learning occurs in the context of a project, series of projects or programme of activities being implemented in an organizational or ad hoc context in which a task or objective has been identified and an idea or plan to achieve it has been agreed. It is a process of coming to understand the issue, challenge or problem to be solved through an agreed intervention or engagement, of seeing what is and is not having an impact in the short- or long-term, and of continually reflecting and potentially recalibrating or restructuring the intervention to improve the chances of success. It actively and intentionally brings together individual reflections and learning happening in the broader operating environment to generate new reflection and ideas. The likelihood of uptake and positive impact is enhanced if undertaken within an engagement that values inclusive and multi-directional work, exchange of experiences and the idea that there are many different and valid kinds of knowledge. Ideas and lessons may be compiled and shared over time through the experiences of the participating individuals, or through written documentation saved and shared in archives for future reference, to ensure experiences are not lost when a programme ends. Programmatic learning requires an ability to understand the specifics of engagements at a hyper-local level, while also feeding into and gaining from higher-order multi-sectoral conversations and exchange of experience, potentially across a diverse geographic span. Comprehensive programmatic learning requires a willingness to admit what may not work and why, to be open in the sharing of information to learn from peers (while respecting security concerns), a longitudinal approach to understanding long-term impact and how it should be assessed (and by whom) and a recognition of the interaction of a complex ecosystem of projects, policies and politics.

Reflection Questions

- ▶ **For implementers:** *How would you describe your approach to programmatic learning? What do you think is effective and what would you like to improve?*
- ▶ **For funders:** *When have you observed the most meaningful learning and uptake in the programmes that you fund? What were the conditions that enabled this to happen? What barriers prevent this from happening more often?*
- ▶ **For evaluators:** *To what extent do you encounter meaningful programmatic learning in your work? In your evaluation practice, is evaluation seen as a unidirectional process, or as a bidirectional learning engagement in itself?*
- ▶ **For researchers and scholars:** *Based on your reading of the literature, what have been the main changes in research and theory on learning and programmatic in the past three decades? Have you observed trends, or even paradigm shifts?*