Eight lessons on fostering learning in large research and development programmes

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/03/29/eight-lessons-on-fostering-learning-in-large-research-and-development-programmes/

3/29/2017

Learning-driven, adaptive approaches to designing research and implementing programmes are increasingly popular in fields such as international development. Among funding agencies there is also a growing trend towards "multi-project programmes", the grouping together of many projects under a single umbrella programme, the aim being to enhance how projects, organisations and individuals exchange knowledge and learn from one another. ***Tiina Pasanen*** *and* ***Blane Harvey*** *here outline eight emerging lessons on fostering learning in large research and development programmes; from a warning never to make assumptions about a collaborative mindset, through the importance of investing in facilitated face-to-face engagement, to the need to regularly review and adapt learning mechanisms.*

Learning-driven, adaptive approaches to designing research and implementing programmes are increasingly popular in international development. At the same time, we see a growing trend within many funding agencies toward grouping together a number of projects under a bigger umbrella programme or portfolio. One of the often expressed aims of these "multi-project programmes" is to enhance how projects, organisations and individuals exchange knowledge and learn from each other. Ultimately, this learning is expected to lead to better development programming and impacts.

Large learning-driven programmes give rise to new opportunities and challenges for those who design, manage, and implement these types of initiatives – as well as for those engaged through them. But what do we mean by learning? Learning by whom and about what? And if it is one of the key mechanisms to address complex issues such as climate change, accountability, or women's empowerment, how can it be supported, especially in programmes of this scale?

This is what we, as researchers and advisors in think tanks and governmental organisations, have reflected on and – yes – *learnt* in the early years of implementing large climate change research programmes such as PRISE, BRACED and CARIAA.

In our recently-published reflective analysis we looked at these programmes as emergent communities of practice. This framing offers a way of looking at how large programmes support or hinder learning through three key dimensions that define communities of practice: joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire.

	Definition	Contribution to Learning
Joint enterprise	Shared understanding of the goals or expectations that bind members together. Continuously negotiated and to which all members feel accountable.	Determines the level of investment and learning energy within the community.
Mutual engagement	Brings members together across their inherent diversity. Promotes the establishment of norms and collaborative relationships.	Determines the depth of social capital, trust, and reciprocity within the community upon which learning processes can rest.
Shared repertoire	Tools, stories, discourses, born of joint enterprise and mutual engagement, that belong to and define the community. Resources to make meaning of research questions, findings and applications.	Determines the shared ways of understanding that the community can use in reflecting and re-orientating practice.

Table 1: Features of communities of practice and their contribution to learning. Source:

A couple of caveats: many of these emergent "findings" may not be new as such. They may also be present in smaller programmes. However, the scale of these large, nested programmes amplifies the challenges and presents unique opportunities for learning. Finally, although all our findings are based on work with climate change programmes, we believe the lessons have wider applicability.

So here are our eight emerging lessons:

1. Don't assume a collaborative mindset

It sounds simple, but this is something we often ignore. There might have been a strong initial interest to collaborate, which is especially visible in proposals, but this doesn't always mean that people are willing to commit to collaboration in the long run. Especially for researchers, it is sometimes difficult to share work in progress before the final results are ready to be published. It can also be seen outside of people's "core" responsibilities and is not sufficiently taken into account in planning and budgeting. Being realistic about these challenges can help in ensuring appropriate incentives for collaboration.

2. Understand and create incentives for participation

One size doesn't fit all. The most common incentive is still financial but sometimes it is insufficient or simply inappropriate. Understanding what drives organisations and individuals can help establish a more meaningful incentive system. We recommend conducting a review of incentives at the beginning of the collaboration to better understand what motivates different partner organisations and the individuals within them.

3. Set learning priorities and realistic outcomes

The challenge is to strike a balance between what is possible and what is feasible. It may be difficult but there's real value in trying to be realistic and setting limits on what can be achieved through engaging in learning processes. Over-promising or setting up overly ambitious systems can have a negative impact on learning. This is especially true if partners become demotivated by demanding systems that don't align with their views of where their energy should be invested.

Based on our experiences, participants are more motivated to engage in learning and reflection processes if they trust – and see – that it can it lead to meaningful action. This calls for management to take learning processes and their outcomes seriously.

4. Engage early and intensively in setting up learning processes

Setting up learning processes in large multi-project programmes can take a significant amount of time (as long as a year in some cases) and resources but is crucial to ensure buy-in. This investment is especially important if we expect that the programme norms and approaches are not aligned with the norms of participating institutions. For example, there might be some conflicting, underlying values in collaborative and transdisciplinary research involving advocacy-based NGOs, research-intensive universities and policy-oriented think tanks. Thus, it is critical to invest time and resources early on to establish the sense of connection and trust that can sustain meaningful investments in learning processes.

5. Promote collective ownership of learning agendas

Without a sense of collective ownership, learning in large programmes easily becomes fruitless. Sometimes partner organisations are encouraged to each "own" their respective areas of focus in the collective agenda. However, this may create organisational silos that restrict wider learning and exchange. Cross-programme working groups on key themes can strengthen the integration and development of collective ownership across partner organisations.

6. Invest in facilitated, face-to-face engagement

Again, a simple lesson but an important one. Our experiences have reminded us that there is no real substitute for face-to-face engagement on learning, even in large programmes. The amount of progress made in three days of effectively-facilitated interaction can be equal to months of virtual collaboration. Committing to invest in activities taking place before and after face-to-face meetings can maximise learning. What's more, external facilitation serves in mitigating power dynamics that can often undermine collective learning.

7. Identify and regularly revisit themes of shared interest

Deciding on joint learning themes in programmes of a large scale is a huge challenge. How does one identify common areas of focus when there are a wide range of possibilities, themes and contexts? There are no shortcuts – it will take time.

Furthermore, it is crucial to not only identify themes that speak to the interests and priorities of partners. It is also worth revisiting them regularly in light of new developments at project and programme levels, as well as developments external to the programme, such as world events or shifts in the policy landscape.

8. Iterate and adapt learning mechanisms

Like programming, the development of learning mechanisms should be seen as an adaptive, ongoing process, where mechanisms are reviewed and discussed early and regularly. Instead of trying to set up a "perfect" system from the start, it is more realistic and cost-effective to focus on those mechanisms that are generating positive results and scale back efforts that don't generate buy-in.

These processes of adaptive management are not without their challenges, especially in programmes where the implementation of changes needs to happen across a number of programmes, taking a considerable amount of time. An adaptive approach requires commitment from both funding and implementing organisations, meaning budgets and programme practices must have flexibility to react to new learning.

This blog post is based on the authors' co-written article, Fostering learning in large programmes and portfolios: Emerging lessons from climate change and sustainable development, published in Sustainability (DOI:10.3390/su9020315). This article is an open access publication.

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