

Applying social learning where 'business-as-usual' solutions no longer work for complex problems and programs

Key messages

- Social learning facilitates sharing and learning beyond individuals to networks and systems. Through a facilitated, iterative process of joint work, dialogue and reflection, new shared ways of knowing emerge that lead to changes in practice.
- Social learning has real potential to unlock change and transform relationships between actors involved in complex programs and/or dealing with 'wicked problems'. Adversely it is not advisable to pursue for simple initiatives.
- Social learning offers many thematic and pragmatic entry points to be embedded in the CGIAR research programs around partnerships, innovation systems, monitoring and evaluation.

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The CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) brings together the world's best researchers in agricultural science, development research, climate science and Earth System science, to identify and address the most important interactions, synergies and tradeoffs between climate change, agriculture and food security. CCAFS is a strategic partnership of CGIAR and Future Earth, led by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). www.ccafs.cgiar.org

If knowledge is power, learning is empowering, and social learning is possibly the most powerful way of empowering people: collectively and through a deep quest for transformation.

This brief explores how social learning can be used to achieve transformational change where 'business-as-usual' solutions no longer work. Examples where social learning can be applied include work on complex global development issues such as climate change, food security and chronic poverty or in multi-organization programs and processes that require sustained engagement and learning.

It is written for teams involved in complex initiatives such as CGIAR research programs (CRPs). It explores how one of these programs—LIVESTOCK—could apply social learning as part of its approach.

What is social learning—and how different is it from other learning approaches?

There is no universal theoretical basis or terminology for social learning (Wals and van der Leij 2007). For the purposes of this brief, the following definition from the 'Climate Change and Social Learning' (CCSL) initiative is used:

'Social learning approaches help facilitate knowledge sharing, joint learning and co-creation experiences between particular stakeholders around a shared purpose taking learning and behaviour change beyond the individual to networks and systems. Through a facilitated iterative process of working together, in interactive dialogue, exchange, learning, action and reflection and on-going partnership new shared ways of knowing emerge that lead to changes in practice.'



Social learning is thus a purposeful and context-specific lens and approach that considers diverse types of knowledge and value systems at many different levels (from grassroots to global scale) and through different learning cycles. Social learning engages relevant stakeholders in framing together challenges at community, regional, national and global scales to mobilize technical, institutional and social knowledge that can accelerate change. It is more than just a process of inclusivity, it is a continuous iterative process of co-learning that goes beyond the individuals involved to also transform the human systems they are part of.

Photo 1 An innovation platform meeting in Mozambique



Credit: ICRISAT/S. Homann Kee-Tui

Women's seed enterprises

Women rice producers in Benin, Togo and Senegal organized small community-based seed enterprises to produce high quality seed, strengthen informal seed-exchange system and improve women's livelihoods.

A participatory social learning and action approach was used, including local language videos produced by and for farmers. National extension programs tracked and disseminated changes the seed farmers were making in response to the videos.

The farmer-to-farmer videos — some dealing with gender-specific issues for women farmers—led to at least 80% greater adoption of new technologies and practices, compared with more traditional communication methods tried previously.

Source: CCAFS 2013

Typically, social learning is:

- Transformative — it mobilizes the energies and capacities of the actors involved to effect changes at wider scales.
- Focused on looped learning—it goes beyond learning for more efficiency (single loop learning), learning for greater effectiveness (double loop learning) towards the development of greater innovation capacity to continuously adapt to, or pre-empt change (triple loop learning).
- Iterative—it feeds off feedback loops that inform new cycles of activities and reflections.
- Facilitated—it generates greater ownership and helps reconcile interests and styles of actors involved so they build trust.
- Socially differentiated—it mobilizes diverse perspectives and multiple knowledges managing power relations so that the needs and voices of all actors are heard.
- Co-creative—it goes beyond the easy and often known answers to gather deeper insights and perspectives on the real causes and solutions around an issue.
- Purposeful—it is intentional in that it orchestrates and sustains efforts of all actors to develop a shared purpose and agreements to embark on collective journeys.
- Capacitating—it requires and develops strong interpersonal communication skills, traits or attitudes (listening, empathy, trusting) as well as collective facilitation, negotiation, documentation and leadership.

Co-management of natural resources

Three initiatives in South Africa received funding from the national environmental agency between 2005 and 2008 to initiate co-management between the affected communities and the state.

They were designed to foster the creation of partnerships and knowledge networks, and to provide training and capacity building in various aspects of co-management, conflict management, and monitoring and evaluation.

In the initiatives where the key variables for social learning showed mostly positive trends, social learning and institutional innovation appeared to be more pronounced. Conversely, in the initiative where variables such as trust building and incentives for participation were considered to be low, the evidence of social learning processes being followed was less pronounced.

These results suggest that the conditions necessary for social learning can be externally managed during an initiative, with positive outcomes for learning processes and potentially innovation, and therefore transitions toward adaptive co-management.

Source: Cundill 2010



How does it differ from other learning approaches?

While social learning borrows techniques from adult learning, it focuses on the transformation of human systems, not of individuals.

Social learning is distinct from organizational learning in that it does not focus on what happens within one organization. It considers a whole set of interrelated organizations and individuals, towards wider human systems. Further, social learning is consciously facilitated and socially differentiated which is not a prerequisite of organizational learning.

Knowledge management (KM) also focuses on learning but does not explicitly address social differentiation and power; it is usually not applied at large scale to seek transformation of societies. Its approaches and tools are sometimes used in social learning.

Many initiatives may seem like they are 'doing' social learning because they borrow elements of it. But it is the combination of all the traits of social learning that truly qualifies an initiative as one of social learning.

Social learning strengths and weaknesses

'There have been plenty of projects and initiatives that have failed to maximize impact and transformational change by relying on a top down, single loop, linear approach and not following through with more participatory forms of exchange.' (CCAFS 2015)

Social learning thrives in situations that require a genuine collective approach to transform the norms and actions of human systems.

Social learning is not just about people meeting face-to-face. It also uses opportunities of new information and communication technologies, including social media, to bring people together. "Participatory video, participatory GIS, community radio, telecentres, oral drama, listening clubs, learning alliances, innovation platforms, and e-extension are all channels that can help to catalyse much stronger 'local' creation, documentation, exchange and dissemination of knowledge by and for communities." (CCAFS 2013).

Adaptive, participatory and integrated assessment approach for impact assessments for inland fisheries

Adaptive, Participatory and Integrated Assessment (APIA) builds on commonly used frameworks for Environmental Impact Assessments but places particular emphasis on a holistic assessment that is integrated across disciplinary perspectives and sectoral interests. It relies on participation by stakeholders to capture local knowledge, to identify and resolve critical issues and conflicts of interest and to generate management recommendations that will command broad-based support and local 'ownership'. Assessment of APIA as a tool was done in a major agricultural development scheme in the dry zone of Sri Lanka.

The results of this social learning process were:

- A more thorough analysis of competing water uses;
- The various stakeholders developing a collective ambition to address the most important needs through workable and cost-effective mitigation measures;
- The strong motivation for stakeholders to seek out complementarities between irrigation and fisheries and to minimize trade-offs.

Source: Nguyen-Khoa et al. 2005

Successes

Social learning theorists Wenger and Trayner [report how social learning was used by a southern African learning network](#) to find a common language to discuss issues and to negotiate the way ahead in a productive and transparent manner.

Closer to CGIAR, [a stock taking study](#) (Gonsalves 2013) commissioned by the CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change Agriculture and Food Security listed nearly 130 examples of partial or full social learning initiatives that have taken place across the CGIAR.

Find all CGIAR social learning case studies at: <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/36024>

Table 1: Social learning successes

Initiative	What did social learning look like?	What was the result?
Climate airwaves	Community radio programs designed to encourage the broadcaster and audience to learn together and feed this learning into wider research and policy communities to influence new thinking	The themes addressed in Climate Airwaves were shared in a regional forum and refined with the audience resulting in a next iteration. This process attracted people to share their ideas and get involved from the district assemblies who had previously refused to connect over the issue. This event was followed by a national forum with stakeholders and donors—130 people.
Maarifa knowledge centres	Community knowledge centres use multimedia tools to facilitate the exchange of ideas, experiences, and knowledge among communities to enhance learning for improved socio-economic empowerment. Much of the communication and social learning opportunities are built into the processes for gathering and disseminating information. A typical Maarifa Centre in Kenya is managed by an advisory committee of about 5–8 gender-balanced local community stakeholders.	This demonstrates evidence of local practical examples of climate change adaptation being discovered, discussed and understood, and in some cases used elsewhere (local-> local transfer). The Maarifa centres started in 2007 and have expanded to 10 centres. Use of ICTs and people networks have evolved over this period to extend the outreach beyond the centres themselves to surrounding villages and communities.



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Initiative	What did social learning look like	What was the result?
Index-Based Livestock Insurance (IBLI)	IBLI brings the benefits of insurance to protect pastoral communities in Kenya and Ethiopia against climate-related risks. IBLI used a game to build capacity of pastoralists to understand insurance while also giving inputs into the design and delivery of the insurance product. The game has been adapted through their feedback	This illustrates how a mainly formal private sector product—insurance—is linked to informal sector pastoralists through knowledge brokers. On one side the reputation of ILRI carries some weight with finance institutions who also need educating on the needs of pastoralists, their willingness to pay and levels of demand to create a viable market. On the other side are the pastoralists who have very little knowledge of insurance and what it can do for them but very high tacit knowledge of risk and possible livestock shock scenarios. By providing a catalyst to this exchange, both sides have learned, over time, delivering sustained benefits.
Morocco drip irrigation	While Moroccan farmers are involved in managing supply chains, notably through local and regional cooperatives large-scale irrigation schemes are outside of their control. The Moroccan branch of the French agricultural research centre for development, CIRAD, wanted to help small-scale farmers better understand drip-irrigation and plan their own group projects. They used social learning to help farmers use land in ways that better suit the farmers and to encourage farmers to take more ownership of the process. The social learning was captured in the project’s monitoring and evaluation.	CIRAD concluded that it was more important to enable farmers to engage with an issue as a group—and design irrigation projects together—than to transfer technology to them. The results include projects that farmers had co-created to meet collective system level water management and that were also tailored to individual farmers. These projects continued to flourish outside of the CIRAD intervention as different farmer groups continued to interact and learn from each other.

A recent paper by van Epp and Garside (2016) suggests that social learning tends to bring a series of nested results on the continuum from process, to learning outcomes, to value/practice outcomes. While ‘process indicators’ are not what most projects seek, they actually are an important step towards success. As the authors point out: ‘we find where there is little or no process, there are weak outcomes’. Social learning successes are integrated and nested within each other and even seemingly ‘simple’ things such as having a clear engagement process can be of major importance to make social learning successful.

Challenges

‘For organizations and networks, designing social learning approaches appears to have high transaction costs.’ (CCAFS 2013).

‘To date, there has been little reported evidence of the cost-benefits of social learning in agricultural research and implementing development work. But there is an increasing body of work demonstrating how social learning has worked in other contexts’ (CCAFS 2013). The reason behind the limited evidence is related to the perceived high transaction costs which tend to make social learning not economical for short- term projects—but possibly profitable in the longer term.

Challenges in applying social learning include:

- They are resource intensive: There is no point in investing in social learning without having sufficient and appropriate resources (or intentions to generate them). Resources are essential to bring actors together regularly in a facilitated approach, to invest in documenting their change process, to build a system that keeps track of that information etc.;
- They are time-consuming: A two- or three-year initiative may not see tangible returns on investment, because it takes time to understand each other and develop trust. Measham (2013) demonstrated that it’s not unusual for social learning stakeholders to be frustrated by its slow pace;

Photo 2: A community sanitation meeting.



Credit: World Bank.



- They do not generate concrete results quickly. The 'low hanging fruits' one can usually enjoy in a social learning initiative relate to the sense of trust that actors develop with each other and their interest in working together. Real breakthroughs take longer to be achieved. Many organizations or funding agencies do not value these 'process' results as worthy of attention;
- They require scarce capacities and discipline: Strong listening, group facilitation, documentation, and learning skills are few and far between. Attitudes of discipline and commitment to the greater good are difficult to instill, especially from outside;
- Some of the benefits of social learning may not be directly useful or usable by the initiative that led to them—i.e. the trust built over social learning initiatives generates new and exciting future ventures, sometimes only once the initial social learning initiative is over. There can be many unexpected or planned results.

Photo 3: Farmers field day organized by the Africa RISING program.



Credit: ILRI/Apollo Habtamu.

If these conditions cannot be accommodated, it is better to steer away from social learning initiatives. Moreover, where an initiative has a simple, straight objective that does not require inputs from many actors, results may be better achieved through other means.

CGIAR research program entry points to social learning

The CCSL body of work was developed for the Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) research program and has a focus on climate change issues. However, most of the social learning principles and approaches identified can be applied and adapted to other fields of inquiry and environments.

The first step of integrating social learning in a CRP is to identify thematic entry points and potential added value from its application. Then, the [CCSL framework and toolkit](#) can be used to devise pragmatic ways to best address social learning from various standpoints.

Thematic entry points

These are introduced from most abstract and outcome-oriented, to most concrete and approach-oriented.

- Complexity theory and complexity-aware approaches: Social learning can add concrete examples about how complexity manifests itself. Social learning can be one of the complex pathways to address complexity;
- Social change: Social learning can give a conceptual and practical foundation for how social change can be effected through collective, transformative learning;
- Learning and collective learning: Social learning can add a transformative collective –social- layer onto existing learning approaches and frameworks;
- Systems theory, innovation systems, innovation platforms, learning alliances and other multi-stakeholder processes: Social learning can enrich the vocabulary and toolset that help set up and make multi-stakeholder processes successful;
- Social differentiation, power issues and empowerment, gender: Social learning can help unpack these issues that are so important in global development and provide practical entry points to address them;
- Partnerships and partnership development: Social learning can add literature and practical tools and approaches to develop trust and genuine partnerships. It is particularly useful where partnerships are engaged with wicked problems;
- Monitoring, evaluation and learning, accountability, impact assessment: Social learning can give some concrete ideas about how collective learning can be assessed from outputs to impact.



Pragmatic entry points

- The initial entry point is the [social learning checklist](#). It can be used to challenge current thinking and as part of a collective inquiry in the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework of the CRP;
- The [general CCSL framework and toolkit](#) can be used to find out where team members situate themselves about social learning and practical actions they can take to start with or build on previous social learning work;
- Elements of the [social learning monitoring and evaluation framework](#) can be reviewed for potential inclusion in any existing or planned MEL framework;
- The list of [case studies](#) can be used to advocate for social learning or related approaches;
- Finally, any part of the CCSL body of work can be used to inform any and all thematic entry points mentioned above.

Figure 1: The CCSL framework and toolkit



Embedding social learning in a CRP: An example from LIVESTOCK

'Triple loop learning is not just about getting a response to information or gathering diverse voices, but also about taking time to co-create new knowledge from the range of perspectives and expertise. Triple loop learning is a series of learning steps, from receipt of information (single loop), to reflecting on what activities will be more effective (double loop), through to behaviour change as a result of that reflection by multiple stakeholders (triple loop).' (CCAFS 2013)

These triple loop ambitions are perfectly viable for CRPs, including the LIVESTOCK Agri-Food Systems CRP. For such large programs, social learning offers various thematic opportunities in areas like partnerships, learning, monitoring, and innovation systems. This section identifies some specific areas where the CRP could consider applying social learning.

Figure 2: Monitoring Agricultural Research for Learning and Outcomes (MARLO) applied to CCAFS.



Monitoring, evaluation and learning of a complex theory of change

In addition to these domains of change, the 'outcome indicators' mentioned in MARLO could be reviewed from a social learning perspective.

From the program's Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (PMEL) framework, various domains of change are considered and among these, five might be informed by social learning work:

- 2.3: Linkages improve between producer organizations and service providers (social learning tools and approaches can be used to improve this);
- 4.1: National partners use data and evidence in their work (social learning loops can be put in place to ensure this);
- 5.2: Capacity and innovation platforms established (the linkages between innovation platforms and social learning are very strong)
- 5.3: Stakeholders' and partners' articulate demand for CRP, are engaged and committed (on the engagement, trust-building and facilitation to ensure this engagement, social learning can sharpen this domain of change)
- 5.4: Enhanced integrated CRP PMEL system used to support science (Additional feedback loops are put in place and social learning embeds PMEL in ongoing work, not just for 'reporting' purposes).



Furthermore, in the CRP management unit, and under the supervision of the 'CRP performance manager', a change process will be implemented to mainstream monitoring and evaluation across the program, supporting teams and partnership management. In this team, social learning could provide:

- Conceptual references underpinning partnership work;
- Practical references from the social learning checklist for partnership management;
- Practical tools and approaches for implementing change management;
- Reference to elements of the overall social learning framework;
- Documentation of that work with a social learning lens.

This work should provide opportunities to document social learning experiences, providing learning and insights in ways programs like this can most effectively embed and apply social learning approaches.

In Flagships:

All Flagships will be involved in the change process implementation and will thus be supported by the CRP management unit in this respect.

In addition, the CRP management unit will look more carefully at specific arrangements of each Flagship and will provide advice on how to improve these, ideally in line with social learning principles and recommendations. The PMEL framework states that: 'Each Flagship will develop and maintain a Strategy and Implementation Plan (SIP) that describes its plan for implementing the research in terms of research capacity, partnerships, stakeholder engagement...'. Social learning can be used to inform partnerships and stakeholder engagement in each Flagship.

The 'Livestock Livelihoods and Agri-Food Systems Flagship' is particularly concerned with multi-stakeholder processes and this work should provide space for social learning in and around multi-stakeholder processes and innovation platforms.

Cross-cutting areas:

Alongside the main research activities in Flagships, the program will invest in cross-cutting work on capacity development and communication, engagement and knowledge management. Here, participatory learning and multi-directional facilitation approaches offer natural homes for social learning.

Photo 4: Livestock program meeting and learning.



Credit: USAID

The communication, engagement and knowledge management team is—according to the CRP proposal—partly concerned with 'platforms and processes that facilitate learning and sharing to improve program effectiveness and collaboration'. Social learning will be a key part of this.

At the CRP level, capacity development is seen as an enabler of the impact pathway, focusing on individuals' and organizations' capacity to undertake and to use research. Among the strategic capacity development actions identified in the proposal, two stand out as potential users of social learning approaches: 'Develop CRPs and centres' partnering capacities' and 'capacity to innovate.' The first is focused on brokering partnerships, the second is focused on multi-stakeholder processes.

Social learning tools and resources

Resources available on the [CCSL wiki](#) include:

- A [definition of social learning](#)—to help avoid endless semantic discussions;
- A [framework for CCSL including a toolkit](#)—an entry point to social learning;
- A [CCSL monitoring and evaluation framework](#)—for use in developing indicators and progress towards them;
- A [CCSL checklist of questions](#)—addressing some foundational aspects of social learning. They are probably the lightest and easiest way to get started with social learning;
- A series of [core resources](#) and a larger list of [other resources on social learning](#)—gleaned from the literature, for further theoretical, illustrative and didactic purposes;
- A [glossary and list of acronyms](#)—to make sense of the most-used jargons of social learning.



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