



DISTILLING INSIGHTS ON ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

KPSRL Distilling Series 2021-2024

Giorgio Ferrari



Contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction	6
Definitions and debates	8
Theories of learning	11
Results, contribution, and drivers of learning	13
Contribution	13
Drivers, enablers, and barriers of change	15
Conclusion	17
Dimensions of organisational learning	17
Strengths and weaknesses of learning models at different levels	18
Bibliography	20



Executive summary

This article is part of a “distilling series” of the Knowledge Platform for Security and Rule of Law (KPSRL). The KPSRL was a project funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented by the Clingendael Institute, the International Development Law Organisation (IDLO), and Saferworld. It aimed to improve policymaking and practice in the sector of international cooperation on security and rule of law through knowledge generation, exchange, and uptake.

This paper aims to reflect on the practice and results of knowledge management and organisational learning for international cooperation. It builds on a literature review of documents produced by discussions among KPSRL network participants between 2021 and 2025 on the topics of knowledge management and organisational learning, as well as on deliverables from knowledge projects funded by the KPSRL and executed by KPSRL network participants during the same period.¹ This literature review of sources internal to the KPSRL was complemented by a rapid scan of literature on organisational learning publicly available online (without the ambition of conducting a systematic review).

The literature review identifies five models for organisational learning.

1. The Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) paradigm, which is the most common learning approach implemented in the KPSRL network, and a mature model included in almost every cooperation programme and project. Discussions of the MEL model have covered whether it provides real learning alongside meeting donors’ accountability requirements.
2. The adaptive management paradigm. KPSRL network participants discussed the theory of adaptive management (2020-2021) and moved to trial the model (2022-2024). This often happened at the request of the MFA of the Netherlands, which has included the adaptive management approach in its grant designs.
3. The learning organisation paradigm. This is a body of theory that aims to expand the capacity of individuals and teams to create results. This paradigm has been less visible in discussions among KPSRL members compared to the adaptive management model.
4. Social innovation theory, which explores learning that happens outside project/ programme boundaries at sector or societal level. This model has occasionally been discussed by research projects that explored real learning outside of project requirements.
5. Decolonial and feminist learning theory, which tries to break down hierarchies among forms of knowledge. This paradigm came from discussions of the locally led and people-centred agendas.

1 The literature review includes events notes, research deliverable, and podcasts etc.

The literature review shows that organisational learning processes and the knowledge they created and exchanged influenced and guided a variety of policy and practice changes. In turn, the literature contains evidence that these policy and practice changes have made interventions more efficient by i) stopping ineffective components or interventions, ii) tweaking interventions strategies to fit the context, and iii) focusing more on outcomes than on outputs.

Learning processes have, however, fallen short of strategically transforming the sector as requested by more demanding agendas for change, such as the decolonisation agenda, and limited information is available on whether these learning processes have contributed to better development results.

The complex picture of drivers of, enablers of, and barriers to the contribution of learning processes on changes in policymaking and practice implies that an ideal learning model that works in every context does not exist. Instead, the diversity of available learning models is a resource for organisations to pick, match, and mix in a complementary way. In fact, practice should often be considered a hybrid mix of different models rather than the pure application of one coherent model.

1. MEL and adaptive management models are useful for an organisation to become aware of potential problems early, tweak its approach, build trust with donors through reliable and open reporting, and expand an organisation's field of vision towards the outside, especially the crucial connection between outputs and outcomes.
2. The learning organisation and social innovation models are the most useful for jointly developing new tools, methodologies, processes, and capacity relevant for practice. They are less systematic than MEL and adaptive management models which becomes a strength when learning must happen rapidly.
3. Decolonial and feminist models of learning are the most useful to ensure that an organisation does the right things and not only things right. They have the sharpest vision of the purpose of learning: learning is meant to contribute to a more equal world on gender and racial dimensions (this is why these two models are discussed together in this paper despite being different on each other in other dimensions). Their focus on co-created knowledge, inclusion of marginalised groups, and marginalised forms of knowledge is particularly useful for organisations going through internal reform processes of the locally led and decolonisation agenda, and useful to make practitioners aware of unquestioned ideologies.

Weaknesses

1. The MEL model is weaker in building internal capacity and teamwork, in allowing space and tools to develop new methodologies and processes, to capture insights that do not come from direct experience, and to provide objective, unbiased evidence in the context of unequal power dynamics inside consortia of practitioner organisations and between practitioners and donors. If it is not explicitly done in a feminist and decolonial way, it is also weaker on participation and co-creation of knowledge.
2. In its purest form, the adaptive management model relies on small experiments, checking the results of these experiments, and scaling up what works and what does not work. Yet, donor requirements seldom allow for the full implementation of these models (another instance of power dynamics between donors and implementers becoming a barrier for learning). Donors might be open to allow implementers to move limited funds between outcome areas but are less open to programming partners experimenting with a high risk.

3. The decolonial and feminist models of change run counter official donor evaluation policies. For instance, the Policy and Operations Evaluation (IOB) Department of the Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs set evaluation quality principles that position evaluators as expert, independent, third-party onlookers that use expert methods inspired by the scientific method and strive for objectivity. This is the opposite of decolonial and feminist models that position evaluators as facilitators of joint knowledge production processes that are collaborative, inclusive, and part of the process to dismantle hierarchies of knowledges.



Introduction

This article is part of a “distilling series” of Knowledge Platform for Security and Rule of Law (KPSRL). The KPSRL is a project funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented by the Clingendael Institute, the International Development Law Organisation (IDLO), and Saferworld.

In its 2021-2025 phase, the KPSRL aimed to be a space that contributed to people-centred approaches to Security and Rule of Law (SROL)-related policymaking and programming through two outcomes: i) active participation by KPSRL network members in exchange and interrogation of knowledge, and ii) generation of new knowledge by KPSRL network members through the KPSRL’s two granting instruments, the Knowledge Management Fund (KMF) and Programme Learning Instrument (PLI), as well as brokering and guidance on learning approaches. The KPSRL has operationalised this approach into three outputs: i) quality learning events; ii) grant-making and project management; and iii) effective distilling of lessons learned and provisions of support on how to learn. This paper is part of the third output area, distilling, together with three other distilling papers (see Box 1 for more information about the other distilling papers).

This paper aims to reflect on knowledge management and organisational learning for international cooperation. “Knowledge management” is defined, for the purpose of this paper, as the production, exchange, consolidation, storing, and retrieving of knowledge for use in organisations, and “organisational learning” and “organisational change” as the processes of change that use knowledge to change organisational processes, systems, and policies with the aim to improve organisational performance.

This paper combines a literature review of discussions among KPSRL network members captured in events notes, research deliverable, and podcasts etc., with a rapid scan of recent contributions in the field of organisational learning available online. The full bibliography is available in the annex.

The paper presents the distinct models of organisational learning implemented or discussed by KPSRL network participants and the main debates surrounding them, reviews the models’ effectiveness, and systematizes the drivers, enablers, and barriers to organisational change/learning. The paper concludes by presenting conclusions and lessons learned.

Box 1 The distilling series

The other three distilling papers are:

1. Locally Led Development (to be found [here](#))
This collects findings on rethinking power relations and diverging interests within this sector, taking leadership and ownership, and navigating risks for local organisations and donors in times of shrinking civic space and growing authoritarianism.
2. People Centered Approaches (to be found [here](#))
This collects findings on bridging the gap between individual experiences and humane institutions, defining ‘people centeredness’, hybrid security and justice, fostering trust between communities and/or institutions, and taking needs instead of a system’s siloes and regulations as a starting point.
3. Roots of Disagreement and Polarisation (in development)
This paper collects findings on the sources of polarisation and diverging world views, identifying arguments that parties to polarised SRoL debates use to justify their positions. Ultimately, the piece aims to suggest points of common ground to allow for useful dialectical opportunities rather than a clash of worldviews.



Definitions and debates

The discussions on learning among KPSRL network participants can be organised in three main debates:

- How can organisations implement the adaptive management approach? And what results can be expected of the adaptive management approach? By the end of the 2010s, donors and practitioners had bought into the literature's claims that adaptive management held the keys to policy and programme effectiveness. During the KPSRL 2021/2024, network members moved to trial practices inspired by adaptive management and reflect on these experiences.²
- To what extent does organisational learning really work in improving organisational effectiveness and development results? How does it do that? A strand of literature pointed out that organisational learning has so far not achieved its promises of improving development results.³
- How can learning and knowledge management be done in a more equitable, participatory, and decolonial way inside complex partnership systems and unequal power dynamics with donors?⁴ A strand in the literature employed the concept of coloniality and modernity to argue that decolonisation processes have displaced formal colonial domination into informal hierarchies of status and authority, including the authority to know. Some KPSRL network participants searched for different, more co-created ways to learn across the boundaries of coloniality. KPSRL network members embarked on discussions on equitable partnerships, for example inside consortia arrangements of multiple practitioners and in programme funded by institutional donors.⁵ The insights on the role of unequal consortia partnerships and donor dynamics in shaping practice are also relevant for learning.

There was a fourth debate taking place beneath the other three. It concerned the foundations of what the KPSRL should consider knowledge and which forms of knowledge(s) it should include and prioritize. This fourth debate was less visible in discussions among network participants but prominent in internal discussions on KPSRL reforms. It is rapidly reviewed here as a foundation to then explore the other three debates in the rest of the paper.

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- 2 See as foundational source for the adaptive management: Andrews, Matt, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock. *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, and Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
 - 3 See Yanguas, Pablo. "What Have We Learned About Learning? Unpacking the Relationship Between Knowledge and Organisational Change in Development Agencies." Discussion Paper 9/2021. Bonn: German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), 2021.
 - 4 See Puljek-Shank, Randall, Louis Monroy Santander, and Michelle Parlevliet. *Improving Your Programmatic Learning Journey: A Resource Guide for HDP Nexus Practitioners*. The Hague: Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law, 2024.
 - 5 See for example: Musa, Abdilaziz. *Towards Effective Partnership and Shared Ownership: A Framework Based on ED&I*. The Hague: KPSRL, 2024. <https://kpsrl.org/publication/towards-effective-partnership-and-shared-ownership-a-framework-based-on-ed-i>.

To approach this debate, it is necessary to take a step back from “knowledge management” and “organisational learning” and discuss definitions of “knowledge”, “information”, “evidence” or “learning”, which the KPSRL internal sources did not explicitly define.⁶

- **Information** can be understood as any **pattern** that can be decoded in terms of message. For example, the sounds through which we speak form a pattern that can be decoded in terms of words.
- The **sources of these patterns** can be: perception of the sensible world, introspection, memory, rational intuition, inference, and testimony from others. These are not random flows of information, but flows and patterns generated as practicing, participating, goal-oriented subjects.
- Information becomes **knowledge** when it is interpreted through **analytical and ideological frameworks**. Coming back to the example from the first bullet point, the sounds of speech are decoded into words through established rules of grammar and syntax. This means that knowledge is always knowledge inside a specific analytical and ideological framework rather than objective truth (unmediated true representation of reality).
- Even when knowledge institutions aim at producing knowledge that is a faithful representation of reality, this intention hits the barrier that reality is too complex and multifaceted to be represented truthfully. To solve this problem, knowledge producers rely on **ideational backgrounds**, ideology for short, that provide shortcuts on what is real, true, and right so that they can focus on adding new knowledge to this foundation.⁷
- Knowledge, as the result of this process of interpretation, is **awareness and familiarity** with successions of events, the physical objects that exist in each moment of time, mental states and concepts, institutional objects, the rules of the game, relationships, and processes. To a certain extent, the social world we live in is produced by what we know, and learning involves adding knowledge to what is already known and also **unlearning** what is already known.
- **Scientific knowledge** is produced through a framework that relies on systematic theory, the testing of theory on the evidence, and a systematic peer review process. Nevertheless, other frameworks exist, such as the one focused on authentic lived experiences.
- As **social practice**, scientific knowledge is a social institution shaped by the goals and power dynamics of broader society. This social embeddedness produces knowledge institutions that are seldom concerned only with producing objective knowledge that is a correct representation of reality. Instead, their work is also about **creating knowledge as the ordering, simplification, and commanding of the social world as basis for common action**.⁸
- There is always a gap between knowledge and what people do with it. What people do with knowledge is influenced by broader relationships of power.



6 Definitions on information, knowledge, and knowledge as a social practice built on French structuralism and post-structuralism, for example Claude Lévi-Strauss’ view of structures and systems, and Foucault’s critique of biopolitics. For a panorama, see Jameson, Fredric. *The Years of Theory: Lectures on Modern French Thought*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2024.

7 This builds on Žižek’s position. For instance, as articulated in Žižek, Slavoj. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

8 Aside from Foucault and Bourdieu, this view has been recently articulated by Harari in Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (New York: HarperCollins, 2024).

Building on these insights, the KPSRL 2021/2024 has intentionally included forms of knowledge other than scientific knowledge, especially those based on lived experiences, and has invested into co-created and decolonial forms of knowledge(s). This was meant to create more **diversity in forms of knowledge** to fill the gaps and weaknesses of any individual knowledge framework and to mitigate the influence of dominant ideologies on knowledge production and use.

Theories of learning

The reader could find useful that we present, crisply separated in categories, the five learning models that KPSRL network participants discussed, explored, or used. Nevertheless, practice was often a hybrid of different models rather than the pure implementation of one specific model.⁹ Learning by doing is always the key underlying base of organisational learning. Some of the learning models discussed below explicitly recognize this, such as the learning organisation paradigm, whereas others focus more on formal learning processes (such as the MEL and adaptive management paradigm).

1. **The Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) paradigm** is the most common learning approach implemented in the KPSRL network. It is a mature paradigm and has become part of every programme and project in development cooperation. Debates in the KPSRL network have concerned the status of evidence generated at outcome level, as well as the level of participation that MEL processes should allow.¹⁰ The MEL paradigm has roots in public policy, public financial management, and rational choice theory, and is founded on a rationalistic understanding of change processes as processes towards objectives achieved through logical means. It implicitly sees actors as maximisers of their own utility and interests and divided between a principal and their agent (which is why the principal needs to monitor and evaluate the agents). It is more accountability-driven than other approaches.
2. **The adaptive management paradigm.**¹¹ This approach is explicitly rooted in biology, complexity theory, and evolution theory. It starts with the assumption that actors in complex fields do not know (enough) at an intervention's outset about causal relationships between actions and consequences. Because of this, the model suggests that programming partners do not fully design a programme at inception, and instead start small, experiment, sense the environment and the consequences of their actions, and adapt piecemeal scaling up what is proven to work. This paradigm presents itself as pragmatic, non-ideological, and tends to avoid grand visions and strategies. Between 2021/2024, discussions among KPSRL participants have moved from presenting and discussing the theory underpinning adaptive management (such as the theory of the

9 Ferrari, Giorgio. Manirakiza, Messina. "Learning from Evaluation: A Meta-Analysis of the Dialogue and Dissent Strategic Partnerships with DSH." Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law, February 2022. As another example, several quarterly learning meetings of the SROL programme to Somalia were dedicated to adaptive management, and it emerged from these discussions that implementing partners adopted multiple models also when they had the mandate from the donor to focus on one specific model, in this case the adaptive management model. They experimented with more or less formal adaptive management tool, with learning organisation models, and always had to include the MEL model for accountability to the donor.

10 For instance, network participants discussed the reliability of methods such as outcome harvesting and outcome mapping.

11 See for example, Andrews, Matt, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock. Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, and Action. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Problem Driven Iterative Approach model) to trialling adaptive management in practice, often at the request of the MFA of the Netherlands, and to reflecting on those trials (2022-2024).

3. **The learning organisation paradigm** is a body of theory that focuses on the expansion of capacity of individuals and teams to create results.¹² It imagines a holistic ‘ecosystem’ of knowledge within organisations and focuses on concepts such as systems thinking, personal mastery (through learning by doing), shared vision, mental models, and team learning. As a paradigm, it comes from business and management studies. Internal reforms of the KPSRL Secretariat followed this model (as well as the model of decolonial and feminist learning below), but in the KPSRL network this paradigm has not been too visible in discussions, much less so than the adaptive management model. There is a sense that the variety of learning models that practitioners know and practice consciously has become narrower, focused just on the adaptive management and MEL models.
4. **Social innovation theory** explores learning that happens outside project/programme boundaries at sector or societal level.¹³ A strand of the theory focuses on processes of innovation design, testing, and scaling up in the Silicon Valley style and is connected to business and management studies. Another strand of theory focuses on innovations that happen during crises; moments that can spur an entire sector to innovate to meet the crisis.
5. **Decolonial and feminist learning theory** tries to break down hierarchies among forms of knowledge. The KPSRL network participants discussed these models during localisation agenda discussions and in discussions around the feminist foreign policy of the Netherlands. The decolonial learning approach recognises that knowledge products that conform to the paradigm of modernity (a concept that originated in Europe during the colonial era) are usually placed at the top of hierarchies of forms of knowledges and other ways of knowing (indigenous and based on lived experiences) are less trusted. Feminist learning theory applies the critical analyses of a relationship of dominance of one gender onto the others, a key approach of feminism, to knowledge management. They are fond of processes of co-creation of knowledge that involve actors normally placed at the ‘bottom’ of hierarchies of knowledge. These paradigms are diverse under multiple dimensions but are discussed together in this paragraph because they are similar on one important dimension: they are more purpose-driven than other models. The MEL and adaptive management models do not have purposes intrinsic in the model itself (apart maybe a focus on becoming more efficient). They require each programme using them to add an external purpose and objective driving the learning process because the purpose of learning is making the programme more effective (but effective for what, that comes from the programme objective). The feminist and decolonial learning processes have the intrinsic purpose of making societies more equal under respectively the gender and race-colonial dimension.

12 Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organisation*. Doubleday, 1990.

13 Puljek-Shank, Randall, Louis Monroy Santander, and Michelle Parlevliet. *Improving Your Programmatic Learning Journey: A Resource Guide for HDP Nexus Practitioners*. The Hague: Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law, 2024.



Results, contribution, and drivers of learning

Contribution

The sources internal and external to KPSRL show that **knowledge management and organisational learning processes have influenced and guided a variety of changes**¹⁴:

- Policy changes, such as the wording of thematic policy documents in central departments of the MFA of the Netherlands.
- Grant designs by the same policy departments.
- Consortiums' and organisational structures and practices.
- Adoption of new tools and approaches, both thematic and dedicated to learning, especially through the provision of funding for learning projects dedicated to this.
- New processes and roles inside processes, such as the MFA of the Netherlands learning how to situate and support learning partners for its grant instruments.
- Clarifying policy and programme processes and procedures, such as when the Embassy to Somalia of the Netherlands clarified to its programming partners the procedures for requesting programme and budget adaptations during quarterly learning exchanges.
- Practices of cooperation by and with programming partners through regular interactions with them or going through learning processes for internal reform.
- Building a shared vision when learning was conducted jointly with programming partners.
- Building a better understanding of a context or situation through discussions with other organisations and the donors, as well as with contextual studies.
- Conceptual clarity.
- Broader diversity and better local participation through learning moments that include forms of knowledge based on lived experiences.

At the level of changes in policymaking and programming, this paper therefore concludes the knowledge management and organisational learning have contributed well.

A different question is whether these changes in policymaking and programming have in turn made organisations better at contributing to development results.

The literature of sources internal to the KPSRL shows that those policy and programming changes have contributed to organisations adapting to their contexts. They moved a programme forward

¹⁴ Evidence here relies heavily on the KPSRL evaluations as they conducted contribution analysis. Transition International. MID-TERM REVIEW: KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM SECURITY & RULE OF LAW. May 2023. Ferrari, Giorgio. Experiences in Innovating Learning: Lessons from KPSRL 2021 - 2024. 2024. Ferrari, Giorgio. "Learning from Evaluation: A Meta-Analysis of the Dialogue and Dissent Strategic Partnerships with DSH." Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law, February 2022.

after a crisis or road-block, allowed focusing on producing outcomes (in terms of sought after behavioral changes) rather than just outputs (such as a training, a paper or a meeting), and saved funds by eliminating ineffective or irrelevant interventions.¹⁵ **Learning accordingly regularly made interventions more efficient.** This is especially true of adaptive management and MEL.

The external sources, however, conclude that changes brought about by learning processes have often fallen short of strategically transforming a sector.¹⁶ For the KPSRL network, adaptive management has been able to make useful course corrections, but not to radically change the effectiveness of development. This is because of three reasons: i) adaptive management has happened inside organisations whose administration and financial departments still followed older result-based management and accountability-based models, ii) adaptive management is inherently weak on identifying and working towards a coherent vision of transformation, iii) adaptive management has happened inside unequal power dynamics within consortia and relationships of funding dependency of programming partners with the donors that means that they can apply the adaptive management model only to the extent that this is recommended and allowed by the donor. The learning organisation paradigm is better able to work towards joint visions, but in cross-organisational settings it has been difficult to have open and transparent discussions on sensitive topics involving performance and funding (especially when donors were involved and when partnerships inside consortia were unequal). In those cases, the involved programming partners preferred to showcase their successes and defend their position against competitors. Decolonial and feminist models of learning showed more intentional focus on changing systems strategically since they have a clear vision of their end goals. However, they are not given enough space in the implementation of programmes or policies exactly because they challenge the broader system. For example, the MFA's official policy was one of localisation, not decolonisation, and when the feminist principles conflicted with the IOB principles of MEL, it was usually the IOB principles that had more weight (the IOB principles situate evaluators as objective, third party onlookers that use objective, academic methods and tools).

In conclusion, investments in knowledge and learning have unlocked benefits for programme efficiency and effectiveness of the sector, and less so for more radical reforms of the sector.

15 Learning from Evaluation: A Meta-Analysis of the Dialogue and Dissent Strategic Partnerships with DSH." Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law, February 2022. The same finding emerges from the learning reports that the KPSRL produced around the Addressing Root Causes of the Dutch MFA, such as Ferrari, Giorgio, and Messina Manirakiza. Addressing Root Causes: Regional Learning Sessions in Uganda and Burundi. The Hague: Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law, June 13, 2022. KPSRL. ARC Learning Group on Adaptive Programming. "Enabling Factors of Adaptive Programming: Learning Paper of the 'Addressing Root Causes (ARC)' Learning Group on Adaptive Programming." Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law, December 11, 2019.

16 See Yanguas, Pablo. "What Have We Learned About Learning? Unpacking the Relationship Between Knowledge and Organisational Change in Development Agencies." Discussion Paper 9/2021. Bonn: German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), 2021. And also Ramalingam, Ben, and John Mitchell. Learning to Change: The Case for Systemic Learning Strategies in the Humanitarian Sector. London: ALNAP/ODI, 2022.

Drivers, enablers, and barriers of change

Building on a review of sources internal and external to the KPSRL, Table 1 presents the drivers, enablers, and barriers that connect learning approaches with policymaking and programming changes.¹⁷ Drivers are the active pressures towards change, enablers make change possible, and barriers stand in between learning and change.¹⁸ These factors are divided according to the level in which they appear: individual, organisational, sector-wide/cross organisational, related to the relationship with donors, or society wide.

Table 1 Drivers, enablers, and barriers for contributions of learning to changes in policy and practice

DRIVERS OF CONTRIBUTION TO CHANGE
<p>Individual level</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tacit learning through goal-oriented practice (learning by doing) and inter-personal exchanges. Tacit/organic learning happens in informal networks of practitioners rather than formal MEL systems. It is best expressed through the learning organisation and social innovation model. <p>Organisational level</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Availability of and effective preparation and facilitation of moments of reflection. Quarterly learning sessions have been shown to be effective as moments to review a programme's progress against its RBF and TOC and, perhaps even more so, as moments to co-create new approaches and methodologies needed for practice. Varied, engaging facilitation methods have been key for the most appreciated discussions to foster openness and creativity. 3. Knowledge generation processes. Co-created processes of knowledge have shown promise to create relevant and owned knowledge. These processes involve shaping learning objectives and questions with users, adapting learning questions to the contexts, and defining the needed form of knowledge. 4. Quality evaluative practice. Mid-term and end-line evaluations have shown to be moments of learning on the validity of contextualised, detailed TOCs. Outcome harvesting has shown to be a tool to make interventions more reflective about the scale of ambitions, progress, nuance of change pathways, and unexpected outcomes. 5. Intentionally setting learning agendas and trajectories that connect learning moments over time has been useful to keep track of the purpose of learning. 6. Making use of the right tools for storing and retrieving information. 7. Creating a diversity of perspectives and knowledge(s) has led to exciting moments of learning. 8. Early investment in new ideas and room for risk has expanded options available to organisations, even if adoption will happen in a more distant future or might at times not come to fruition at a later stage. <p>Sector wide</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Use of trusted intermediaries in learning networks that connect those seeking knowledge and those possessing it, of the type of 'spiders in a web' type of partners, to make learning exchanges and connections happen.

¹⁷ Drivers of contribution are factors of change that are active in a process and that are close to the moments of change. Enablers of contribution, instead, are more systemic, structural factors that sustain the possibility for drivers of change to operate.

¹⁸ The discussion that follows is built on the experience with learning in) the ARC programme of the Dutch MFA, the ii) KMF and iii) the PLI funding instruments of the KPSRL, iv) the learning moments of the Dutch SROL programme in Somalia, v) the internal learning of the KPSRL, vi) the broader literature on learning.

ENABLERS OF CONTRIBUTION TO CHANGE

Individual level

1. The capacity to **recognize being “stuck”** either in one country or from a program point of view.

Organisational level

2. **Management support** and leadership that encourage working in an evidence-based way, as well as the coalescing of a **learning culture** over time.
3. High levels of **trust and interpersonal safety** in learning teams.
4. Career paths that ensure organisations retain core knowledge and expertise.
5. **Periodically changing leadership** and senior personnel to introduce new ideas in organisations.
6. Funding sources for learning, and budget flexibility to move budget in accordance with learning.
7. Combining staff dedicated to the production of knowledge and operational staff in the same teams adds to the relevance of knowledge produced by the knowledge personnel.

Sector wide

8. Demonstrating relevance and value-added for new approaches and practices.
9. Communication style focused on solutions, showcasing an organisation's values and what they stand for, and inspire hope.
10. Opening spaces for honest, candid discussion.
11. **Long-term relationships** with partners.
12. Dominant actors in a sector support learning.
13. **Equitable partnerships** where learning happens across decolonised boundaries.
14. **Consortium structures** that emphasize a common vision and approach among partners and allow contractual and planning flexibility to local partners.
15. Channels through which organisations can share their learning products externally.

BARRIERS TO CONTRIBUTION TO CHANGE

Individual level

1. **Pride** in someone's expertise that prevents accepting gaps or obsolescence in this expertise during reform processes.
2. **Loyalty** to one's (or one organisation's) position that prevents being open to reform the position of an organisation in the sector (for example connected to the debates on the role of INGOs in a decolonised aid sector).
3. **Rigidity** of core beliefs on how change happens and what good or best practice looks like.
4. **Being stretched thin** over interventions and sectors, which leads to fall back on biases and heuristics (rules of thumbs) because people do not have the time to explore the knowledge base systematically.

Organisational level

5. **Low prioritisation** of formal learning over day-to-day work because incentives reward doing and prevent stopping and reflecting, especially from failures.
6. Learning tools and approaches **focus too much on individual learning**, leaving a gap in team-based learning.
7. Learning activities that are **bureaucratised**, making learning less accessible and rewarding. Learning only happens when reporting or evaluations are due, and only in the form requested by the donor without deeper reflection on what learning models and processes suit an organisation better.
8. **Scapegoating** in case of bad performance.
9. **Tinkering** rather than tackling the root causes of problems. Changing a few practices or policies can be at times a rubber wall to absorb more radical demands for change and a cover to hide the fact that the system fundamentally continues in the same way.
10. Lack of corporate responsibility and drive for real organisational change.
11. Too much focus on the short term results that prevent from stopping and investing into longer-term results.
12. Low investments in knowledge uptake after knowledge production.
13. Internally, the learning function competes with other departments for insights into what to do, such as the planning, acquisition, or budget functions, which follow different priorities.

14. High levels of turnover.
15. Groups risk becoming prone to **group thinking**. This means that team members might feel the need to agree with each other to avoid internal conflicts even when honest critiques should be aired.
16. Lack of expertise in learning inside organisations.

Donor-implementer relationship

17. Lack of clear procedures to validate programme adaptations with the donor.
18. Burdensome processes of adaptation approval.
19. Tension between advocacy and learning when funding is at stake.
20. More focus on new policies and programmes rather than closely managing the actual implementation of standing policies and programmes.
21. Lack of core funding for partner organisations in the majority world to fund overhead (to stop and reflect) or experimentation.
22. Unequal relationships do not allow open and honest discussions.

Tools for learning

23. Tools for learning like PEA or systems thinking are better at showing constraints to change than to lead to actionable recommendations for change.
24. Tools like the TOC approach risk becoming a tick-boxing exercise that does not unpack how change happens. Learning from TOC reviews become more difficult when the TOC does not spell out all the assumptions.
25. Tools like RBF when used with a focus on accountability have too many indicators, especially quantitative indicators.
26. Tools like the format for annual reports when they do not allow partners to share the information that is needed (annual reports too short, focus on outputs only, or focus on financial information).
27. Not monitoring the broader system in which interventions take place.
28. Close-ended monitoring that does not leave space for unexpected outcomes.

Sector-wide

29. Competitive environments lead to hoarding of knowledge inside organisations rather than sharing.
30. Language - both in terms of jargon as in terms of connecting actors.
31. Broker organisations learn for the users of knowledge rather than facilitate a learning journey.
32. Collective action dilemma when learning needs to happen in groups across organisations as a common good.
33. Risk aversion of communicating failures in the context of a hostile press and public.

Society-wide constraints / democratic deficit

34. Unequal social norms and hierarchies that define who has the authority to speak and how (e.g. coloniality and patriarchy).
35. Lack of systems for downward accountability to communities, which limits feedback loops and validity.
36. Lack of proper learning mechanisms at deep democracy level that involve the broader public. The broader public is too far away to reach with detailed information and they have no time or space to reflect on the specialised information that reaches them. As a result, the impulse they provide to political actors in Government and Parliament cannot take into account nuanced learning emerging from practice.

Conclusion

Dimensions of organisational learning

Learning works best when it is built on goal-oriented practice, exploration of the world, systematic reflection, and supportive and equal relationships.

- **Goal-oriented practice** means constant practice (learning by doing) over time to achieve one's goals. Goals connect practice over time and ensure time to learn from practice and relevance of lessons learned for follow up actions.

- **Exploring the world** allows us to learn from sources other than personal practice. The concept includes much more than research. It includes learning exchanges, observation, visits, and empathy with the experiences of others.
- **Reflection** amplifies and multiplies goal-oriented practice and exploration of the world. Reflecting means going over something that already happened, effectively reliving the same events twice, thrice, etc. each time from a slightly different perspective and with potentially new insights. Regular reflection moments can be introduced into team processes.
- **Supportive relationships** are about the right amount of trust, ensuring enough trust that individuals feel safe in opening and recognising mistakes with colleagues and other individuals and enough scepticism that insights and findings are challenged for improvement.

These elements of learning span levels of action, from the individual to teams inside organisations to whole organisations to consortia, sectors, and society as a whole.

Strengths and weaknesses of learning models at different levels

The **learning organisation model** is relevant for setting **individuals** up to learn inside teams and organisations, as it includes concepts such as personal mastery and personal curiosity that offer a useful perspective on unlocking internal motivation to learn in pursuit of valuable objectives. At **team level**, this model unlocks creativity better than other ones, because its toolbox ranges from structured thinking to playful modes of interactions. At **cross-organisational level and sector-wide level**, this model can unlock moments of shared creativity on common challenges when spaces of open dialogue are available to staff from multiple organisations.

Decolonial and feminist models of learning bring valuable insights into models of co-creation of learning **inside teams and between organisations** as well as a broader diversity of knowledge types and more international purposes of learning. These models are particularly useful to connect learners with the human side of processes of change through personal stories and reflections. Because of their consequences for equitable relationships, they would be particularly well suited to rebalance learning relationships among **programming partners in consortia** and between **donors and practitioners**.

The **MEL** and **adaptive management** models will continue to be the models that organisations are expected to implement internally and in their **programming practice**. They are useful in raising early concerns about programmes' and policies' effectiveness, tweak them, decide what to continue, stop, or change, and expand the field of vision of an organisation towards the outside, especially the space where outputs and outcomes connect. Internally, they should be guided by common visions on where the learning process is aiming to land, connected to **participatory/joint planning processes** that involve where relevant individuals from other organisations or communities, and allowed the time to be more than tick-boxing exercise to produce baseline studies, context studies, annual reports, and evaluations in the deadlines set by donors. At higher levels, such as **sector-wide levels**, these models begin to struggle in connecting actions and consequences in relationships of contribution, for example in interpreting how to connect limited interventions with change or absence of change in national political processes.

The **social innovation** model is useful to explore learning and change processes outside the boundaries of organisations, for example at **sector level**, or for highly informal processes of design thinking inside organisations that develop new approaches and methodologies

Nevertheless, organisational learning has limitations, and these should be recognised. At organisational level, organisational cultures and individuals in leadership positions can prevent an organisation from learning. At cross-organisational level, unequal consortia relationships and donor-practitioner relationships are a common barrier to learning. These barriers become even clearer at the sector-wide and societal levels in which organisations are immersed.

At the **sector-wide level**, goal-oriented practice is normally possible only on a handful of critical issues recognised by almost everyone in the sector. For example, in the SROL sector, between 2020 and 2024, decolonisation/localisation was one of these issues. Learning at the sector-wide level is contingent on pooled funds for establishing networks where representatives from an entire sector come together, generating knowledge that is relevant for shared challenges, and mechanisms for sharing knowledge products and experiences across the entire sector. An example is the form of sector-wide knowledge platforms.

Nevertheless, **sector-wide learning is influenced by broader political priorities and ideological backgrounds that the sector cannot shape**. We can define therefore an additional, broader level as the **democratic/societal level** of learning. At this **democratic/societal level**, the media and the education system are the main tools for learning to shape public opinion, which in turn provides political impulse to political actors in cabinet and parliament through elections. In this public sphere, the public is mainly a passive recipient of information and education because there are no learning institutions that bring together the public for nuanced discussions on public issues or to reflect on learning that emerges from the different sectors. Under trends of disinformation and misinformation in the media sphere, the political impulse that the public provides to Cabinet and Parliament does not incorporate nuanced reflections on what sectors have learned through constant engaged practice. Rather, public opinions falls back on heuristics and prejudices, influencing political actors in the same way. Closing the gap from practice in the sectors to learning at the political level therefore requires introducing institutions and processes of direct democracy that currently do not exist. In the absence of such institutions, there is little that organisations inside sectors can do besides being aware of the ideological backgrounds that (are forced to) implement. That is why even approaches like **decolonial and feminist models** that are better suited to shape learning interventions with sector-wide scope for their focus on breaking down social barriers and hierarchies have not yet unlocked radical sector change.

In **conclusion**, organisations should remain aware of the diversity of learning models available to them, matching them in a complementary way. MEL and adaptive management models can allow an organisation to become aware early of problems with the current approach, tweak them, and build trust with donors through reliable and open reporting. Learning organisation and social innovation models are most useful when used to develop new tools, methodologies, processes, and capacity relevant for practice. Decolonial and feminist models are the most useful to ensure that an organisation does the right things and not only things right. Learning processes should also help organisations and sectors become aware of the unquestioned ideologies that sustain them.



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