



PAEPARD



THEMATIC BRIEF #6



Strengthening the capacity of multi-stakeholder partnerships in ARD



Reflection and learning in ARD

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Reflection and learning

Networks and organizations need to find ways to be more effective in pursuing their objectives and thus seek to “learn” to be able to respond, innovate and adapt to complex, changing social and environmental conditions, thus bringing about social change. An essential capacity for ARD (Agricultural Research for Development) partnerships is therefore the ability to reflect and learn.

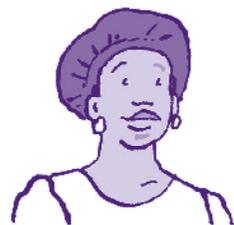
Learning is not simply about increasing knowledge and skills or changing attitudes; it is about making sense of complexity to act more effectively. Commitment to learning, however, requires time, effort, and resources. That is, ongoing learning, whether in an organization, long-term partnership or network, requires allocating time to come together with the clear purpose of learning, as well as adequate planning and preparation. Reflection in groups allows individuals and the group to learn from the experience and perspectives of its diverse members. Safety, trust, personal expression and team building are important for creating the right group learning environment.

Key to effective group learning is facilitation — whether by a designated member of the group or a skilled external person or group. Effective facilitation creates the safe and participatory space that encourages members to adhere to agreed ground rules and maintains a high energy level and positive approach. Facilitators also help participants identify and articulate key points; encourage open expression of opinion allowing diverse voices to be heard and ensuring inclusive participation.

Adult and experiential learning

Joint learning builds on the following principles of adult learning. Adults are not empty vessels; they learn by building on the knowledge they already have. They have developed self-knowledge and need self-motivation to change. Adults are stimulated by sharing their own experiences, engaging in dialogue with their peers, and actively participating in the search for causes and solutions. They learn predominantly if they consider an issue or topic relevant to their lives. They want both to receive and give knowledge. They have strong personal dignity and should be treated with respect.

Albert Einstein is reputed to have said that “*Knowledge is experience, everything else is just information*” (see also



Thematic Brief 7 on knowledge co-creation). Some theorists take the view that all learning is in effect, learning from experience. This is often called “experiential learning”, although the term has come to include a range of meanings, practices, and ideologies, and is explored in a wide range of literature.

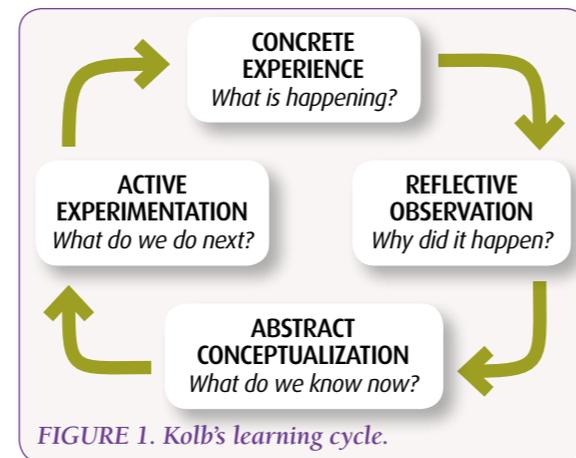
One of the most useful definitions of experiential learning is, comes from Moon (2004): “*The process whereby people individually and in association with others, engage in direct encounter, then purposefully reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and seek to integrate their different ways of knowing. Experiential learning therefore enables the discovery of possibilities that may not be evident from direct experience alone.*”

Moon then goes on to review what can be described as characteristics of experiential learning:

- The learning is personally significant to the learner;
- It is not usually mediated or “taught” (rather it is “facilitated” or managed);
- The material of learning is usually direct experience (rather than texts, information);
- There is a process of reflection that gives meaning to the experience;
- There is usually a formal intention to learn, and learning events are usually structured.

Learning cycles

Experiential learning is an iterative process whereby individuals, networks and even organizations learn from their own experience through a conscious and facilitated process of conceptualization, planning, acting and reflecting. In his influential book, David Kolb described the process of experiential learning as a cyclical process or a “learning cycle” (see *Figure 1*). He suggested that there are four different



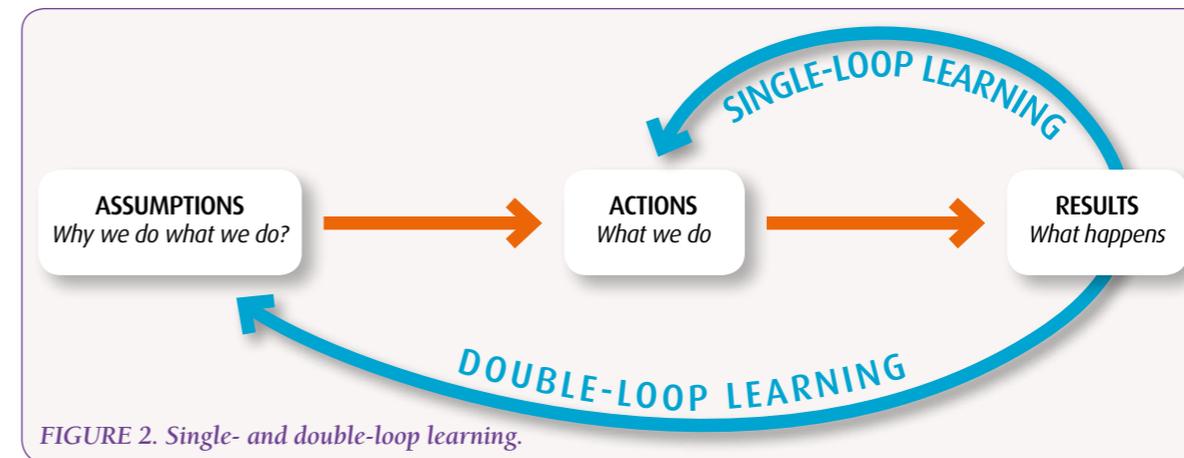
but linked sub-processes that interact over a period of time (which could be minutes or months) to achieve learning. In this learning cycle, direct (“concrete”) experience is followed by reflection on what happened, then the formulation of a general rule or conclusion (conceptualization), followed by more experimentation that gives rise to new experience etc.

This “learning cycle” - a conscious process of iterative reflection, planning and action, is central to the way ARD partnerships jointly learn and co-create knowledge.

Deepening reflection and learning

In complex situations, simple reflections on what happened and why rarely captures the intricacies of the situation adequately. When wanting to make more sense of complex reality, probing more deeply will help to better understand why certain things have happened. This includes an analysis of the wider system (see Thematic Brief 2 on Systems thinking), to make sense of the connections between what happened with for example the beliefs and assumptions of different stakeholders in the ARD partnership.

Argyris suggested the need for “double-loop” learning to deepen the process of reflection. In his model, “single-loop” learning refers to learning about the effectiveness of actions and improving them – “*are we doing things right?*”. Double-loop learning refers to learning about the assumptions that underpin our actions, the rules of the game – “*are we doing the right things?*” (*Figure 2*).



The focus of double-loop learning is on challenging and changing underlying values and assumptions, and on solving problems that are complex (as is typical in multi-stakeholder processes as in ARD partnerships). This learning model is used for deeper learning and reflection, which can help to bring about changes in attitudes, assumptions and beliefs of stakeholders.

The two fundamental reflection questions that form the bases for the respective learning loops and should be used in any reflective learning process:

- 1. Are we doing it right?** (How can we improve what we do?)
- 2. Are we doing the right things?** (Should we change our strategy?)

To come up with answers to these questions it is essential to seek to understand why things have happened the way they have. In a group, this will mean that different partners will have different answers to the questions. These divergent opinions and assumptions need to be discussed. Probing questions that might be asked can include:

- Are there other ways to look at the situation?
- Who agrees with whom, and who does not? Why not? What sense can be made of such contradictions?
- Which of these events did you not expect to happen? What does this say about the assumptions you made regarding the initiative?
- Are there mistakes that you may have made?
- What remains a puzzle? What would you have to do to clarify or address the situation?
- How should we go from here?

Different tools can be used to draw different viewpoints and assumptions out during group processes as actors may have very different responses to such questions (see suggested tools at the end of this brief).

A good learning trajectory involves regular and deep reflection to move forward and innovate together

Ongoing reflection processes

For ARD partnerships to be able to answer these questions and ensure deeper double-loop learning, a learning framework provided by a “Theory of Change”, and the development of a learning agenda is needed. Critical reflection processes need to be built into group events such as annual project reviews or monthly meetings with partners. Although this is often done implicitly in ARD partnerships, making and using this framework more explicitly can improve the learning of the partnership. That is, “reflection” often takes place at one level only, involving a sharing of experience among different groups and discussing the outcomes (what “went well” and “not so well”). However, the process can be made much more effective by carefully structuring sessions, developing a learning agenda, ensuring enough time is scheduled, and employing skilled facilitation to create the safe environment needed for deep, open group reflection processes, to draw out and document key underlying issues.

Ongoing processes of social change and innovation require not just a one-off learning cycle, but an iterative series of cycles, each involving planning, acting, reflecting and capitalization (see Figure 3). The event of stakeholders coming together at regular intervals (e.g. 2-4 months) for joint reflection, learning and then (re)planning can be combined with training sessions to acquire new skills and knowledge to better implement and adapt planned activities. After a series of learning cycles, a more complete capitalization workshop can be held to identify overall lessons, document the change process and demonstrate impact for external audiences.

The focus of the challenge identified by stakeholders – and hence the capacity needs of stakeholders – evolves as the

overall process of learning cycles develops (and perhaps as other stakeholders become involved). Typically, an initial focus (or stakeholder interest) may be on technical, financial, material issues, but as these immediate and/or disciplinary issues are explored, the importance of process or functional capacities becomes more evident.

Learning cycles can (and should) integrate individual, organizational and institutional issues. Even if these cannot all be addressed by stakeholders directly involved, it is important for local stakeholders to identify issues at these different levels, and to discuss how they can be addressed (e.g. through new forms of organization or by lobbying/advocacy, with which they can be involved).

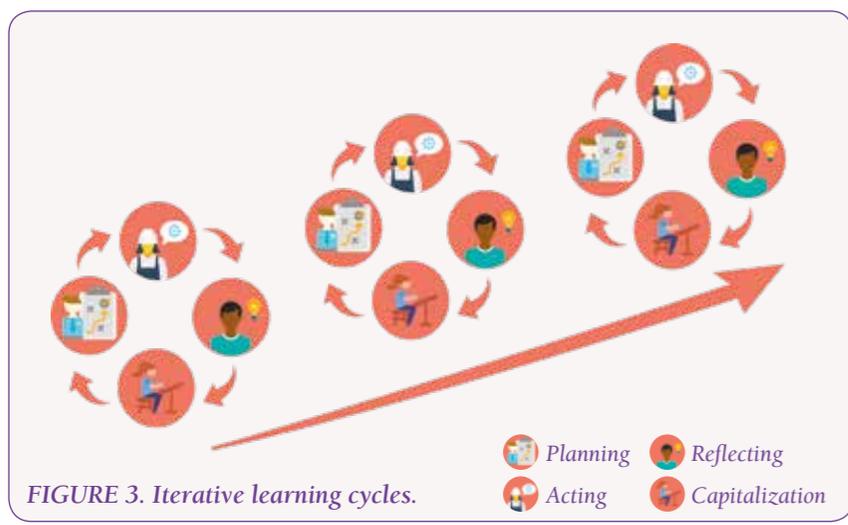
Reflection, capitalization and documentation

The learning cycles allow for reflection and adaptation of interventions and actions. In order to capture good practice, both for the partnership and also for a wider audience, learning involves more in-depth processes such as “process documentation” and “experience capitalization”.

Process documentation is related to learning-focused monitoring and evaluation as well as communication, and emphasizes both observation and analysis. It is an ongoing process of tracking events and capturing successes and failures. Written case studies, videos, audio recordings and photography may all be used to capture events.

Experience capitalization is a French term that denotes a process by which key actors (e.g. ARD partners) can share and transform individual and institutional experience and knowledge into capital that can be used in future. Its focus may be on strategic orientation, basic concepts, or operational activities. The outputs of the capitalization process are lessons learned and good practices; the outcome is induced changes and a redesigned practice. Capitalization of experiences aims to improve future practice, and at the same time to develop the institutional memory of an organization or network.

The key value of process documentation is its ongoing nature (it goes alongside other intervention activities), its



PAEPARD reflection and capitalization workshop

BOX 1

IN 2017, PAEPARD ORGANIZED A 5-DAY “reflection and capitalization workshop” to draw lessons from the project the ARD partnerships supported, and to provide recommendations for their future direction. Sixty-five persons attended the workshop, and two external consultants were hired to facilitate the reflection sessions in both English and French.

ALL THE PARTNERSHIPS WERE INVITED to prepare input to the workshop in the form of a document reflecting on key aspects of the project: achievements, success factors and constraints, focusing specifically on leadership, capacity needs, project management and policy environment. The experiences of the different ARD partnerships, and also of the work packages of the overall PAEPARD project, were exchanged and discussed intensively

in the workshop. A field visit to one of the partnerships was also organized.

WHILE THE FORMAT OF THE WORKSHOP was not specifically organized around the “ORID model” (see next section in the main text), the workshop did allow for discussions around the main reflection elements of this model. That is: What happened? How did partners feel about what happened? What are the implications? What should be done next?

THE RESULTS OF THE WORKSHOP were documented by a dedicated team of writers, who prepared a brief outlining lessons and recommendations on partnership and brokerage, communication and advocacy, project management and coordination, capacity strengthening and sustainability of the partnerships.

creative use of media and its focus on continually informing implementation. The added value of capitalization is to synthesize findings from experiences to inform change in future interventions (see Box 1 for an example from PAEPARD).

Tools to stimulate deeper reflection and learning in ARD partnerships

There are many tools available to support group learning in participatory ways to allow for diverse opinions to be shared, build trust and allow for underlying issues to come to light. Systemic analytical tools are central to the reflection and learning process. A skilled facilitator will be able to choose and use these tools to help to deepen the group’s learning processes. A relevant resource is Gordijn et al., 2018.

Communication tools

ORID FOCUSED CONVERSATION

This tool allows for a group to more deeply reflect on a particular experience. It needs time for participants to listen to and share their perceptions and emotional responses to gain a broader and deeper understanding of an experience. ORID stands for four steps to guide the reflection by a group, using questions that roughly follow the KOLB learning cycle:

- 1. Objective** (What happened? Perceptions/observations on the experience, the facts);
- 2. Reflective** (How did you feel? Emotional responses and mood about the experience);
- 3. Interpretative** (What did you learn? Reflections on the value, meaning and significance of the experience);
- 4. Decision** (How will you apply this learning? Future resolutions and/or actions).

MARGOLIS WHEEL

This method can work in larger groups and ensures that everyone can have a say. The group is divided in two and arranged into either two circles or two rows; with each person from one group sitting facing a person from the other group. Everyone then discusses a particular question with the person in front of them. After about 5 minutes, one row moves to the chair on the right while the other row stays put. Another question (or the same one) is then discussed with the new person; this goes on until the reflection questions have been gone through. The process can then be moved into a deeper reflection in plenary, having been enriched by smaller interactions.

TALKING STICK

This method is to allow for people to share what is on their mind or in their heart, and for others to just listen, without judging or asking questions. Passing a stick around from one to the other, each person can share their own key insight or lesson learned about a particular event or activity; they can also share their feelings about it or dilemmas. This requires that everyone feels comfortable that they are in a safe space and can be honest about their thoughts and feelings.



BONO'S SIX THINKING CAPS

This tool, originally designed by Edward de Bono as a decision-making tool can be adapted to analyse experience (the effects of action) from different perspectives. It can be used to help avoid the confrontations that happen when people with different thinking styles discuss the same problem. It allows emotion and scepticism to be brought into what would otherwise be purely rational decision-making processes. The tool also helps, for example, persistently pessimistic people to be positive and creative. Group members consciously adopt a certain thinking style by donning (metaphorically speaking) a certain coloured hat. Each hat represents a different style of thinking:

- **White hat:** Objective, neutral thinking in terms of facts, numbers and information;
- **Red hat:** Emotional, with judgments, suspicions and intuitions;
- **Black hat:** Negative, sees risks and thinks about why something will not function;
- **Yellow hat:** Positive, optimistic, clear, effective and constructive. The yellow thinker helps the group to think positively and to put concrete suggestions on the table;
- **Green hat:** Creative, seeking alternatives. The green is for developing creative solutions to a problem;
- **Blue hat:** The role is to keep an overview of what thinking is necessary to scout the subject. The blue thinker is responsible for giving summaries, surveys and conclusions.

Systemic learning tools

Presented below are tools to help a group analyse the situation at a more systemic level (also see Thematic Brief 2 on Systems thinking). To learn more about the tools, go to the References section.

TIMELINE MAPPING

Timeline mapping is the process of arranging important investments, events, actions, activities, achievements, and other milestone markers in chronological order so that they can be seen in temporal relationship to one another and to key contextual factors (e.g., social, economic, political, demographic, and cultural events and trends). It should be constructed by the group and broken into periods (years, or quarterly sections depending on the length of the intervention). Above the line at the appropriate time in the process, breakthroughs or milestones are noted in one colour and the factors that led to these noted. Below the line, in another colour, setbacks are noted as well as the factors that contributed to these. Agreeing on the chronology of events and the contributing factors to successes and setbacks allows the group to reflect on the overall process, identify power

dynamics at play and pinpoint weaknesses to be addressed. A variety of online templates are available to construct such a timeline, but a participatory process using flipchart paper and meta-cards has proven to be more interactive.

TREND MAPPING

A trend map is a visual depiction of relevant developments that have been or are currently influencing the system on a given topic. It is illustrated by using the collective knowledge and experience of a group of people familiar within a given system and its context. It enables participants to understand an issue's landscape/context and history, identify how various contextual factors (e.g., social, political, cultural, and economic developments and events) influence a topic or goal. It explores the connections, relationships, momentum, and energy among the trends on the map. It discovers patterns by pinpointing key trends (e.g., increases, decreases, appearances, disappearances, evolutions, and adaptations) that may influence the topic or goal. It enables one to understand how policies or social and cultural norms are changing and see the relationships between outputs and outcomes and external factors.

STAKEHOLDER MAPPING

An actor map is a visual depiction of the key organizations and/or individuals that make up a system, including those directly affected by the system as well as those whose actions influence the system. It is usually carried out as a participatory brainstorming session. It can be very informative to do this in different groups of stakeholders (for instance farmer organizations, researchers, NGOs, local government, private sector etc.) to really illustrate different perspectives of a system and relationships with in them.

There are three steps to follow in Stakeholder Analysis. The first step is to identify the stakeholders related to a certain issue or challenge. According to their importance to the issue at hand they can be depicted in larger or smaller circles. Relationships between the stakeholders, where they exist, can be drawn using thinner, or bolder lines according to the strength of the relationship. Conflicting relationships may be shown with dotted lines. Next, work out their power, influence and interest to develop a good understanding of the most important stakeholders, who will be supportive or those that may block an initiative (see more explanation of the influence and interest tool in Brief 4 on Power).

MIND MAPPING

Mind maps are a powerful graphic technique that can be applied to all aspects of life where improved learning and clearer thinking will enhance performance and effectiveness. It is a non-linear way of organizing information and a technique that allows capture of the natural flow of ideas. It

can be applied by individuals or by groups, to improve simple tasks, such as writing a memo, to more complex tasks, such as getting a shared perspective of a complex project.

Rather than starting writing on the upper left-hand corner of a page (unless you are in a country where you start on the upper right-hand corner), mind maps go from the centre of the page outwards. Begin with a word or image that symbolizes what you want to think about (e.g. the value chain under consideration for the ARD project) placed in the middle of the page.

Come up with other concepts that you associate with the central idea, in a continuous brain dumping process that helps stimulate new ideas and connections. As ideas emerge, write one or two-word descriptions of the ideas on lines branching from the central focus. Key words, symbols and images provide a mental shorthand to help you record ideas as quickly as possible. Use different colours and styles. Put everything down that comes to mind even if it is completely unrelated.

Sometimes, one can see relationships and connections immediately and can add sub-branches to a main idea.

Reflection and capitalization during the annual project review

Project reporting typically includes an account of the activities carried out, and the results achieved. But even more important is to reflect on lessons learned and their implications. An annual project review is an opportunity to critically reflect and learn from achievements and failures in a programme, and to decide on how to improve it. It can also help to: ensure that the overall goals, results and strategy for a particular ARD programme remain appropriate; review the implementation to date and analyse reasons for any deviations; review effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management; and to identify lessons learned, and actions needed to improve the next year's implementation process. The more stakeholders that are involved in these reviews, the better the picture will be of what has been happening, and the more people will understand what still needs to happen.

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Executive summary

To achieve their objectives, ARD (Agricultural Research for Development) partnerships, as with any organization or network, need to reflect and learn from their experiences. By engaging in regular reflection, they can respond to changes in their context, and adapt their actions to stay on course. ARD partnerships can be complex as they involve actors from very different social backgrounds and organizational mindsets, so the reflection process must be designed to allow for the varied viewpoints to be heard and for group learning to take place. This is not easy and requires time, good preparation and planning. Effective group learning also requires effective facilitation to guide the discussions and ensure a safe and participatory space.

In this brief, concepts of how we learn are explained, as are processes of reflection, capitalization and documentation of learning. Interactive, experiential

learning is explained as key to group learning processes. Also explained is how to design effective reflective processes, and to capitalize and document them well so that the experiences and learning are not lost.

Reflection and learning in ARD partnerships are typically hampered by insufficient time, and superficial processes that end at looking at what happened and what did not happen. To be able to solve problems that are complex (as is the case in most multi-stakeholder processes), double-loop learning can help bring better understanding about attitudes, assumptions and beliefs of stakeholders. With this understanding comes greater possibilities to adapt the research programme in order to reach the desired goals. A number of tools are suggested to help stimulate such deeper reflection and learning processes.

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