

EDITORIAL

This non-thematic issue of the journal is the closing and third issue for 2014. It includes five papers, two case studies and one community note. The publication of this issue makes the second full year in which the journal has been back on the Open Journal System and is probably at a stronger point than it has ever been in the past with a very committed editorial team and a number of issues in the planning. The next issue, to be published in May 2015, is on the subject of ‘Facilitating multi-stakeholder processes: balancing internal dynamics and institutional politics.’

The papers in this issue are mostly focused on organisational learning, highlighting the failure of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to support organisational learning:

...the kinds of information that did not routinely enter into project reporting were ones that contradicted the project objective’ and ‘... the information that addresses any side effects on non-project villages ... is simply not used. (Moeko Saito-Jensen and Maya Pasgaard, p. 12)

Upon being asked to evaluate an online collaboration platform at an international non-governmental organisation, one of the authors asked ‘What specifically about the platform do you want to evaluate? What are your indicators of success?’ ... it was clear that these questions were difficult for the client to answer. (White et al, p. 21).

Moeko Saito-Jensen and Maya Pasgaard argue that the phenomenon of selective learning ‘damages organisational reputation’ (p. 5). More seriously, however, it must be damaging the local communities which development aid is supposed to be helping. Other contributions to this issue highlight participatory approaches which specifically focus on challenges and unexpected effects and meta-learning from a number of different projects and programmes (Restrepo et al, Bhatt et al). The papers also highlight the negative effect of hierarchical power on open communication and the fact that trust is an important facilitator of organisational learning. A number of papers also highlight the importance of recognising and addressing ‘failure’ as learning opportunities that should not be ignored.

Papers

The first paper ‘Blocked learning in development aid? Reporting success rather than failure in Andhra Pradesh, India’ (Moeko Saito-Jensen and Maya Pasgaard) attempts to understand why development organisations tend to report project success rather than failure, arguing that this impedes learning from project problems and makes organisations prone to repeating the same mistakes. Drawing on the case of a World Bank forestry project in Andhra Pradesh, India, it analyses different interlinked sites of project learning activities facilitated by M&E, and

investigates the way in which project information is used for project reporting. The results point to multi-layered blockages to project learning from problems, such as indicators and the formats of project visits; the criteria used for project fund disbursement and staff career promotion within recipient governments and development organisations; and asymmetrical power relations, collusion and collaboration among project actors. The paper demonstrates how learning is hindered at all levels: at the local level but also at the level of recipient governments and the World Bank. It calls for a critical need to restructure the existing organisational incentive structures within recipient governments and development organisations to cultivate a culture of learning from failure. Although this inability to learn from failure is widely recognised within the development field, this paper identifies barriers at all stages, reinforced by diverse project stakeholders but also by M&E systems and indicators.

The second paper ‘Learning 3.0: collaborating for impact in large development organisations’ (Nancy White, Rachel Cardone and Aldo de Moor) is also very much related to M&E, focusing on the difficulty organisations face in measuring the impact of networks and communities of practice. The paper builds on the findings from an initial probe into the experiences of five development agencies using collaboration platform technologies, conducted from September 2013 to February 2014. The paper proposes a framework for looking at productive practices in selecting, configuring and supporting use of collaboration technologies, arguing that opportunities for learning and impact exist in the boundaries between different parts of a development organisations and different kinds of interactions.

Next, ‘Collaborative learning for fostering change in complex social-ecological systems: a transdisciplinary perspective on food and farming systems’ (Maria J. Restrepo, Margareta A. Lelea, Anja Christinck, Christian Hülsebusch and Brigitte A. Kaufmann) conceptualizes collaborative learning methodologies used in transdisciplinary research projects dealing with change in complex situations, such as farming and food systems of developing countries. It proposes a framework for understanding collaborative learning approaches based on theoretical considerations and 18 selected case studies which includes the next paper in this issue. Based on this analysis, the authors propose that a ‘collaborative learning’ process includes four steps: establishing cooperation, dialogue, discovery, and application of new knowledge. Trust among the participants was a key to promoting knowledge exchange and mature reflection, resulting from a carefully designed and facilitated process.

The fourth paper ‘Changing institutional culture: participatory monitoring and evaluation in transdisciplinary research for agricultural development in Vietnam’ (Oleg Nicetic and Elske van de Fliert) describes the use of a participatory monitoring and evaluation system as the key method providing researchers with the opportunity to experience how farmers make decisions and manage the system as a whole rather than in fragments. This system also served as a mechanism to operationalise the transdisciplinary nature of the project allowing researchers and farmers to better value their own and each other’s expertise in their quest to develop sustainable farming systems.

Next, 'Knowledge assets of higher education institutions in Uganda: proposing a framework for assessing human, structural and relational knowledge assets' (Walter Omona and Theo van der Wiede) assess the knowledge assets of higher education institutions in Uganda by identifying and testing the relative importance and ranking of the relevant knowledge assets: human assets, structural assets and relational assets. The paper identifies the key indicators to constitute the dimensions of the adapted framework which is then applied with the help of a questionnaire using descriptive analysis to test the relative importance and ranking of the knowledge asset indicators identified in achieving higher education goals.

Case studies

This issue of the journal comprises two case studies. The first 'Systematisation: learning from experiences of community-based adaptation projects in India' (Somya Bhatt, Shalini Kala and Anna Kalisch) describes the use of a process called systematisation to extract lessons and create knowledge on what climate change adaptation means on the ground. It examines 6 projects which were part of the Indo-German development project, Climate Change Adaptation in Rural Areas of India (CCA-RAI). Undertaken during the 2011-2014 period, this study places emphasis on the challenges and unexpected outcomes.

The second case study, 'Navigating complexity: adaptive management and organisational learning in a development project in Northern Uganda' (Amir Allana and Timothy Sparkman) shows how the Northern Karamoja Growth, Health, and Governance Programme, developed and implemented by Mercy Corps Uganda, has been an ongoing experiment in applying the principles of adaptive management and facilitation. Three salient takeaways for effective facilitation are proposed: the importance of staff behaviours and underlying beliefs, particularly with regards to 'failure', flexibility to experiment, dissent & debate, and curiosity with the subject matter of their work; importance of consistent messaging from senior management with regards to the same; and tools and processes playing a support function to these behaviours, rather than being their source.

Community note

The final contribution to this issue is 'Knowledge for Development: findings of a stakeholder consultation facilitated by the German Development Institute' (John Akude and Philipp Grunewald). presents the findings of a conference on knowledge for development (K4D) which took place July 2014.

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