

## Emerging lessons on

# Action Learning

*This briefing summarises emerging lessons from research led by Khanya-aicdd and funded by the Southern African Trust. This was based on five detailed cases studies which aimed to deepen our understanding of **how to use action learning** to improve the development and implementation of policies and practices that actually benefit the poor.*

### Overview

This briefing presents lessons of how to use action learning to improve the development and implementation of policies and practices that actually benefit the poor. Action learning is about learning from our actions and applying what we learn back into our next experience in an ongoing process of iterative cycles of learning and action. The briefing suggests that action learning processes can improve the design and implementation of programmes in conditions where those with power decide that these processes are desirable. It provides some insight into the concept of action learning, describing it as an alternative to conventional development practice while highlighting a number of lessons emerging out of this practice.

The research was based on five detailed case studies drawn from South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe, and was led by Khanya-aicdd and funded by the Southern African Trust. The full report is available on <http://www.khanya-aicdd.org>.

### Emerging key lessons:

- The importance of effective identification, involvement and commitment of partners from the outset for the action learning process to work effectively.
- Multi-stakeholder partnerships linking government at different levels and civil society seem to be very effective at innovating and institutionalising change.
- Level of funding is not a critical factor, providing partners bring the resources they use for implementation.
- Flexibility of design is critical, as is the facilitation process, both by a project coordinator and shared leadership by partners.
- A commitment to a reflective approach is essential if lessons are to be learned and implications addressed.
- Tension and conflict is natural in all processes, and this has to be facilitated effectively. In fact “success” can lead to competition as other agencies see the initiative as invading their space.
- The initiatives all had impacts on policy and practice, as well as on the confidence and capacity of partners. A challenge still remains on how to ensure effective upscaling.



*Constant discussion between stakeholders about plans and practice are a critical feature of an action learning approach*

### Introduction

The Learning about Action Learning project aimed to deepen our understanding of **how to use action learning** to improve the development and implementation of policies and practices that actually benefit the poor. The research was a partnership between Khanya-aicdd (based in South Africa), Practical Action Southern Africa (Zimbabwe) and the Local Government Development Programme (LGDP in Uganda). It was based on five detailed case studies that drew on practical experience of trying to implement action learning processes in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda and Ghana.

The framework for unpacking the action learning process was taken from a regional learning initiative currently operating in Southern and East Africa. Strengthening Management for Impact (SMIP) is an IFAD funded programme that is seeking to improve the impact of rural development interventions. The programme draws heavily on IFAD's Guide to Project M&E which promotes 'managing for impact' (Mfi). Khanya is a regional partner in this programme and is mainstreaming much of the Mfi approach in it's work. Hence the Mfi framework seemed an appropriate lens through which to explore the LAL case studies.

## What is action learning?

As the name implies, action learning is about learning from our actions and applying what we learn back into our next experience, an ongoing process composed of **iterative cycles of learning** and action that will often go outside or beyond more traditional project management cycles. The **action learning cycle** used by Khanya-aicdd in its work with partners has been informed by the development of participatory learning approaches. Action learning is an alternative to conventional development practice, informed by a different set of values, opening space for practitioners and beneficiaries to review and improve their understanding together of the gaps or needs and appropriate responses. Action learning is best suited to situations where emergent change (long-term, iterative change in a relatively stable environment) is possible.

### Khanya-aicdd's Action Learning Cycle



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Action learning values and strives for strong **participation and self-empowerment** of partners in the process including the people who, under other approaches, may be termed 'beneficiaries'. The people who the research is about should ideally occupy a role as equal participants or co-researchers in any research project, rather than as passive subjects or beneficiaries. Action learning is about linking their needs with practical solutions identified with the people rather than for or on behalf of them.

## Lessons from practice

### The Case Studies

The research project drew on practical experience of trying to implement action learning processes to deepen understanding of how to use action learning to improve the development and implementation of policies and practices that actually benefit the poor. Through a detailed analysis of case studies, the project aimed to identify good practice,

the extent to which these approaches influenced pro-poor policy, and the implications for future civil society-government relations in the region. The five detailed case studies were:

- A 3 year **Community-based planning (CBP)** project which covered South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ghana and Uganda. CBP is a form of participatory planning designed to promote community action and feed into higher-level development plans;
- A 3.5 year **Community-based worker (CBW)** project which covered South Africa, Lesotho, Kenya and Uganda, and which sought to strengthen the delivery and impact of local services in the natural resource and HIV/AIDS sectors through improved implementation of CBW systems;
- The **Chivi Food Security project** initiated by Practical Action Southern Africa (then Intermediate Technology Development Group, ITDG) in Zimbabwe as a response to persistent, localised chronic food insecurity and an acknowledged need to improve the extension system and service provision to subsistence farmers;
- The second **Local Government Development Programme (LGDP-II)** in Uganda, which was designed to incorporate lessons learnt from an earlier iteration of the programme and improve delivery of basic services and facilitate economic growth and poverty reduction in line with the government's decentralisation policy;
- A project focusing on **Forestry sector and agricultural advisory services reforms** in Uganda, and in particular the piloting of alternative models for forestry advisory services. The combined interventions generated a more participatory forestry advisory service using action learning methodologies.

### Creating conditions and capacities for action learning

All the case studies had a **project promoter**, someone with a vision of what they wanted to achieve and how to do this, who then found other stakeholders who were interested in collaborating in that vision. For effective action learning all **stakeholders need to own and influence** design from the outset. All the case studies took care to increase involvement of stakeholders, but as can be expected from their different origins (some in community-based processes and others in high level government decision-making processes), there were differences in the way this was done. **Lessons emerging about stakeholder identification and involvement are:**

- Drawing on the strengths of both civil society and government in action learning partnerships can be creative and generate real possibilities of systematic solutions. For instance, the forestry reform process in Uganda used the capacities of civil society and government to good effect, where NGOs with skills and local links did some types of facilitation and support work that governments cannot.

- For any intervention to have impact, particular partners are critical and the make-up of the partnership is one of the most critical factors for success. This must be done thoroughly. In Community-based planning (CBP) in South Africa, having key policy-makers and a committed municipality involved was critical.
- Political interference and power have a major impact and thus it is essential to get political buy-in from key political players.
- Representation is critical for organisations but also individuals with personal commitment to a changed agenda are essential. As commitment widens and change becomes institutionalised highly committed and motivated individuals become less critical.
- Success breeds competitive instincts, and there may be attempts to head off the process if it is seen to tread on someone else's turf.

The **amount and type of funding** has an influence on the overall nature of the intervention, and on the motivational attributes of those involved in each process. Resources are important, but as the Chivi and CBW cases revealed, material incentives are not always necessary to encourage participation, commitment and a sense of responsibility. In fact some of the success of CBP and CBW was as a result of partners having to bring their own resources, rather than just being attracted to the funding honey-pot, so they had to be fully committed and take involvement seriously.

### Guiding the project strategy

Action learning entails assisting participants to identify their own needs and develop their own solutions. This means participants need to be at the centre of the design process. Some of the **lessons emerging around intervention design** were:

- The importance of strategic opportunism for new ideas to be created. Not everything comes from linear design.
- The need for process design, indicating overall expected outcomes and indicative processes, but with flexibility for change.
- The importance of stakeholders being part of the design process, or able to influence the ongoing process, with strong partnerships facilitating sustainability.
- A good situation analysis is needed at the outset, and this should promote dialogue between stakeholders, and identify priority issues for the stakeholders.
- Strengthening and investing in local institutions as part of the intervention strategy will enable initiatives and processes to be maintained and developed after outsiders have left.
- The need to design pilot implementation so it is replicable and can be mainstreamed afterwards.

**Flexibility** of design is very important to allow for lessons to be incorporated into ongoing processes. **Piloting** was a key feature of the case studies, as one would expect from an action learning approach, and in a number of cases it was identified as a key mechanism for building flexibility into the intervention. A succession of pilots could be seen in the scaling up process of CBP, allowing learning at each stage.

**Institutionalisation** within existing systems (after adaptation of those systems, based on learning from the project) is one of the key ways to ensure sustainability. The case studies were well aware of the need to link up with the development system, though they had differing degrees of success in this regard.

### Ensuring effective operations

The formation of communicative space and democratic dialogue is an essential and critical feature in action learning processes. How this space and dialogue is facilitated is equally significant. Ownership cannot be limited to the design stage, and participants should be involved integrally in implementation, monitoring and drawing out lessons. A key task for facilitators is to generate and maintain energy, enthusiasm and commitment.

Some of the highlights emerging from the **lessons on leadership and facilitation** are:

- The role played by the project co-ordinator is critical, who must both facilitate a process and be on top of the content.
- The process requires sufficient time and adequate resources to operate.
- If an effective partnership is in place different partners will play different leadership roles but it is critical for the overall process to be "held".
- The importance of building participants' capacity to reflect, building their confidence and ability to express voice and make their own choices.
- The co-ordinator must be able to "play the energy" to use different activities to maintain energy.
- Having groups to steer processes in each area is fundamental, if it is to be a shared action learning process. How formal to make the structures in each country seems to vary.
- There is a challenge of delegating authority to different partners or areas and yet ensuring appropriate quality overall.
- Transition periods between stages are critical, and how those are managed can lead to disruption and collapse, or a dimension change of scale of impact.
- Training that focuses on leadership and co-operation enhances resilience and likely impact of any technical

intervention or experimentation as stakeholders are constantly aware of how they are working together rather than simply the content of what they are working on.

- All stakeholders must place a high value on reflective practice whether through formal or informal channels or a combination of both.
- A successful intervention overcomes resistance and conflict rather than ignoring it. There will always be challenges in the process, the skill lies in how these are handled and used to strengthen the process.
- The need to be flexible about the way the project is emerging, while keeping in mind the overall goals and critical common products.

Commitment is built through ensuring broad ownership but also managing tensions that may arise in the process. Some of the **lessons emerging on ownership** were:

- The importance of committed partners prepared to invest their own time and resources, and see how the project can contribute to their wider programme.
- Although the process is about institutions, you need committed individual champions who can carry their institutions with them.
- The importance of a locally-driven process with participation of senior government officials if there is to be systemic impact.
- There may be tension about “ownership” especially when the project is seen to succeed.

#### Creating a learning environment and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems

M&E is the conventional framework through which learning may be captured in a project setting. However in practice M&E is not always sufficiently integrated into project design or operations and the potential value added for learning is lost. An action learning orientation conceptualises M&E in a much more creative and dynamic way and uses it as an explicit framework for learning at a myriad of levels. Two key principles underpinning action learning are that the experience of the learner, including that of learning from others, is valued above other sources of learning; and that action learning is an ongoing process composed of iterative cycles of learning and action.

All the case studies set out to learn from and build on previous experiences, including the use of pilots. Most of the projects started with some form of learning questions, one of a range of learning tools used in the various case studies. Other tools included: reviews of existing experience; partner meetings to share and plan on the basis of lessons; workshops to share learning with others; study and exchange visits; development of process guidelines; training including training of trainers; use of pilots; softer strategies around building trust, transparency and mutual respect, working in

partnership with all stakeholders; use of formal evaluations; and use of formative learning reviews.

The case studies used a range of methods and processes for **sharing lessons**, and took this aspect very seriously. These included the use of a wide range of communications media. All of the case studies had a **systematic learning framework** which was used in review processes and evaluations. However there was a common weakness of inadequate routine monitoring systems, and this meant that some of the richness from the ongoing processes is lost.

#### Impacts of action learning approaches

While positive physical and livelihood impacts from the various projects were reported, it was not possible to make clear links between using an action learning approach and achievement of these impacts.

The political will required to design policies and institutions in a participatory way, and to convert these into implementation and practical action, determines the **effectiveness** of an intervention. Action learning processes can improve design and implementation in conditions where those with power decide that these processes are desirable. However, much work needs to be done to structure participatory and action learning approaches into institutional forms so they do not reinforce existing power inequalities in society.

The action learning case studies all had significant influence on **policies and practices** of government, with CBP and the CBW system being adopted or receiving high-level backing in a number of countries; improvements in extension methodologies as a result of the Chivi project in Zimbabwe; and new institutional structures being formed out of the Uganda forestry reform process.

The action learning approach has built the **confidence and resourcefulness** of poorer farmers in Chivi and in the Ugandan forestry sector. Improvement of local capacities was significant within the CBP process within all of the countries. The CBW case study noted a positive impact on capacities at various levels, including an increased knowledge and understanding of community members concerning HIV and AIDS. However, it was not explicit about how the action learning process adopted contributed to enhanced capacities, apart from through training for CBWs themselves.

More thinking is needed around the **requirements for successful upscaling** such as standardised approaches, presence of suitable guidelines, training of trainers, availability of support to ensure that quality is maintained, funding etc. The transitions in the upscaling process are points where particular care must be taken to ensure continuity in the process.