

Improving your Programmatic Learning Journey

A Resource Guide for HDP Nexus
Practitioners

*Module 3. Learning and Uptake: A
Conceptual Framework*

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Module 3. Learning and Uptake: A Conceptual Framework

Module Summary

This module summarises key ideas that have informed this collaborative study. This includes academic work and practical reflections from a variety of relevant perspectives and disciplines. The selected concepts are organised along a range from the more traditional to the more innovative:

- ▶ Learning within the project design cycle
- ▶ Systems thinking
- ▶ Localisation and a decolonised approach to learning
- ▶ Co-creation
- ▶ Social innovation

A one-page chart provides a high-level summary of some of the literature and themes, while more resources that influenced the thinking about these issues are provided in **Annex 7.4: Bibliography**.

While much of this module was influenced by the literature review, thinking about this issue was also influenced by the case study participants; therefore some of their insights are included in the interest of integrating experience with academic insights.

3.1 Introduction to the Conceptual Framework

At its most basic, learning is an expansive concept, encompassing basic elements needed for human evolution and survival (which plants are poisonous, and how do we know?), individual experience (what rock climbing techniques are most effective, how do we know, and how do we learn them?), societal functioning (what are the best ways to make group decisions, and how do we know?) and countless other unremarkable examples. Individuals may learn to benefit solely themselves, or to benefit a group. It can be random, natural and unintentional, or planned, considered and intentional. It can be a combination of intentional (and unintentional) trial and error, with the error (ideally) influencing reflection, uptake of what was learned and instituting a new practice or mode of action in response.

Much has been written about various aspects of individual learning; about learning in the business or organisational space; about toolkits for monitoring, evaluation and learning; and about learning in the development or humanitarian sectors. **Annex 7.4: Bibliography** provides over 100 references, and even these represent only a fraction of what is available. **Figure 6: One-Page Resource Summary on Programmatic Learning** presented below provides a brief at-a-glance survey of some of the resources, organized by broad category, that the research team found useful. In the interest of

brevity, an effort was made to only include a few representative resources for each broad category, representing a broad selection of topics, publication formats and dates of publication.

However, even more revealing than what this survey and the more extensive bibliography show, is what they demonstrate are missing:

- ▶ While much has been written about learning, about general organisational development, and about specific humanitarian/aid and development contexts, there is far less looking at conflict-affected and fragile states or at peacebuilding, or looking through these lenses
- ▶ While more appreciation of the intersectionality of the HDP nexus has emerged in recent years, the complexity of the nexus in terms of learning and uptake is under-represented
- ▶ There is a wealth of tools and toolkits suggesting methods that should be used, but less analysing the extent to which such tools work well or not, are or are not used, and why
- ▶ There is little on the impact on programmatic learning of the power imbalances among donors and recipients in the HDP programmatic learning realm; of the drivers (past and present) of such imbalances; and, perhaps most importantly, their implications for the potential of and limitations to learning to enable more effective HDP nexus engagement
- ▶ There is a disconnect between the normative and the prescriptive and the increasingly popular political economy analysis framework that explicitly maps power and where power is held in a given ecosystem, which has implications for the implementation of programmes as well as the potential for learning, uptake and impact in such an ecosystem

The conceptual framework for this study will focus on what helps or hinders uptake and impact, as this is an issue with which policymakers and practitioners of all kinds grapple. The selected themes surveyed in this module aim to shed light on different ways of thinking about learning and uptake so readers may bring these ideas together in a manner that enables their own learning journey.

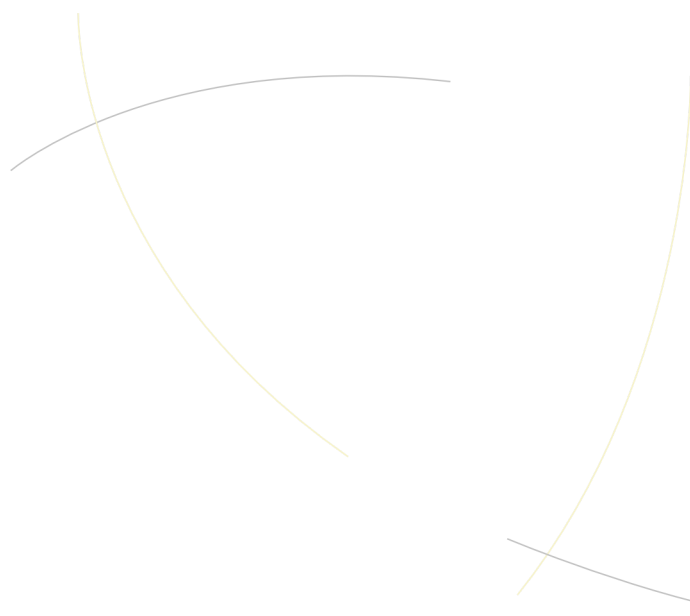


Figure 6: One-Page Resource Summary on Programmatic Learning

<p>Organizational Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Approaches for Organisational Learning: A Literature Review (2018)</i>: Comprehensive review of concepts surrounding organisational learning that bridge the divide between theory and practice. • <i>Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective (1978)</i>: Combines research and practice in business/organisational learning; an early toolkit. • Double loop learning in organizations (1977): Addresses common questions and concerns about organisational learning, with clear examples and references. • “Is Yours a Learning Organization?” (2008): Provides an overview and an online assessment tool to answer this question.
<p>Learning in the Humanitarian Sector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools for Knowledge and Learning A Guide for Development and Humanitarian Organisations (2006): A lengthy set of tools that may be tried by the practitioner. • Knowledge and Learning in Aid Organizations – A literature review with suggestions for further studies (2007): A theoretical review of literature with good reflections for practice. • Learning to Change: The Case for Systemic Learning Strategies in the Humanitarian Sector. (2022): Provides framework of 5 areas of focus for learning by humanitarian orgs.
<p>Power Imbalances in Design and Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do we go from here? Navigating power inequalities between development NGOs in the aid system (2024): Surveys and interview inform this study on the need for more equitable relationships and approaches. • Time to Decolonise Aid: Insights and lessons from a global consultation (2021): Describes the areas and modes of work for decolonizing aid, and a set of recommendations for INGOs, policy-makers and workers in the field. • Race, Power and Peacebuilding (2022): Looks at global trends affecting peacebuilding, offering insightful questions for the field, proposing areas of decolonial engagement. • Transforming partnerships in international cooperation (2023)
<p>Learning in the Development Sector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What Difference Does CLA Make to Development? USAID. (2020) • What Have We Learned About Learning? Unpacking the Relationship Between Knowledge and Organisational Change in Development Agencies. German Development Institute, Discussion Paper, 9/2021. • Oliver Serrat. Knowledge Solutions: Tools, Methods and Approaches to Drive Development Forward and Enhance its Effects. Asian Development Bank. 2010.
<p>Systems Thinking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Thinking in Systems. A Primer.” (Meadows, 2008) • “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making.” Harvard Business Review (2007)
<p>Programme Design and Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Craig Valters, Clare Cummings and Hamish Nixon. Putting learning at the centre: Adaptive development programming in practice. (2016): Useful short review on adaptive programming, but little on why it is not more often used. • Better Evaluation and Emergent Learning sites
<p>Learning in Conflict and Crisis Contexts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge Management Toolkit for the Crisis Prevention and Recovery Practice Area. UNDP, 2007. • Inconvenient realities: an evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and the rule of law in fragile in conflict affected contexts. Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 2023.

3.2 Learning within the Project Design and Implementation Lifecycle

Key Points

- ▶ Programme and project design processes are placing increasing emphasis on learning, demonstrating interest by donors in learning, uptake and impact; however, this is often an add-on to more traditional M&E approaches, and not a fundamental rethink of the way they operate and engage
- ▶ The data collected as indicators in these processes are key; the more that indicators of success and related timelines are developed by the people in the community itself the more meaningful they will be
- ▶ Bi-directional accountability (up to donors and also down to people affected by programming) is critical, and while evidence-based programming has become much more common, approaches that are less unidirectional and more collaborative are needed

Various approaches to evidence-based programming, performance- or results-based management or data driven design have been evolving within the HDP nexus for years, progressing through various iterations including logical frameworks (logframes), theories of change and associated constructs, and, more recently, adaptive programming and adaptive management. “Learning” in this context is often built into the project design and implementation lifecycle, and alternately referred to as monitoring and evaluation (M&E), monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL), or design, monitoring and evaluation (DME). For simplicity, MEL will be used here to refer to this approach to evidence-based project design as a whole.

One participant at the sense-making workshop noted that it is striking to observe that in these approaches, the learning tends to come last, if at all.

This emphasis on MEL and on gathering evidence to design and improve action, is in large part a response to pressures on individuals and institutions in the public sector to justify expenditures and activities in a context of increased demand for accountability, transparency and effectiveness. Evidence-based programming generally seeks to better direct resources and processes towards results.

The monitoring element is often done by the implementors who are required to regularly report against set project timeframes, indicators and benchmarks. At best this should be an active part of the process of adaptive management, enabling for fine-tuning, recalibration and meaningful stock-taking. At worst it can be (or be perceived by implementors as) heavy handed micro-management, and of a check-box approach to project implementation that rewards short-term thinking over long-term impact.

The evaluation element is often informed by an “assessment approach” that evaluates “past or present conduct to produce evidence of effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) on the basis of rigorous criteria, systematically applied” with a view to identifying “which past or current policies, programmes or practices have achieved the desired goals and effects, and to then systematically

endorsing or replicating these verified policies, programs and practices” (Miller and Rüdnick 2012, 15). Learning occurs within this context, often with evaluations or mid-term reviews or other reports as the main reference point. Monitoring, evaluation and learning hence serves to demonstrate the impact of past action and to distil what has worked and what has not, both within, and ideally across, specific circumstances and cases. Analysis and evidence-gathering is then mostly geared towards making general claims to provide a basis for more universal conduct, and develop a repository of known programming options, more so than towards designing interventions geared to address the particular (ibid, 15-17).

While there is a substantial body of work on “good” or “best” practices in MEL, some important questions arise about the effectiveness of such models. During discussions with representatives of the case studies and other experts, frequent comments emerged relating to the focus on and approach to “accountability.” All understand the need for accountability, but also highlight that this drive may come with an emphasis on compliance that manifests as a form of control with limited sensitivity to or flexibility for context-specific conditions. In addition, “accountability” can still too often be primarily construed as something implementing organisations “owe” to their donors (i.e., **upward accountability**) rather than as an imperative that relates as much – if not more so – to the groups, stakeholders and communities at the receiving end of the programmatic context (**downward accountability**). For example, case study ConnexUs has developed a [grounded accountability model](#) in the spirit of co-creation which starts from research with the people that programs are designed for and builds to tailored solutions. The researchers and programme managers focus on engaging and listening to the selected local communities.

Respondents also observe that, particularly among some large donors, the processes required to meet evidence-based programming requirements can sometimes become so onerous as to detract from the resources and time needed to meet the organisation’s objectives. The term “projectitis” was often heard as participants in the case studies reflected on how often relatively short project cycles and predetermined outcomes and targets can limit the space for meaningful learning and adaptation. Moreover, the complexity of the programme documentation required may necessitate outsourcing to consultants familiar with the format, process and jargon; consultants who are not necessarily intimately familiar with the context or the challenges addressed, let alone directly impacted by the context or intervention itself. This adds not only costs, but can create an additional gap between donors, intermediaries, and the people towards which projects should be oriented. And while it has become quite standard for evaluation to be included in project design, when these are developed by an outside consultant, this external process may miss out on useful internal reflection or engagement with affected communities, and may create an environment in which there is a sense of an adversarial relationship and external judgment. A more collaborative approach to all of these steps that brings together internal and external perspectives could be useful.

Learning in this context may be conceptualized as existing on a spectrum between “accountability” and “accompaniment,” where the former typically focuses on a hierarchical compliance and effectiveness, and the latter on a “walking along with” and “joint learning” process amongst donors, implementing organisations, and local stakeholders. A certain tension between these two poles may be experienced by those stakeholders aspiring to an adaptive and flexible approach, and appreciating these dynamics can help to reduce the potential for friction and enhance the potential for collaboration. There is also a natural link to the upward/downward accountability dilemma and imperatives, and the question of how decision-making, power, agency and responsibility are shared.

Legitimate questions also arise about who drafts a donor funding approach and associated call for project applications; who determines how donor funds should be allocated and why; who determines the timeframes for project implementation and measurement of success; who determines what is acceptable as evidence of impact; and who determines what constitutes “legitimate” forms of learning and knowledge. These questions and factors about design, process and implementation can all reflect, reinforce or begin to lessen power imbalances, implicit biases and assumptions.

While evidence is always made up of information, information on its own is not evidence. Information becomes evidence when applied in an evaluative and analytic process to confirm, validate or disprove a claim (Miller and Rüdnick, 2012, p. 6). There is little consensus about what constitutes relevant evidence, and whether and when evidence can be generalized from one context in order to be applicable to another. There can also be a bias towards evidence that:

- ▶ can be allegedly quantified (consider the prevalence of demand for SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound indicators);
- ▶ exists in writing as opposed to an oral tradition; and that
- ▶ exists in a dominant language which excludes understanding by those most affected.

At minimum, awareness and acknowledgement of these knowledge biases is important in beginning to refocus learning and the accumulation of experience downward.

There are some positive trends. The Dutch MFA, for example, is working to ensure sufficient clarity and simplicity of calls for applications, and communicating with current or prospective partners. Calls for applications that require only a short one-page concept note in the first phase are noted positively. That said, interlocutors interviewed and participants at the sense making workshop observed that even when calls for proposals may be drafted in a way intended to elicit more innovative approaches, this opportunity may not always be grasped by applicants. A respondent from the Network of Women Professionals noted seeing more joint processes in terms of donors developing ideas for project with partners, noting that this is a good trend. However, the extent of meaningful joint work can vary greatly, and there is still a strong reliance on project based engagement that limits flexibility and investment in learning.

A special feature in [The Economist in January 2024](#) focused on the rise of private sector trust-based philanthropy, and in the process revealed experiences about micromanagement that are familiar to many in the HDP nexus. “I don’t see how you can sit in your plush foundation office and think you understand what is needed in a local context.”

“Patriarchy existed for millennia;” what is a reasonable timeframe to assess the work of the feminist movement?

In addition, discussions on the importance of donor support for core funding rather than discrete or atomized project funding not only provides space for ownership and adaptive programming, but demonstrates trust, trust in the relationship, and enables flexibility. Longer project implementation periods – for example, moving to five-,

eight-, or longer engagement periods – can build partnerships and relationships. This has been adopted by the Dutch MFA, and is also noted by Kvinna till Kvinna as a core feature of their work that enables more impactful work as well as learning and uptake.

Reflection Questions

- ▶ *Have you had the opportunity to engage in setting the indicators for a project by working together with the donor on developing a MEL framework? What elements of the process did you find most useful? How would you improve such a process?*
- ▶ *Timeframes are another element of the evidence and indicator review process. What do you think are good guidelines for setting the timelines for reviewing the impact of an engagement? How would you define short-, medium- or long-term thinking?*

Further Reading on Design Approaches to Programming

- ▶ [“The Hague Conclusions from the Workshop on Strategic Design in Public Policy”](#) addresses improvements to how the way that knowledge is used for action in public policy, focusing on the means of knowledge generation, and the factors inhibiting responsible generation and successful use of knowledge for public policy.
- ▶ [“Trying it on for Size: Design and International Public Policy?”](#) (Miller and Rudnik, 2011) is a talk given to designers by two researchers at the UN Institute for Disarmament Research at the event, “The Limits of Design: Designing for Security and Sustainable Development”.
- ▶ Miller, Derek and Lisa Rudnick. [“A Prototype for Evidence-Based Programme Design for Reintegration”](#) (Miller and Rudnick, 2014) is an introduction to the evidence-based programme design tool.
- ▶ [“Evaluation Trends: Moving Beyond the OECD-DAC Criteria.”](#) (Giodano and Ellina, 2017) focuses on the, “widening recognition of the need to learn, iterate and adapt through evaluation as a continuous activity rather than a separate task.”

3.3 Learning through Systems Thinking - The Whole and its Parts

Key Points

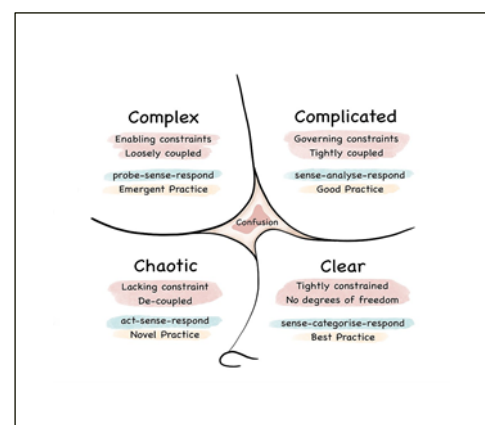
- ▶ Elements of systems thinking can provide another framework for thinking about the dynamic and multi-level environment in which programmes are designed and implemented, and in which learning and uptake happens.
- ▶ Understanding the various scenarios of complexity that can be possible in a given implementing environment can enable the forward-thinking needed for adaptive programming, and can reflect the role of learning throughout the adaptive programme implementation process.
- ▶ The concept of systems thinking can also provide a reminder that the whole may be more than the sum of its parts, and enable a more holistic view and assessment of a project or programme being implemented

Systems thinking has developed as a transdisciplinary approach to the study of systems as cohesive groups of interrelated, interdependent components. Systems theory is relevant given the multiple and varied actors (donors, implementers, beneficiaries/participants, governments) involved in constant interaction throughout HDP Nexus work, and brings together individual and organisational units of analysis. A particularly helpful model in this regard is the Cynefin framework presented below.

Figure 7: Cynefin Framework

- ▶ Cynefin, pronounced "ku-nev-in," is a Welsh word that translates as "place" or "habitat."
- ▶ It is based on concepts from knowledge management and organisational strategy.
- ▶ Cynefin is a sensemaking framework that provides a context to think through the details of a situation, classify it and understand the appropriate response to make the most of the situation.
- ▶ Cynefin Framework has 4 domains– Clear, Complicated, Complex and Chaotic, with implications for planning and learning
 - Contexts can change from one domain to another
 - Important to know which domain is the most relevant, although several can coexist at the same time
 - Complex domains call for flexibility to develop new responses

Cynefin Framework



Within the Cynefin Framework, Complex Domains are particularly relevant and common in HDP Nexus work. As described by Snowden and Boone (2007), “in Complex Domains

- ▶ A large numbers of interacting elements are involved.
- ▶ The interactions are nonlinear, and minor changes can produce disproportionately major consequences.
- ▶ The system is dynamic, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and solutions can't be imposed; rather, they arise from the circumstances. (This is frequently referred to as emergence.)
- ▶ The system has a history, and the past is integrated with the present; the elements evolve with one another and with the environment; and evolution is irreversible.
- ▶ Though a complex system may, in retrospect, appear to be ordered and predictable, hindsight does not lead to foresight because the external conditions and systems constantly change.
- ▶ Unlike in ordered systems (where the system constrains the agents), or chaotic systems (where there are no constraints), in a complex system the agents and the system constrain one another, especially over time. This means that we cannot forecast or predict what will happen.”

This inherent appreciation of complexity and the effects of interaction among varying elements is relevant for thinking about the HDP Nexus space, whether at a local or global level.

Systems thinking can therefore contribute to approaches to programmatic learning. It is important to understand the kind of domain (see Cynefin Framework above) in which the learning is taking place, and to revisit this understanding regularly in order to make adjustments if the domain has changed (for example, if a complicated domain has become complex). This can be an element of adaptive programming, and should be approached jointly as a process involving the implementor as well as the donor.

The domain determines also how learning can be formulated and applied – clear domains enable standard operating procedures (**best practice**); complicated domains call for expert judgement (**good practice**); complex domains call for ongoing innovation and regular feedback about the effectiveness of each approach and initiative (**emergent practice**); and chaotic domains call for learning about maintaining stability and crisis management (**novel practice**).

The domain also determines the sequencing of analysis required in learning – for simple domains a classic and linear **sense -> categorise -> respond** cycle is sufficient, whereas in complex domains learning requires **testing/probing -> observing/sensing the response -> responding**.

Another useful concept when thinking about learning within systems is the notion of single and double loop learning. This framework is also sensitive to the complexity of learning in dynamic systems, and can feed reflection on factors that can promote uptake and transformation. “[Double loop learning in organizations](#)” (Argyris, 1977) explains this approach.

Single loop learning is considered to be learning that is instrumental and aimed at making adjustments to correct a problem or mistake that may be identified. However it does not address

issues of **causality**. The theory of action underlying the approach therefore remains unchanged. Successful single-loop learning permits an organisation to carry out its present policies or achieve its existing objectives, but does not lead to reconsideration of underlying assumptions. HDP Nexus project outcome evaluations frequently demonstrate single loop learning because they only evaluate the results based on intended outcomes, do not question organisational approaches nor factor in external contributors and other actors.

Double loop learning considers causality, and potentially the transformation of organisational values and norms. Double loop learning imagines knowledge through two feedback loops that connect observed effects with organisational values and strategies. Learning and experience affect not only the articulation of goals, but requires an ongoing process of grappling with assumptions, understanding causality dynamics and re-imagining what could be possible.

Various example of systems thinking were evident among some of the case studies. Kvinna till Kvinna's long-term engagement and global scope of work facilitates a process of discrete parts of their work feeding into understandings of global trends – the whole. ECCP as a community of practice aims to provide space in which the complexity of both environmental engagement and conflict transformation as specific topics naturally interact.

Reflection Questions

- ▶ *Think about one of your projects, or one of the places where you have recently worked. Which of the four domain types from the Cynefin framework best captures the environment in which you were working?*
- ▶ *If you have been involved in a programme or project for a longer period of time (for example, for 5 or more years), have you seen a change in the domain in which you were working, or a multiplicity of domain characteristics? If you were working in such a dynamic environment, how much flexibility did you have to adaptively managed and implement your programme?*

Further Reading

- ▶ [“Know your Domain - the Cynefin Framework,”](#) (Connor, 2018) describes the Framework and its implications for leaders.
- ▶ [“Thinking in Systems. A Primer.”](#) (Meadows, 2008) provides an introduction to systems analysis and enhances understanding of how systems work, which is helpful to understanding why they create problems that are very resistant to improvement.
- ▶ Snowden, David and Boone, Mary. [“A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,”](#) Harvard Business Review
- ▶ Darling, Marilyn, Guber, Heidi; Smith, Jillaine; and Stiles, James, [“Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning and Adaptation,”](#) *The Foundation Review*, 8:1.

3.4 Learning through Localisation and Decolonial Approaches to Engagement

Key Points

- ▶ The concept of localisation in the HDP nexus and programmatic learning context is based on the principle of truly including participants/“beneficiaries” in programme design and engagement, not simply allocating a certain portion of funding from the centre to the periphery; to be meaningful it requires localising decision-making and power
- ▶ Decolonised approaches to learning require an honest look at the power dynamics rooted in historical structural and social practices in the interest of breaking free of that power imbalance
- ▶ While often a controversial topic, growing evidence suggests that if done well, this approach will increase the likelihood of impact and positive results

The concept of decolonisation very often sparks debate and critical discussions, and can lead to discomfort and disagreements among stakeholders involved in peace, security and development work. Yet due to the emergence of concepts such as localisation, bottom-up approaches, co-creation and other such avenues of work, it is a term that requires analysis and reflection.

For case study participants, decolonisation is a concept that oscillates in its usage: for many it is useful in signalling unequal power relations and the need to make a conscious effort to deconstruct these, while for others it is problematic for its condemnatory (blaming) tone and a perceived association with victimhood and a perceived lack of agency. A North/South framing can be oversimplistic and reduce nuance. Interlocutors from the case studies emphasised its varied connotations depending on different historical experiences of colonisation (for example in Colombia, Central Asia, and the Western Balkans). For yet others the term signifies the latest trend and a buzzword that requires more content and action to be meaningful.

A related contemporary debate within the aid, peace, humanitarian and security sectors, revolves around the concept of “localisation” within these interconnected fields. Localisation in this context has been defined by Véronique de Geoffroy and François Grünewald in 2017 as a process that, “aims to return local actors, whether civil society organisations or local public institutions, to the centre of the humanitarian system.” The idea emerged from the [World Humanitarian Summits in 2016](#) and 2021 and resulted in pledges by major donors to provide at least 25% of their funding through local actors among other significant changes (often referred to as the “[Grand Bargain commitments](#)”). These commitments are also intended to influence discussions on localisation across the HDP nexus more broadly – and focus attention on local efforts – in order to start addressing structural power imbalances that contribute to inequality and that contribute to violence, insecurity and further barriers to development.

However, the slow progress in terms of meaningful localisation points to the need to consider the broader HDP nexus ecosystem and the challenges to systemic change rooted in unequal power balances and the legacy of both racism and colonialism within this ecosystem. A growing number of

global, national and local actors point to the need to [shift power](#) and engage in a conscious [decolonisation process of aid provision](#). Through this conceptual lens, more effective programmatic learning is impossible without a process of decolonizing learning.

Figure 8: Key Principles of Decolonised Learning

Key Principles of Decolonised Learning

- ▶ The patterns and practices of colonization are often primarily understood to refer to the divide between the Global North/South, but they can also reside in more contextual and localized divides such as central/federal, capital/remote locations and urban/rural.
- ▶ Decolonizing approaches require a commitment to open communication between stakeholders based on needs and interests of those most affected by violence and developmental barriers. A particular request made by participating organisations in the study was for a push within international organisations, and among their decision-making circles to be aware of and understand the power they hold. Imbalances can be created through funding schemes and project cycles, and this can begin to be remedied by a commitment to step back, trust partners, and give a real voice and decision-making power to marginalised communities worldwide.
- ▶ Genuine decolonisation requires long-term commitment to the deconstruction of barriers created within international systems. This requires a collective effort, focused on the interconnectedness of systems (decision-making, grant and funding structures, project cycles, M & E, etc.)

“There’s a way that the ECCP community can call attention to these issues on the global stage and impact policy change, or dynamic change of colonisation, and then there’s the internal side of the way that we can try to decolonise”

Genuine efforts to decolonize learning within the HDP nexus involves discussing and addressing a range of complex issues located both internally and externally in stakeholders of these fields, all of which exist outside of a simple project implementation framework, yet inevitably impact implementation, learning, uptake and impact. A full exploration of these issues and dynamics is beyond the scope of this guide, but the following offers basic food for thought in terms of thinking about how these dynamics affect engagement and the programmatic learning process. (Additional terms and concepts are included in **Annex 7.1: Glossary**.)

- ▶ **Structural racism:** the normalization and systematization of all dynamics routinely privileging white people whilst generating endemic negative outcomes for people of colour globally. Programmatic learning can be limited by these often unseen or under-appreciated structural characteristics.
- ▶ **The colonial gaze:** the prevalence of white ethnocentric views presented as superior to those of non-white groups, leading to a biased perception that whiteness is equivalent to progress and that Eurocentric institutions hold the only answer to the problems of the

Global South. Privileging one set of knowledge over another, or favouring a unidirectional approach to programme design and implementation, can reinforce this power imbalance and inhibit real opportunity for learning, uptake or impact.

- ▶ **Decolonisation:** An acknowledgment and unlearning of the dominant power dynamics occurring in HDP nexus-relevant sectors, ensuring ample space for listening, partnering and sharing power with those most affected by violence, injustice and barriers to development. It is a principle as much as a process. It involves deconstructing colonial ideologies regarding the implicit or explicit, presumed or stated, superiority of and privilege of Western thought and approaches. In programmatic learning, this often relates to establishing a learning agenda, process and feedback mechanism that not only involves those affected by violence and injustice, but that puts their perspectives, needs and concerns as the focal point of dialogue and intervention, and recognises the value of knowledge derived from lived experience and indigenous practices.
- ▶ **Decoloniality:** An analysis of the power relations that began as a consequence of processes of conquest and colonization, which includes a comprehensive understanding of their lasting effects, which include the predominance of a Eurocentric, often imposed, view of the world.

Reflection Questions

- ▶ Have you encountered localisation as a concept or reality in your work? What was that experience like? Did everyone have the same definition of the term, and the same expectations for what it should mean?
- ▶ Have you had conversations on the topic of decolonisation, either within your organisation, or with your partners or donor? What was this process like? What lessons did you learn from this engagement that you would bring to future discussions?

Further Reading

- ▶ [More than the Money: Localisation in Practice](#). (de Geoffroy & Grünwald, 2017) explores aid localisation and the commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain through two case studies – Myanmar and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Recommendations emphasise the need to strengthen humanitarian action and partnerships with local actors.
- ▶ [Time to Decolonise Aid](#). (Peace Direct, 2020). Grounded in an online consultation with over 150 practitioners, this report explores the power dynamics and imbalances of power in the HDP Nexus space, the impact of structural racism and visions for a decolonised system.
- ▶ [Community philanthropy and #shiftthepower](#). This resource and hash tag provides food for thought on people-led initiatives and philanthropy, and shifting powering away from a “helping” mentality and towards a partnership approach. It provides space for allies of this vision to engage and share experiences and ideas.

3.5 Co-creation as a Principle of Engagement and as a Process for Learning

Key Points

- ▶ Co-creation is not the same as consultation, as it requires an ongoing relationship among implementors, donors and stakeholders, and is based on a two-way street of input, feedback, learning, reflection and decision-making
- ▶ Learning is therefore an integral part of the process rather than an end-of project procedure, with knowledge production influencing a given activity or initiative, but also feeding back to the community of stakeholders

Co-creation, as a working methodology for both engagement and ongoing programmatic learning, requires joint production of innovative knowledge outputs through a process of establishing partnerships that allow equality in the creation of knowledge and action. Collaboration can occur in the setting of a knowledge agenda, the identification of agreed knowledge (or learning) questions, and the joint implementation of research and outreach activities among stakeholders. Knowledge production requires the inclusion of multiple issues and types of knowledge, and accesses knowledge that is socially distributed across professional and geographical boundaries. This is where co-creation becomes an interesting and valuable tool to begin to address power imbalances due to the spirit of sharing power and decision-making that underlies the concept.

Various principles underpin co-creation as a collaborative, participatory and power-sharing process of action and knowledge creation. Partnerships require active participation in social practices and cultures of knowledge development and dissemination by all stakeholders, which demands mutual commitment to the process, an agreement around common goals for knowledge production and the sharing of resources in the process of research development. Co-creation requires constant communication among stakeholders with the aim of integrating different types of inputs and actions. This requires long-term engagement in relationships based on trust, and a natural understanding that accountability must be bi-directional.

Co-creation is a relatively new term that overlaps in various ways with some more established literature and tools relevant to participation in policy creation. As addressed during the collaborative study's sense-making workshop, experiences with check-box approaches to participation in practice raises fears that the potential impact of co-creation will be similarly blunted. This knowledge in itself can help to avoid this outcome.

There are examinations of the similarities and differences between co-creation and participation, such as, "[Is co-creation more than participation?](#)" (Prager, 2016). One example of intellectual synergy with long-held approaches is Arnstein's (1969) well-known ladder of participation. This conceptual ladder has eight rungs, associated with increasing shifts in power towards the participants. They are similar in that they focus attention on power differences and the degree of participation of the "have nots". Rungs 3 - 5 (informing, consultation and placation) of the ladder are relatively weak forms of participation that only allow token stakeholder contributions. Genuine

participation through power sharing and joint decision making (rungs 6 - 8) only occur in the context of a partnership. Both participation and co-creation involve processes of doing while simultaneously pursuing mutual learning to produce “actionable knowledge”. However, co-creation does not stop with “actionable knowledge” but requires practical outcomes. ***Genuine participation can thus be understood as a precondition for co-creation.***

The process of co-creation is often made up of three stages, which can occur sequentially, but also may overlap depending on timing, location, and resources available to stakeholders.

- ▶ **Stage 1– Co-design:** This stage requires integration among stakeholders to develop a viable research issue and research agenda. This demands communication and negotiation in the creation of a research question, articulation of shared objectives and a methodology agreed by all stakeholders. In the experience of the case studies, co-design helps uncover the needs and interests of the individuals and communities on the ground.
- ▶ **Stage 2 – Co-production:** This stage is characterized by a multidisciplinary perspective combining different disciplines, sources of knowledge (academic, practical, experiential) and constant exchanges between researchers and stakeholders. Valuing the unique contribution of each type of knowledge in the process helps avoid favouring dominant forms of knowledge and reinforcing power imbalances.
- ▶ **Stage 3 – Outreach and co-dissemination:** This stage includes outputs being published in accessible language(s) for all stakeholders, translation of results into understandable data that is useful for all interested parties, and a process continued by an integral discussion about the validity, applicability, and relevance of research results by all partners. The main value guiding co-dissemination is *shared utility of research and knowledge for all stakeholders.*

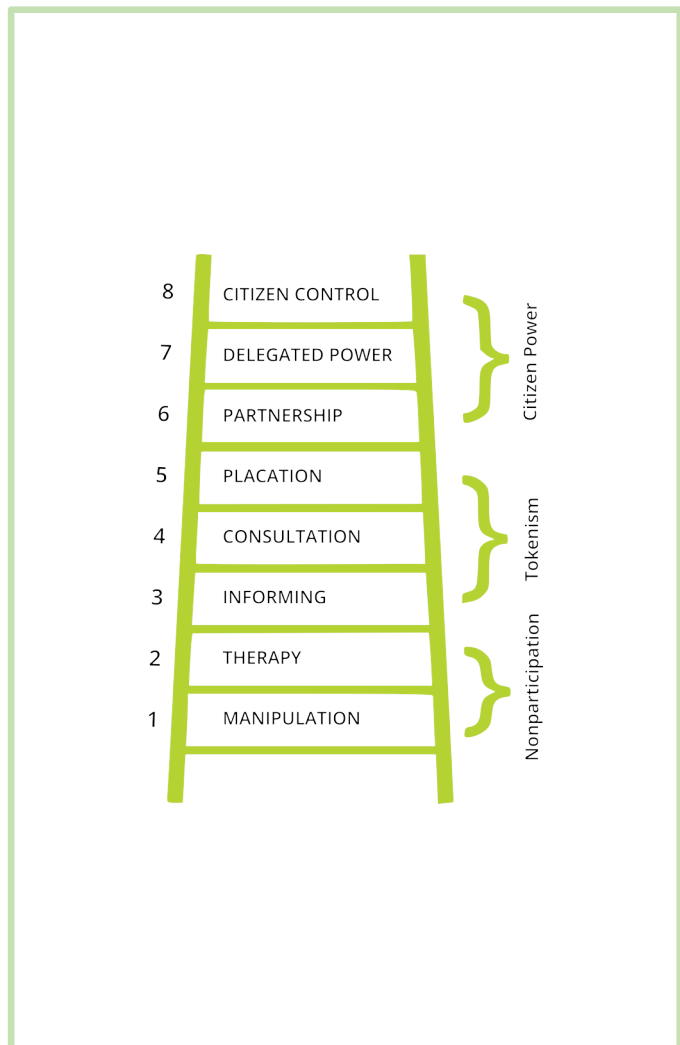


Figure 9: Co-creation tools

Co-creation tools

The Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Guide includes the following tools for co-creation

- ▶ [Tuckman \(forming, norming, storming, performing\)](#)
- ▶ [Belbin team roles](#)
- ▶ [Scenario planning](#)
- ▶ [Conflict styles](#)
- ▶ [Partnership agreements](#)
- ▶ [Open space](#)
- ▶ [Document and Summarise](#)
- ▶ [Visioning](#)
- ▶ [Circle of Coherence](#)

Source: [MSP Tools](#), The MSP Guide, 2016 – also available in French and Spanish

Beyond the advantages of collaborative participation and communication between different partners, and reflecting values of localisation and decolonial approaches to engagement and learning, co-creation demands power-sharing between stakeholders at all levels of research: in discussing research questions and objectives, in openness and flexibility in the constant communication during the implementation phases of knowledge creation and in serious reflection about the genuine utility of research for all those embedded in the co-creative partnerships.

Commitment to co-creation is intrinsic to the work of one of the case studies in this initiative, BSocial (based in Colombia). In discussions and also in the sense-making workshop, they explained how a co-creation approach can also contribute to addressing problems of research and intervention fatigue, and excessive “projectitis” derived from short-term, imposed international practices that drain the interest and energy of local communities, producing little to no impact. Co-creation, when understood as knowledge creation that effectively gives something useful, tangible, and sustainable for communities on the ground to benefit from in their bottom-up activities, can help gain legitimacy and trust with communities on the ground.

In discussions with various case studies regarding the value of co-creation methodologies there is an evident concern with how genuinely participatory

The Cup Metaphor

During the sense-making workshop, one participant noted the metaphor of a cup. When someone is holding a cup there can be an impulse to want to go and fill it; however one should look to see what may already be in the cup. What is already there? What was in there before? What can be added? Should anything be added? What would be the impact of adding something to what is already in the cup?

co-creation can be, as it has become an increasingly used buzzword in international practices within the HDP nexus. During the sense-making workshop some participants noted that they are worried that they are already seeing this word and concept being watered down to a synonym for consultation or collaboration, as opposed to the fundamentally restructured and rebalanced process that it should be. For example, [a USAID guide on co-creation](#) is more internally managerial, and heavily focussed on issues related to competitive or non-competitive procurement, even viewing the process as “time bound” (p. 23). This is a quite different interpretation of the term than the one described here.

For co-creation to be useful it requires an interest by all stakeholders in learning, rather than being interpreted as a synonym for consultation. It is often a messy process that requires extended periods of brainstorming and discussion of research alternatives and sources of knowledge, which leads to a demand for time, flexibility and adaptability. Co-creation requires willingness to change the balance of power in knowledge creation, permitting individuals and communities to actively engage in decision-making.

Figure 10: Co-Creation Guidance

Co-creation Guidance	
<i>You're on the right track to co-creation if:</i>	<i>You might need to rethink your understanding of co-creation if:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ You and your partners view the process as a set of principles, not a one-off technique. ▶ There are various forms of knowledge present in the process: experiential, local, scientific, practitioner-based, hybrid. ▶ Your timeframe anticipates a meaningful process of co-creation, at the outset and throughout implementation ▶ Communication between partners is open, flexible and permits a flow of ideas and proposals that includes all voices within the collaborative network. ▶ You deliver outputs that are translatable to all contexts relevant for the work being done and permits a variety of products that can help cover the needs and interests of all involved stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ You think co-creation and consultation are the same thing ▶ The project's guidance is co-opted by a particular form of knowledge (usually academic or narrowly scientific). ▶ Your timeframe is rigid and limited; there is no time for a “messy” process ▶ You continue to develop your programming based on inflexible log frames and require reporting to the output level. ▶ It becomes a box-ticking exercise that seeks to simply include local actors in just the implementation of research and knowledge creation, or to simply fulfil funding criteria. ▶ Timing pressures between stakeholders lead to impositions and demands that reinforce the power asymmetries occurring within a given partnership.

A process of co-creation may seem like an impossible ideal. Co-creation's requirement for adaptability and flexibility can often lead to projects deviating from what they originally agreed to do, a constant concern for donors in the field. Challenges and barriers abound, including time pressures, funding pressures, a lack of shared understanding of what "co-creation" means, and pressures for "results based work." There can be legal hurdles as well, as some donors are constrained to explicit donor rather than partner co-creation roles. The Karibu Foundation must be mindful of its commitment to a participatory grantmaking process while also balancing legal accountability to the Norwegian Board. However if these pressures block or prevent meaningful co-creation processes, the comment of one of the participant in the sense-making workshop could prove relevant: "co-creation of what and for what?"

However, learning in the context of co-creation is taking place, including in various ways among the seven case studies. The table below summarizes the funding models and approaches to learning applied by the case studies that intentionally applied a co-creation approach to their work.

Figure 11: Case Study Funding Models and Approaches to Learning

Funding models in the case studies with a co-creation approach		
Case Study	Model	Approach to Learning
BSocial	Partnership with INGOs (e.g. Impunity Watch)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Social innovation as a formula for development work ▶ Regular review and documentation of lessons learned, discussions of failure to learn and transform projects
Karibu Foundation	Direct funding to national/local NGOs, process and funding recommendations made by core group from social movements, participatory grantmaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Current evaluation process of the pilot ▶ Participatory research on the grant process ▶ Regular reflection processes around the categories LIKED, LEARNED, LACKED, and LONG FOR ▶ "The road is built as we walk it"
Kvinna till Kvinna	National offices, funding through long-term partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Annual dialogue meeting with partners ▶ Program Days with global program staff ▶ Results Days (~ 5 hours; online or IRL) ▶ After Action Reports (not obligatory) ▶ Collaborative thematic learning days (~90 minutes) ▶ Advocacy practice group (~every 3 weeks); regular org. practices to foster learning – learning days
Peace Direct	Direct funding to national/local NGOs, funding through long-term partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Locally-led MEL working group with HQ staff and partners ▶ Direct feedback and data collection from work in the communities to PD to enable rapid responses and adjustment ▶ Friday as an internal learning day with no meetings

Reflection Questions

- ▶ *Have you ever engaged in a process of co-creation? What were some of the characteristics of this engagement? How did your experience differ from other activities in which co-creation principles were not applied?*
- ▶ *What do you think are the main differences between co-creation and participation or consultation? What potential advantages or challenges does each approach bring to work in your sector?*
- ▶ *Think about a project or programme you are currently engaged in. Do you think a co-creation approach would be useful in developing future phases of the initiative? How would you seek to persuade stakeholders – whether a target participating community or a donor – that a co-creation approach would be beneficial?*

Further Reading

As co-creation is a relatively new term and there can be a lack of clarity about its principle, intent and processes, this lengthier set of resources with brief annotation is provided.

- ▶ Cindy Horst and Marta Bivand's (2018) PRIO policy brief "Co-creating knowledge: creative collaborations between researchers, artists, policymakers and practitioners" offers a very precise description of co-creative practices, including a description of the stages, dilemmas and possibilities within research.
- ▶ Carlos Nupia and Laura Valencia (2023) "Understanding mechanisms of knowledge co-production in peace research projects supported by international cooperation" offers quite a comprehensive guide to the literature underpinning co-creation as well as different models and methods applicable in the peacebuilding field.
- ▶ [Co-creation: an interactive guide](#), (USAID, 2022) contributes to understanding co-creation, showcasing different conversations and ideas underpinning the term, its possibilities for competitive and non-competitive work, and some examples of co-creative dissemination and research outputs.
- ▶ "Designing public policy for co-production: theory, practice and change" (Durose and Richardson, 2016): as traditional technocratic ways of policy design are denounced as inadequate to cope with difficult dilemmas, co-production is presented as a more democratic alternative.
- ▶ Galgano M. and Dalli D. (2014), "Theory of value co-creation: a systematic literature review": offers various perspectives and research streams explaining the co-creation literature, highlighting avenues of engagement and suggestions for implementation.
- ▶ Ind N. and Coates N. (2013), "The meanings of co-creation": A practical review that suggests how stakeholders, and particularly end-users can be encouraged to collaborate with one another to meet their needs for socialisation and meaning making, suggesting how organisations can influence and use co-creation effectively.
- ▶ Jasanoff S. (2004), "States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order" establishes the connections between knowledge creation, social identity, institutions and discourses, providing analysis on the relations between science, power and culture.
- ▶ Ladisch. V. and Yakinthou C. (2020) "Cultivated collaboration in transitional justice practice and research: reflections on Tunisia's voices on memory project": A reflective narration of a peacebuilding co-creative project geared towards issues of truth and empowerment of women survivors of conflict.
- ▶ [The Parable of the Blobs and the Squares](#) video, which makes the case for "co-production"

3.6 Social Innovation in Support of Adaptation and Learning

Key Points

- ▶ A social innovation approach is a structured process aimed at identifying both problem and solutions, explicating recognizing that systemic factors may serve as barriers or hindrances to success
- ▶ For this reason, the process and analysis includes actions at the individual level, the institutional level, and the “disruptive” level, to address the multi-level dynamics
- ▶ A process of creative thinking, prototyping, testing, recalibrating and upscaling enable an intentional yet adaptive approach

Complementary to co-creation, social innovation focuses on the creative process for eliciting new solutions (in the form of products, services, markets, and processes) that can address societal goals. Such outcomes lead to new or improved capabilities, relationships, and better use of resources, enhancing society’s ability to act. Within public and social policy, and as a growing area of research for grassroots, non-governmental and civil society organisations, social innovation is focused on creating solutions to problems and needs of vulnerable people in a way that not only meets their aspirations, but that generates a tangible improvement of their quality of life and social relations. The inherently consultative and reflective approach is built on ongoing learning and adaptability in the pursuit of effective and sustainable uptake.

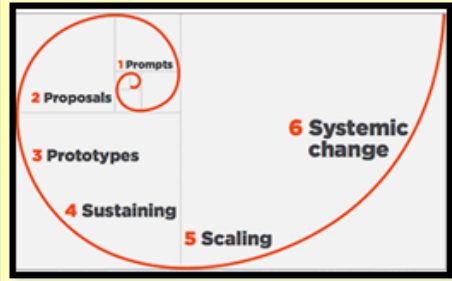
Social innovation’s ability to introduce new products, processes, and programs, brings the opportunity to change some of the basic routines, resources, authority flows and beliefs of the social system in which innovation happens. To harness this opportunity, social innovation needs to meet two requirements: a) it should be perceived as something new to the user, territory, sector or intervention site, and b) it must lead to improvement: something that is more effective and/or efficient than what exists already.

Social innovation is often interpreted as a possible answer to social market failures in the provision of public goods. To fulfil these criteria, social innovation requires three levels of operability:

- ▶ An **incremental level** that addresses identified market failures effectively and is often focused on the creation of products.
- ▶ An **institutional level** that can reconfigure existing market structures and patterns, focused on markets.
- ▶ A **disruptive level** which seeks to change cognitive frames of reference to alter societal systems and structures, this is often focused on politics.

Prototyping an idea in the first phase to then allow for upscaling after the proof of concept has been done can be a useful technique. In addition, adaptive programming, while seemingly just reflecting common sense, could in time replace the log frame.

Figure 12: Six Stages of Social Innovation

<p>A social innovation process is pursued through 6 different stages, each of which is presented briefly below:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prompts, 2. Proposals, 3. Prototypes 4. Sustaining actions 5. Scaling actions and 6. Systemic change. 		 <p><i>Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan (2010)</i></p>
1. Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A team begins by coherently defining a common understanding of a particular problem ▶ The team also considers indicators for the need for some social change (bad performance, lack of provisions, budgetary cuts, outdated systems and processes) ▶ The team considers the root causes of these needs and combines them with inspiration (creativity centred on the latest evidence) ▶ Prototyping highlights the need for social innovation by creating spaces to address problems. 	
2. Prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The proposals stage is where ideas are developed; this phase sees the generation of ideas and a focus on finding solutions. ▶ Methods such as design thinking, crowdsourcing or ideas competitions are utilized to generate new approaches and perspectives to a particular problem ▶ The team combines different perspectives, disciplines, and mindsets to catalyse social innovation; this phase is marked by active collaboration and participation. 	
3. Prototyping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ New ideas and formulations require piloting through prototypes and pilot projects which occur in small environments that permit changes and adaptation. ▶ Learning is crucial to prototyping as lessons learned, failure and discussions on alternatives often occur at this stage. ▶ A practical understanding of potential solutions through prototyping can lead to shifts in concepts, requiring the testing of other different alternatives to find an ideal fit. ▶ As prototyping requires the testing of ideas, this can take the shape of pilots within the public sector or start-ups in the private sector. 	
4. Sustaining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ This is where social innovation becomes concerned with sustainability, hence a need for establishing structures and processes. ▶ This dialogue towards the creation of an organisation model includes discussions about governance structures, financial sustainability, and performance measurement. ▶ Leadership is addressed and defined at the end of this stage. The sustaining phase can be understood as the space where the idea becomes everyday practice, either because it can be sustained indefinitely or as it reaches a moment when it is no longer needed. 	
5. Scaling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Scaling for social purposes, with the interest of rapid diffusion of a product or a process, often requires open-source approaches and the creation of collaborative networks. ▶ Discussions regarding funding occurs at this level, as social innovation addresses large numbers of users (citizens) rather than individual consumers, third parties such as state institutions, foundations and donors must be discussed, in particular to enable further development. ▶ The scaling phase can be interpreted as the moment for growing and spreading social innovations. 	

6. System change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ This stage is marked by genuine transformations at the societal level, educating stakeholders that simply combining technological and social innovations does not immediately lead to the desired transformation. ▶ Systemic change is focused on the creation of new coalitions; on providing scientific evidence of the utility and impact of the new product or system; on the adaptation of laws and norms when necessary; and on the development of new professions that can further test, create and formulate within the innovative creation. ▶ Systemic change involves re-designing and introducing entire systems so as to obtain the full advantages of a set of innovations.
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Social innovation is a powerful decision-making and creation tool that provides solutions based on the end users' context, needs and problems, rather than simply assuming that a specific sector or organisation already has answers that can be simply imported (the "cookie cutter" approach). The process is focused on a thorough understanding of the problem (the prompt and proposal phases), a collaborative and participative process (the sustaining and scaling phases), and the genuine transformation of societies (the scaling and social change phases).

Social innovation is interpreted by one of the case study partners as another way of managing knowledge, with a focus on learning that permits its consolidation through trial and error. This is the reason why the timing of the prototyping phase is crucial, it must allow for testing and monitoring, which can take from weeks to years depending on the complexity of the process.

Social innovation means falling in love with the problem rather than with the solution.

Reflection Questions

- ▶ *Have you ever participated in a process based on the social innovation method's six steps? If so, which steps were the most enriching in identifying challenges and opportunities? Which contributed more to learning?*
- ▶ *If you have not used this framework before, is there a past, or potential future initiative, that you think would lend itself to this approach? Which steps do you think would be the easiest to integrate into your planned process? Which would be the most difficult? Why?*

Further Reading

- ▶ *Social Innovation relates to how organizations adapt/change from emerging contextual factors within an organization's external environment and internal demands, including factors like economic systems of exchange, political systems, laws, policies, and cultural systems of beliefs (Shier and Handy, 2015).*
- ▶ *The idea of social innovation is often understood as the mixture of practices in areas of social action, promoted by certain actors or groups of actors working around the addressing and solving of better social needs and problems, through means other than existing practices. (Alex, Simon and Gabriel, 2015).*
- ▶ *Social innovation implies a normative perspective that something positive is created for society, it is social in its ends and means, visible through new ideas (products, services and models) that all meet social needs, creating new social relationships or collaborations (Osburg and Schmidpeter, 2013).*