



Learning at the Portfolio Level: Collaborative Learning and Programme Adaptation in Fragile Contexts

18 December, 9:00-12:30, IDLO office, The Hague

Workshop Notes

I Background

The workshop on ‘learning at the portfolio level’ provided a space for joint reflection and sharing of knowledge among researchers working on portfolio learning and adaptation, practitioners working in projects with collaborative learning components and policymakers working on portfolio management. It combined insights into the Overseas Development Institute’s (ODI) research on portfolio level decision-making and adaptation, the practical experience of implementing collaborative learning initiatives in the context of the ‘Addressing Root Causes (ARC)’ programme and interactive discussions among the participants on how the results of collaborative learning efforts can effectively inform programme adaptation and portfolio decision-making - in view of the ARC programme as well as the wider portfolio approach of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in the field of security and rule of law (SRoL).

II Setting the scene: Portfolio learning & adaptation

[For details, please refer to the presentation attached]

While practice partners increasingly work in fragile and conflict-affected contexts and within complicated implementing settings (multi-actor consortia, large-scale programmes with various thematic components), they face growing demands to make project results and data publicly available. Hence, issues of attribution and knowledge gaps are pertinent for the SRoL community to address. Many questions that organisations are expected to engage with are political (for example, questions of inequalities in resource allocation and drivers of societal change) and exceed the scope of what project monitoring & evaluation (M&E) can account for. While these questions might be considered at the analysis stage of portfolio planning and feature in the context of terminological debates, learning needs to be taken to the practice level, to change the ways development projects work. At the same time, the political climate and perspectives on what counts as ‘evidence’ and what development programmes should deliver is shifting in the context of many Western donor societies. Against this backdrop, practice partners regularly need to balance expectations and navigate the trade-offs between competing demands.

To engage with these more fundamental questions and to enable learning and adaptation, **collaborative learning initiatives between practice partners, researchers and policymakers are required**. Engaging in early and intense discussions of shared learning needs during the design phase of programmes is likely to yield better learning results than bringing these questions up only during the programme implementation stage. The organisational change management literature can provide pertinent insights into how these learning and organisational change processes can be facilitated. It can also be worthwhile for development programmes in the context of development and security to explore how diplomacy and defense handle portfolio development. Overall, **still little is known about**



what motivates and enables organisations in the development sector to learn and adapt - these factors need to be explored further, before they can be institutionalised.

At the same time, there is a risk of over-aggregation of data in large programmes, for the sake of being able to speak to donor portfolios. Hence, practice partners also need to consider the most appropriate level for engaging with learning needs. **For many learning needs, smaller subgroups are likely to be the more effective learning mechanism.** Furthermore, learning through geographically focused groups may be better equipped to deal with issues of ‘context specificity’ than thematically organised groups. In the end, the learning of project staff at the field level is more pertinent for changing the ways development projects work than it is for portfolio-learning at the HQ-level. Including local partners and locally generated knowledge in collaborative learning initiatives will ensure that the substantial day-to-day project learning at the field level, which is often not formalised, is increasingly considered in organisational learning and adaptation processes. Though it may be less relevant for strategic decision making at portfolio level.

III Practical experience of the ARC learning group on Adaptive Programming

[For details, please refer to the presentation attached]

In the ARC context, global learning groups have been established in 2017, to collaboratively work on specific issue areas. The learning groups have faced several barriers to learning, among them: difficulties to coordinate learning processes within consortia; a lack of motivation of staff to engage in learning activities that come on top of regular project implementation responsibilities; a lack of direction in terms of ‘what’ and ‘for whom’ learning is considered relevant and which learning needs to prioritise; and the limited opportunities of learning groups to meet physically, as ARC is a geographically dispersed programme. An **organisational culture of learning, donor policies holding partners accountable for learning efforts, external promoters like the KPSRL, and tangible outputs**, like the publication of the ARC learning paper on adaptive programming, were identified as conducive for overcoming inertia and collective action problems. In terms of organisational culture, flat hierarchies, agility to react to changes and ‘approachable’ staff who will pay consideration to requests made from the local level were identified as factors that are conducive for learning and adaptation. Moreover, it was noted that in the ARC context, **process-oriented collaborative learning initiatives (like adaptive programming) might be more amenable for cross-organisational/regional comparison than thematic learning initiatives (like transforming gender norms)** - an observation that would need to be explored further during the remaining programme period.

To take the ARC global learning initiative forward, interlinkages between different levels of learning should be explored. The ARC learning partners have implemented various learning formats since 2017 (for example, learning events at the local, national, and regional levels). In 2020, **learning experience made so far should be assessed to distill what has worked well or less well.** Moreover, the learning groups could decide on one or more pertinent learning questions for 2020 and focus efforts and resources on these questions, instead of tackling all knowledge in parallel (sequencing of information needs). At the same time, participants were conscious that a balance needs to be reached between focusing on establishing (collaborative) learning infrastructures that have been decided on at the programme level and remaining responsive to learning needs and preferences at the implementation level.



IV Group discussion - taking ARC learning forward in 2020

In early 2020, all ARC grantees will have finalised their Mid Term Reviews (MTRs). Moreover, the MFA is currently conducting its own MTR of the ARC programme; results are expected to be available in late March/early April 2020. Though ARC grantees work with different evaluation methodologies, a **synthesis of the findings of the MTRs** could be a useful source of data to inform collaborative learning initiatives. As a full synthesis report will not be feasible, learning groups should **formulate learning questions for the remaining programme period (until 2021)**; a synthesis analysis of the MTRs could then focus on data relevant to these questions. For the analysis, an application could be submitted by an ARC learning group for a grant from the KPSRL's Knowledge Management Fund (KMF). Moreover, ARC grantees agreed that a discussion should be initiated between ARC grantees and the MFA to **explore synergies for the End-Term-Evaluation** of the ARC programme, in view of the groups' learning needs.

V Group discussion - integrating collaborative learning components into portfolios

While most practice partners are currently engaging in learning processes, these processes mostly take place within projects or within organisations, while cross-organisational learning initiatives remain an exception. For example, in the context of consortia, governance structures, power imbalances and different organisational approaches to (and cultures of) learning and change can hamper the sharing of knowledge and result in competitive dynamics between practice partners. These dynamics need to be tackled by creating **incentives to achieve joint results** (e.g. creating jobs in the same context). These incentives should be set out through MFA funding mechanisms, which should include **“protected”, clearly allocated budgets to encourage investments in (joint) learning infrastructures**. Moreover, learning efforts should be encouraged from the outset of programmes, to avoid inertia after a programme has started running. This requires the willingness of all partners involved to allocate time to collective reflection processes, despite pressure to implement and deliver results.

Collective action problems for learning can also be addressed by **involving a 3rd party learning partner/researchers**, who accompany learning processes (e.g. the Strategic Partnerships on Dialogue & Dissent), where 'higher level' meta learning is facilitated through accompanying research on Theories of Change. Hypothesis-testing approaches could also be aligned with organisational decision-making processes within programmes/portfolios. Next to research, the KPSRL plays a role in facilitating learning processes and should be considered by the practice partners during the proposal stage already. At the same time, learning and adaptation cannot be 'outsourced' entirely, as these processes need to be embedded within the implementing organisations to effect changes in the way development projects work.

Learning experience and knowledge needs arising from MFA programmes working with different funding mechanisms need to be communicated back to the MFA, and practice partners should **advocate for what the pre-requisites should be in a new tender**. At the same time, the MFA could reflect on how its own learning can be better facilitated and formulate learning questions, which could then be taken up in collaborative learning initiatives.