

Sharing Lessons learnt

SHARING
LESSONS OF
ADAPTATION

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Why reflection?

Reflecting on what has been done and achieved creates opportunity to assess without judgement, and thus to learn without excessive stress and gain insight into how to improve future actions. When done collectively within a team, reflection will enable members to gain insight into one another's perspectives and perceptions, to develop deeper empathy and to mobilise energies and deepen commitment to achieve outstanding or additional objectives. Reflective moments are quiet spaces in which intuitive knowledge can emerge and combine with what people conclude in more logical ways, creating a richer picture of the dynamic processes of adaptation.

If reflection is not acknowledged by all as an important aspect of the action research cycle, it might not be prioritised and may lose its rightful place on the agenda to planning exercises, discussions or conflict resolution. When facilitating adaptation processes, ensure that time is allocated for reflection at appropriate intervals. It is particularly useful to reflect at the close of a workshop so as to give participants the opportunity to recall and share which aspects of the process, content and interactions were of value, and why. Equally important are the less positive or even negative experiences of participants.

Adaptation is a complex process, and if we limit our focus to a small range of actions, we might well miss seeing other options and open the way for maladaptation to take place. Reflection will enable facilitators and participants to appreciate the progress that is being made (even if this means that negative social and environmental impacts have been contained to some extent), to learn from what has not gone as well as hoped, and open up the frame of engagement to include other participants.

The essentials of reflective processes

Reflective processes should be designed to enable participants to take stock (on a personal level, and in



Engaging activities can support deeper reflection processes (Photo: B Koelle)

terms of collective endeavour), and bring all actors in the process on board so that the insights of all can be shared and harnessed.

In a sound reflective process space and opportunity will be created for people to think more laterally than they might otherwise have the opportunity to do.

The way in which you reflect, or facilitate the reflection of others, will determine the quality and the depth of the insights that emerge. There are no precise "recipes" for reflective processes. However, one useful approach is to first reflect separately on (i) the chronology of events (what happened and when), (ii) relationships and how/why they have changed, (iii) new insights that have emerged, and (iv) levels of energy and passion.... And then look at them together and record your reflections.

Whether you will be reflecting on your own, or with a group, seek out a quiet and safe space to reflect in, where the chances of disturbance are minimal.

If you will be reflecting on your own, you may want to refer to some pictures or written material that relate to the intended focus of the reflective session: have these available. It will probably be useful to have a pen and paper available to record your reflections: frequently, the act of writing helps to

articulate thoughts that might otherwise stay just below the surface of your conscious mind. As you let your minds flow back over your experiences, try first to focus on the positive aspects: what you have achieved, what you have enjoyed and what you have found value in.

In reflective processes undertaken by groups, the facilitator will be inviting other participants to share their insights. Some of these insights might not be comfortable for others to hear, especially if they relate to their performance or behaviour. While it is important to ask people to phrase their feedback in a respectful way, it is even more important to encourage all participants to accept all feedback, even critical feedback, as a gift. Honest feedback will provide a unique insight into how others have experienced or perceived a situation or action, and can help members of the group to improve their interactions. For this reason group members should be encouraged not to defend themselves against what they might perceive as criticism, and not to try to justify their past actions, but rather to embrace the opportunity to learn.

Best practice or best spin?

Adaptation to climate variability and change is a highly complex and dynamic process in which people and institutions must constantly respond to unpredicted events and shifting frame conditions, and on-going learning is essential. Whether individual, collective or institutional, much of what is learned is likely to be of primary value in the specific context, and may not be directly transferrable to other situations. For these reasons we would suggest that describing and disseminating “best practices” that describe a process that can ostensibly be replicated elsewhere is less useful than sharing a more nuanced understanding of the factors and processes that contribute to effective adaptation.

In order to enable others to learn effectively and usefully from the successes, insights, challenges and failure of others the conventional tools such as reports, publications or presentations at conferences are not optimal, in part because they predispose the writer or presenter to presenting elements of the experience in a way that shows a clear logical progression from planning through implementation to the achievement of the pre-identified goals, which is generally consistent with the expectations of donors, peers and supervisors.

Frankness and honesty regarding inadequate understanding of the context in which the adaptation process has been supported, inadequate or incorrect information, misconceptions, changes to plans, misappropriation of resources, maladaptation and downright failure require courage, and might well result in cessation of funding, withdrawal of other sorts of support, loss of face and status and even loss of livelihood. Under these circumstances anyone could be forgiven for putting a positive spin on the narrative and drawing conclusions that are based more on fiction than on a clear-sighted analysis of the experience.

Learning from failure and the unintended

One of the richest sources of insight and knowledge is reflection upon the processes that may or may not have achieved their intended outcomes, but also resulted in unintended outcomes (both positive and negative). How then to draw on the rich lode of learning that lies hidden in the unplanned, the serendipitous and the failures, and to share this in ways that others can benefit from the insights by learning how to facilitate these processes more positively?

Within a professional environment that is frequently unforgiving, it is essential to create safe spaces for sharing and learning within which people will be more able to share openly. This is more easily achieved in face-to-face situations in which people can be invited to be candid without the fear of being recorded or quoted verbatim, and insights can be shared, discussed and compiled without direct attribution. Evaluative processes conducted in this way will produce more insightful material because they not only enable open sharing, but also create synergies between participants that help them to uncover patterns of causation that they might only have been partly aware of.

Effective processes of sharing

Whereas it is vitally important that policy makers and donors understand what sort of interventions are likely to succeed, and which will more likely result in maladaptations, it is equally important that members of affected communities should have opportunities to share and learn in their own context, and between one another. Effective tools for these peer learning processes include participatory video and knowledge exchanges, also known as cross-visits.



Creating spaces for reflection can support deeper learning processes, driven by enthusiasm of its participants. (Photo B Koelle)



Space for learning and reflection can be created in field and in the office and is important for the joint learning process: the Mechal project team pausing for reflection in the field (Photo: B Koelle)

Participatory video enables participants in adaptation processes to record one another sharing their experiences and insights in a relaxed atmosphere in which they are more likely to be candid. Enabling them to subsequently participate in editing the material generates pride, builds ownership of the material, and provides opportunity to exclude any footage that might be seen to be damaging.

Knowledge exchanges (Oettlé, 2004; Oettle & Koelle, 2003) enable the facilitator to create different opportunities for sharing experience and insights, both formal and informal. Members of rural communities generally derive a great deal of pleasure and stimulus from meeting members of other communities that have similar skills and experiences, and face similar challenges. Facilitated knowledge sharing processes, interspersed with informal discussions whilst walking in the fields or eating together, provide excellent opportunities for frank exchanges of experiences, which in turn provide rich material for collective and individual learning about adaptation processes.

Assessing impacts

Adaptation processes take place in complex settings, often involving many different stakeholders, organisations, sectors and agendas. While we often try to implement adaptation processes that will address a specific challenge, it is important to decide how to monitor the impact of these interventions before getting started with implementation. Planning the ways and methods you are using to assess impacts of certain adaptation interventions can also help us think through some of the intended and unintended impacts our actions might have.

Challenges of assessing impact in adaptation processes

While the actual methods used to monitor impact should be adjusted in the course of the adaptation process as needed, it is important to keep a few challenges in mind relating assessing impacts of specifically adaptation processes:

Complexity challenge: Complex systems make it often difficult to attribute a specific positive or negative impact to a certain action. It is thus important to understand the system within which the interventions are taking place and the possible impacts different interventions could have had on the system. It is helpful to engage various stakeholders in this process, including the intended beneficiaries.

Integrating different types of knowledge: in order to be able to understand complexity, it is important to understand and integrate different types of knowledge when trying to understand a complex situation or problem. Types of knowledge can include local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, scientific knowledge, knowledge about political and administrative processes, etc.

Shifting baselines: Most adaptation processes are operating in an environment within which the baselines are constantly shifting (e.g. there might be trends for higher extreme temperatures in summer, repeated droughts in the past decade, or an increase in the number of extreme weather events). This should be considered in assessing the impact of adaptation processes. Answering the question: "if the project interventions did not take place - what would the impact have been?" can help to unpack this issue.

Understanding what happened and why

The process of monitoring and evaluating impact is essentially one of learning to improve the specific process or measures being implemented, whilst also striving to ensure that the learning from this particular process can support,

inspire and enhance other adaptation processes.

Understanding complex situations can be challenging, but when assessing the actual impact of an adaptation intervention it is crucial to involve the actual beneficiaries (whether they are the intended beneficiaries or not) in the assessment process.

In a participatory adaptation process, stakeholders involved have often a clear idea of what they would consider positive and negative impact, and what it may be attributed to. The facilitation of an impact assessment learning process should be designed in such a way that it draws on these insights, whilst also:

- Creating a safe space for all persons participating in the reflection process.
- Ensuring all sides can be heard and that all voices are recorded (including more quiet groups!).
- Expressing appreciation for sharing insights and learning - positive or more challenging perceptions can be shared more easily when it is clear that they are really appreciated, and if there is a sense that this sharing of experiences (and that risk that this sometimes entails) is really informing practice, and may result in improvement!
- Ensuring that you have sound data about impacts. Facilitating an on-going process of monitoring by community members can be a good way of doing this. This data can then be presented in the course of the impact assessment, preferably by the community members who are directly involved in the monitoring.
- Interrogating the impacts and their attribution using all types of knowledge you have available. Sometimes using group discussions can be a good way to triangulate results.

Why should impact monitoring be participatory?

Participation in impact monitoring by local communities enables more accurate and truthful assessment of impacts, and deepens ownership of the process and its outcomes on the part of the local community. Key aspects to consider in this regard are:

Understanding the impacts of different interventions on various groups is crucial (considering age, gender, ethnicity), including an understanding of different vulnerabilities and the impacts interventions might have on individuals in these groups.

Effective communication is crucial in order to include a broad range of stakeholders and minority groups. This also means that effective listening is crucial!

Ensuring that adaptation measures do not have a negative effect on some groups can best be achieved by exploring with members of these groups how they feel about the intended and possible unintended impacts of the project interventions.

Impact monitoring is a learning process and should ideally stimulate new ideas for adaptation action that is fully owned by the intended actors and beneficiaries.

Assessing the impact of adaptation processes (which often require considerable investment) will strengthen

accountability and give a good indication of how funding and other resources can be used in a more efficient and effective in the future. If the perspectives and priorities of the local communities are reflected and addressed, their ownership of the adaptation processes will be strengthened.

Acknowledging failure

As we have noted above, frequently the most precious, but least accessible learning available to practitioners that can potentially transform and enrich their practice is the learning from what did not go well. Pressures from donors and organisations to claim success and to promote “best practice examples” conspire to make learning from failure difficult to realise. However, unsuccessful adaptation processes provide rich opportunities for sharing lessons about what to anticipate and avoid. While best practice cases can be inspiring, their use for learning will be constrained if the limitations of the approaches in question are not communicated in an open manner. Promotion of “best practice” in ways that gloss over or omit to mention the shortcomings and pitfalls can mislead the audience and can thus result in flawed and unsuccessful approaches being repeated over and over again.

Successful adaptation processes are urgently needed, and ensuring that these are owned by local communities and are supported by an on-going active learning process is not a luxury but a necessity.

If you would like to explore ways of assessing impact of Community-Based Adaptation processes further, you can read the freely available PMERL manual published by Care and IIED (Ayers, Anderson, Pradhan, & Rossing, 2012)

This manual is available in electronic form at:

http://www.care.org/sites/default/files/documents/CC-2012-CARE_PMERL_Manual_2012.pdf



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