

Improving your Programmatic Learning Journey

A Resource Guide for HDP Nexus
Practitioners

Module 6. Recommendations

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Module Summary

Throughout the course of this study the team heard many thoughtful and helpful recommendations. These are provided here to encourage future food for thought and brainstorming on how to move forward, and to ensure the voices of participants are clearly heard. It also provides a summing up of the stories, reflections and ideas heard, considered and analysed throughout the course of this study.

General Reflections

- ▶ Learning takes time and space, and happens most effectively and most frequently when it happens in the nature of long-term relationships among partners. While the M&E elements of project design have become increasingly common in the past 10+ years, learning – as a fundamentally more longitudinal factor – cannot yet be considered to be meaningfully mainstreamed.
- ▶ Time is a finite resource that can often be limited by resources; in others words, money. Organizations that rely on project-based funding may not have the flexibility to engage in reflection in learning the way an organisation that enjoys core support can.
- ▶ The relational aspects of learning cannot be underestimated. Meaningful reflection on practical experiences, challenges and dilemmas requires a degree of openness, vulnerability, and honesty. This also points to the importance of creating spaces and fostering conditions that enable genuine communication and a free flow of ideas, to enable processes of co-creation and decolonised approaches to learning to occur.
- ▶ IT can be a part of more effective work and more consistent learning and uptake. However it should not be seen as a “cure all”, or as a substantial replacement for human, person-to-person contacts. Opportunities such as AI, improvement in translation tools, and the potential of large data sets should be considered and implemented. Risks such as AI security concerns as well as the potential for misinformation and disinformation, must also be foremost in mind.
- ▶ The relevance of systems thinking came up repeatedly during this collaborative study. This leads to two important implications. The first is the need for more spaces of reflection for different kinds of actors working together in systems – based on the principle of getting the system (however defined) into the room in order to enable better understanding of the system dynamics. The second is the prevalence of assuming simple environments amenable to linear interventions and goals reflecting “best practices.” In contrast, many environments in which HDP nexus programming occurs are complex or even chaotic, and in which emergent practice or adaptive design is called for.

Recommendations for the KPSRL

- ▶ Share these findings with the other Knowledge Platforms, for example in a workshop format where their own experiences can be integrated
- ▶ Continue to share learning on the pilot projects; organize opportunity to share that learning with individuals and organisations involved in this collaborative study
- ▶ Promote the idea of learning from failure through “Fail Fairs” or similar fora, to increasingly normalize the process and reduce the potential for stigma
- ▶ Review the PLI to identify where and how grant-application and grant-making can be improved by simplifying bureaucratic procedures and reporting requirements, and made increasingly participatory
- ▶ Be in touch with the case studies in 6 or 12 months to see how/if their work and perspectives on programmatic learning have changed

Recommendations for Donors and Intermediaries

- ▶ Throughout the course of discussions with case study participants and others it became clear that people have been thinking about the issues of learning and uptake from learning for some time – and have a lot to say on the subject. A number of recommendations have been included in the Case Study Snapshots. However, taken together, and considered in light of other expert interviews, the sense-making workshop and literature on the issues, some overarching and targeted recommendations will be presented below in the hope that they will at minimum provoke reflection, and perhaps influence programmatic and policy decisions.
 - Seek and cultivate potential intermediaries located outside of the capitals
 - Design intermediary partner contracts to ensure that these organisations don't emerge as competition with other small CSOs (who may be their sub-grantees); to ensure that they adhere to principles of co-creation; and to ensure that they adhere to principles of maximum sharing of information
 - Require intermediaries to commit to principles of co-creation and select them based on demonstrated experience with co-creation

Recommendations for CSOs/INGOs in the HDP Nexus

- ▶ Stay up to date on learning, co-creation and design trends and good practices to enable your own work but also to ensure your ability to engage on these issues with your donors – or even to educate them
- ▶ Review your own work and performance and engage with your established donors/partners to commit to annual learning budget targets

- ▶ When considering integrating IT into ongoing learning processes take into account language barriers, connectivity issues, the potential for “lite” IT reporting options (recognising bandwidth limitations in many places), security concerns, and cultural differences that can emerge in local settings.
- ▶ Identify ways to use increasingly frequent discussions on learning to talk to donors and networks about what is needed for better learning and uptake

Figure 28: Sample Talking Points about Learning

Sample Talking Points to Explain Why Support for Learning Matters

While there has been notable progress in recognizing the importance of learning in project and programme planning and design, it is still not consistently viewed as a necessity; the word “luxury” was often heard. The following are sample talking points that practitioners may be able to use and adapt for conversations with their current or future donors and supporters to make the case on why learning matters, and is necessary.

- ▶ We’ve recently engaged in internal discussions about our learning practices, and while we see a useful combination of formal and informal methods, will be working in a more concerted manner to systematize our learning.
- ▶ Over the past number of years, we are heartened to see more references to learning in calls for proposals and programme documentation. We would like to begin a discussion about how an investment in learning can become reality; for example, ensuring as a practice that 10% of budgeted funds be made available to learning activities and investments.
- ▶ This approach could be further in line with considering a move back to understanding the importance of core funding in supporting not only real impact but sustainability.
- ▶ As effective learning depends on quality information and research, we are in conversations with our partners about a commitment to sharing research – whether baselines assessments, evaluations or specific thematic reports. This would not only enable more reflection in future design and planning, but would also help to reduce redundancy among partners, and thereby enable more efficient use of resources. We would also point out that it is important for everyone to be able to learn from what did not work, and to have an honest conversation about why.
- ▶ Evaluations that assess project implementation provide useful input that can be helpful in planning future projects (when timeframes allow). As a part of a commitment to learning, we would like to suggest a commitment to longitudinal impact assessments to be factored in to programme plans. This would, for example, enable impact assessments to be conducted 5, or even 10 years after a project has been completed, to measure longer-term sustainability and impact, and better learn from these experiences.

Recommendations for Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Development Agencies

- ▶ Consider current assumptions on the nature of accountability, with an eye towards ensuring accountability exists, is rigorous, and is increasingly bi-directional – from the implementor up to the donor, and equally, from the implementor and donor down to the community
- ▶ Evaluate relationships with intermediary organisations to understand their operating context and impact in the field, with the aim of ensuring that they do not replicate urban/rural, centre/periphery or other power imbalances; and also to ensure that they adhere to principles of co-creation, bi-directional learning and partnership
- ▶ Commit to maximal transparency and information sharing in terms of the publication and sharing of research and learning (research, baseline assessments, evaluations, opinion surveys, etc.) including budgeting for more and more consistent research participant feedback, and innovative and multi-lingual knowledge packaging and dissemination
- ▶ Consider how to sequence and develop Calls for Proposals to ensure attention for learning and adaptation is incorporated, and that timelines and resources permit reflection and learning through the review and discussion of mid-term and final evaluation reports.
- ▶ Pledge to earmark aside a percentage of budgets for MEL, and also for experimentation and innovation.

Final Quandaries and Dilemmas

- ▶ What is the meaning or value of programme co-creation if there is no policy co-creation?
- ▶ To what extent does emphasis on “programmatic learning” risk obscuring attention to larger strategic goals of organisations/institutions towards structural, systems change, beyond the work of any specific programme?
- ▶ What can be done to meaningfully address the donor/recipient power imbalance?
- ▶ What is the future of non-colonial principles in a world increasingly shaped by the privileged/non-privileged dichotomy?
- ▶ Ultimately..... what are the limits to learning?