

Linking learning to decision making

Action Aid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System

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In many aid agencies the rhetoric of learning is rarely matched in practice. Charles Owusu describes the efforts of ActionAid to make systems and structures part of the solution to becoming a learning organisation, rather than part of the problem.

In a major effort to create space and time for learning and to reform power relationships, ActionAid, an international NGO, introduced the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS). Key elements of ALPS include annual participatory review and reflection processes at all levels, involving multiple stakeholders; greater downward accountability, with more transparent budgets; and the use of locally appropriate language in the forms used for reporting.

ActionAid's struggle to implement ALPS illustrates many of the challenges faced by aid agencies in trying to become learning organisations.

Integrating learning and planning

First, ActionAid established annual review and reflection processes at all levels, and across functions, in order to learn from achievements and failures and to improve the quality of programmes. Once the process was institutionalised, however, it was realised that achieving honest dialogue among stakeholders about ActionAid's work required more than just 'space and time' for reflection. In particular, the finance director needed to find ways to integrate financial systems with programme planning and review cycles, so that the review process would directly influence planning and budgeting. This would ensure that learning would be fed back into planning, which in turn would lead to greater transparency in financial reporting at all levels.



It was therefore necessary to simplify the financial reporting schedules and templates used at local levels, so that the information could be easily understood and discussed with community groups. A new and simpler coding system was

introduced. An information disclosure policy was introduced to improve transparency by compelling staff to share financial information. Headquarters decided not to require formal country reports, and to allow staff more time to interact with communities. Reporting forms were redesigned, with locally appropriate language; this last element represented a radical shift, and generated much debate.

One of the most difficult challenges that ActionAid had to address concerned the power dynamics vis-à-vis its partners. Most partners feared a backlash if they went too far in their criticism. Because of its power, ActionAid was aware of the inherent tension when it tried to ask communities and partners to 'open up' in honest dialogue, and to provide feedback and criticism of its work. Decision-making authority was thus shifted closer to the point of action.

Within ActionAid itself, it was recognised that there was a need for decentralisation, regionalisation and devolution of authority, as well as for greater coordination among key functions. ? impact assessment, human resources, organisational development, finance, marketing and sponsorship. Yet the pressure to demonstrate change, and to respond to linear thinking about impacts, the rigid adherence to 'measurable indicators' was in direct contradiction with the learning agenda ActionAid was trying to promote.

A number of factors did much to constrain the learning process. These included the procedures associated with the log-frame approach and the hierarchical culture it fosters, reinforced by disbursement pressures. Another was the priority given to meeting (often unrealistic) targets rather than learning. Yet another was the unrelenting pressure to demonstrate impacts, even though in some contexts learning would have been more appropriate as a yardstick for judging success.

Consistent management support

All of these challenges did not deter ActionAid's management, who enforced ALPS from the top with clear principles and directives. For an organisation that prided itself on its preference for a bottom-up approach, this was somewhat at odds with its philosophy. Most important, management made it clear that it was willing to listen to suggestions, and to review and update any constraining structures, systems, procedures or policies. For example, the impact assessment unit was moved from programmes and made to report directly to the chief executive officer, thus linking learning outcomes to top-level decision making.

Gradually, a feeling of 'failing forward' towards a culture in which failures could be honestly reported began to emerge. The country teams began to organise 'learning events' to highlight the 'tensions and dilemmas' of ALPS. The field teams received support for documentation and research, and budgets were allocated for publications. The management gave feedback and responded promptly to recommendations from the field teams. Where necessary, heads of department were free to propose or introduce new structures or systems, so long as they enhanced learning.

As more senior staff visited the field, more varied interpretations of progress, success and failure began to emerge. New mindsets developed and old biases began to change. Ultimately, it has been the willingness of the leadership to review and address the constraints inherent in structures, cultures and systems that hold the promise for double-loop learning within ActionAid, even though this does not mean that everything will change overnight.

Link

[ActionAid's Accountability Learning and Planning System \(ALPS\)](#).

The author was involved in piloting Action Aid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS). He is now working with CCF-USA on its new Planning, Accountability and Learning System (PALS).