

START NETWORK



START DEPP Linking Preparedness Resilience & Responses (LPRR)

Action-Learning-Research

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1. Introduction

In order for productive learning to occur within the context of this project, monitoring practices must be robust and go beyond collecting data against indicators. This is especially important within a resilience context, as the pre-emptive baseline measurement that is usually used for measuring progress/success is not desirable here. Instead, an ‘Outcome Harvesting’ approach is more practical, as it does not measure progress towards predetermined outcomes or objectives, but rather collects evidence of what has been achieved, and works backward to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to the change.

Within the LPRR project there is a need for rigorous evaluation, which balances accountability and learning. Given the ever-evolving evidence base of ‘what works under what conditions’ coupled with the need to demonstrate quality, impactful programming in both upwards and downwards accountability, these types of robust evaluations are essential. In order to ensure learning and accountability are achieved through evaluations, they must be well-planned and budgeted for. This is where the role of the Learning strand comes in; by recognizing that learning is essential at the outset, it enables it to be included within the design of the project.¹

1.1 What is Action-Learning-Research?

The core element of an Action-Learning-Research (A-L-R) approach is the role of *active learning*, meaning actions are taken to solve real problems, and reflection upon the results is undertaken in order to improve problem-solving processes and solutions developed by the team.

To understand what is meant by Action-Learning-Research, we must understand the experiential learning cycle.²

At its simplest, it consists of two stages: action and reflection.

Action → Reflection in an ongoing series of cycles.

¹ Corlazzoli and White (2013)

² Dick (1997)

However, the value of reflection is that it leads to learning, which in turn contributes to changed behaviour in the future:

Action → Reflection → Action

Therefore, it is important to expand the reflection component, acknowledging that it is, in part, a critical review of the last action. However, it is also a time for planning what will happen next.

Action → Review → Planning → Action

We cannot add 'theory' to this. The review stage is essential as it enables intuitive theories contained in action to be made explicit. When reviewing, we can only make sense of the world in ways that build on our prior understanding. In enhancing that understanding, we become better able to act on the world.

In the action stage, we often do not have the time to be deliberate about what we are doing, and therefore the 'theories' we draw on are intuitive theories. During the review and planning stages, these intuitive theories can be made explicit. Therefore, action is informed by conscious intuitive theories while review and planning are informed by conscious theories (theories are derived deliberately from recent experience, and used to plan the next experience). Thus, experiential learning functions by a dual alteration, meaning that action and reflection inform each other and by engaging with both in a cyclical way, we are able to integrate them.

It is important also to note that within this framework, we are not looking to unlearn what has worked in the past and start from scratch. Rather, reflecting on what has not worked helps people unlearn what does not work and invent better ways of acting going forward.³

1.2 Why is learning important for the conflict strand?

Due to the dynamic nature of conflict-affected and fragile states, flexibility and adaptability in programme design is essential in the context of this rapidly changing environment.

Keeping this flexibility in mind, it is also crucial that sound conflict and/or context analysis strategies, a conflict sensitive approach, and the mainstreaming of gender is considered in

³ Marquardt et al. (2009)

both design and implementation. These considerations are equally important in the monitoring and evaluating, or learning, components of any programme dealing with situations of conflict.⁴

The LPRR project goes a step further in merging resilience with conflict sensitivity, and therefore both of these areas of focus must also be merged within the project learning. Coinciding with the sensitive nature of conflict, Action-Learning-Research is important in order to minimize the very real possibility of causing harm or even exacerbating conflict through our work.⁵

2. Learning in Practice

2.1 Who will this learning be used by?

While the LPRR project as a whole seeks to build capacity for *communities*, the Learning strand has a more *programmatic* focus; it seeks to build the learning capacity of programmers so that they may improve the ways in which they build community capacity going forward. This Action-Learning-Research will therefore be used by consortium agencies, implementing partners, and community representatives as a tool to analyse and learn from M&E results.

2.2 Who will learning be intended to help?

While the learning strand of the LPRR is programmatic, it is programmatic *for* communities. As a result, Action-Learning-Research is intended not only to help those implementing resilience-based programmes in contexts of conflict but also, by extension, it seeks to help build the capacity of affected-communities. In order to do this, the learning framework is intended to help project implementers to reflect on past actions and improve upon the problem solving process (ensuring they are including the appropriate stakeholders) and on the actual response (by reflecting on how the programme impacted on the beneficiaries, the wider economic, political and social conditions/power relations).

⁴ Corlazzoli and White (2013)

⁵ Corlazzoli and White (2013)

2.3 How are we working together within the Action-Learning-Research?

The LPRR theory of change and learning aims have generated a number of agreed joint learning principles that will guide our journey of learning throughout the project.

1. Each consortium member takes ownership and responsibility for their own learning and level of engagement. Learning can only be effective if the participants actively want to learn.
2. Each consortium member commits to actively participate and engage in learning through attending workshops, providing feedback and offering comments and reflections on outputs
3. Each consortium member commits to being a LPRR learning champion in their own organisation. Here, each consortium member will be expected to proactively share and communicate knowledge and project outputs internally throughout their organisations; across different departments and offices, and externally with local partners, governments and other actors.
4. The consortium commits to openly sharing examples of both good practice and examples of bad practice; failures and challenges.
5. The consortium commits to creating an environment of trust to enable challenges and failures to be openly shared and to respect the value and knowledge systems of partners.

The LPRR advisory group members in Kenya and Pakistan, will be the Learning Champions in the pilot countries level, and will be key actors to feed in the 'review and planning' stages of the A-L-R process by providing technical and practical expertise.

2.4 What do we hope to achieve through learning?

This Learning-Action-Research methodology will be used to operationalise the Learning Framework developed in collaboration of the LPRR consortia members and the in-country partners in Kenya and Pakistan, specifically. This methodology will involve some general learning for the project, but will focus on keeping conflict in mind within the learning process.

Since this is a type of *social learning*, we seek to achieve more than individual learning, but rather learning and, subsequently, change at an institutional level. Effective social learning should lead to better engagement in the future, as it seeks to break down barriers to participation as a result of this institutional level change.⁶

2.5 What does the learning methodology seek to do?

The learning framework for the LPRR project is a tool designed to guide the learning, capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation aspects of the project. Learning is important for this project in order to ensure that programmes are supporting community resilience building through capacity building. Furthermore, learning will enable actors to improve their responses to conflict through the incorporation of resilience and the assurance that their actions are having a positive effect on beneficiaries.

Action-Learning-Research is a tool designed to capture the impact the LPRR project has at an individual, organization, and partner level. Through this approach, we will aim to capture how the project is influencing the consortia's perceptions and attitudes towards the project and see to what extent it influences individuals and organizations throughout the three years and to document how it does so. This will be done through reflective interviews with each consortia member at key points throughout the three years and through group reflections at other key milestones.

2.6 Where will the Action-Learning-Research be used?

Initially, Action-Learning-Research will be used as the main tool for learning in the LPRR conflict strand pilot programmes in Kenya and Pakistan. If proven effective in these contexts, it is hoped that this tool can be adopted by the wider consortia projects and then the humanitarian sector as a whole.

2.7 When will the Action-Learning-Research be used?

The Action-Learning-Research is intended to be utilized throughout the project cycle. The first reflection point will occur once the initial community action plan has been developed.

⁶ Van Epp and Garside (2014)

This reflection point will assess whether the methodology is working, what challenges have arisen, and what needs to be changed in order to overcome these challenges. Subsequently, timing of reflection points may vary, however projects would benefit from a formal reflection every six months, with a mini-reflection every three months. In addition, reflection should be undergone at any milestone moments or significant events within the project cycle.

2.8 How will the Action-Learning-Research be operationalised?

Understanding the context in which institutions and individuals within them operate is key to challenging them successfully.⁷ Therefore, reflection over how our presence and actions impact upon the environment we are working in is crucial for this learning process to be useful.

Each of the A-L-R workshops will be specifically designed around one or more themes or guiding reflection questions that rose during the pilot implementation. These will be proposed by the pilot lead agency, which will also co-facilitate the workshop.

Different learning methodologies to be used in the workshop:

- Participation observation
- Focus group discussions
- Stories of change, stakeholder portraits and follow-up interviews
- Surveys/questionnaires
- Social network analysis
- Community self-assessment
- Outcome mapping
- Policy change analysis

⁷ Van Epp and Garside (2014)

3. Learning as Reflection

The reflection element is the most important, as “great questions” should evoke thoughtful reflections while considering the current problem, the desired goal, designing strategies, developing action or implementation plans, or executing action steps that are components of the implementation plan’.⁸

3.1 Bank of Guiding Questions

Good questions will evoke thoughtful reflections, which keep in mind the current problem and the desired goal, designing strategies, developing action or implementation plans, or executing action steps that are components of the implementation plan.⁹ The list of questions here is not exhaustive, and are not confined solely to the phase in which they have been organized, but rather many questions may be asked multiple times throughout the project cycle.

Design Phase:

- Have you considered how your project would respond if there were to be an eruption of, or increase in conflict within or close to the project sites?
 - Are all staff and partners suitably trained and aware of how to respond in the case of an increase in conflict?
- Has a conflict analysis been conducted (at both the local and national level)?
 - Does the analysis include an assessment of underlying conflict factors and power dynamics as well as a robust stakeholder analysis?
 - How has the design of the project been informed by this analysis?
- Have you identified specific challenges faced by men and women, boys and girls?
 - Have you identified any underlying values and attitudes relating to gender that may be responsible for driving gender inequalities?

⁸ Marquardt et al. (2009)

⁹ Ibid.

- How might these affect your project, and how might your project affect these values and attitudes?
- How have the project beneficiaries and partners been selected?
 - Has this been informed by the conflict analysis (e.g. accounting for any divisions along ethnic, political or social lines?); were clear criteria for participant selection developed with the local communities (including both direct beneficiaries and surrounding communities)?
- What feedback and accountability mechanisms have been built into the programme implementation plans?
- Do budgets include provision for updating conflict analysis and building capacity of staff, partners or community members in conflict and gender sensitivity?
- Who are the key actors for resilience building and conflict prevention in the given context?
- Who are we building relationships with?
 - How is this actor perceived by others? Is this actor seen as party to a conflict?
 - Is this actor seen as part of/linked to an influential group (e.g., political party, religious group, etc.)?
 - If we meet with this actor, might we be perceived as partial?
 - How can we mitigate that risk?
- Does the security situation allow us, our partners and beneficiaries to effectively engage with the project, without putting anyone at risk?
- When is the monitoring/ evaluation being conducted?
 - Does this account for any potentially sensitive times (for example, harvesting season or elections)?
- Which actor groups have the most influence over conflict and security issues in the context?
- How do these groups relate to each other?
 - How homogenous/ cohesive are these groups?
 - Do they involve marginalised or minority groups?

- What are their interests, goals, and capacities to influence the conflict positively or negatively?
 - Do any of these groups have incentives or disincentives to promote peace, or any existing or potential motivation to take up violence?
- Which groups tend to be the biggest perpetrators or victims of violence?
 - Are different sub-groups affected by violence differently (e.g. along gender or age lines)?
- Which groups are more vulnerable to the effects of environmental hazards or other shocks? Why?
 - Which are most resilient? Why?
- Are there conflict implications associated with where we choose to work?
- How does the beneficiary selection relate to divisions within the community, and what implications might that have?

First Reflection Moment:

- Who is leading the process?
 - How are they perceived by the people being consulted and how could this affect the data? Are responsibilities spread across different members of staff?
- Who is being consulted?
 - How diverse are the groups being consulted (caste or ethnic groups, gender, in positions of power or marginalised)?
 - Are both direct beneficiaries and surrounding communities included?
- What is the relationship between the overall context (profile), key stakeholders and underlying drivers of conflict?
 - Are there any factors that might contribute to an increase in conflict in the future?
- Is our team diverse and balanced (e.g. in terms of gender, age, language skills, ethnicity etc.)?
 - Are they impartial and seen as being impartial by local people?

- Do all team members understand and buy into conflict sensitive approaches?
- If not, can this be managed (e.g. through capacity building), or does the team composition need to change?

Throughout the project cycle:

- Have you considered whether and how project activities could make conflict worse, or spark conflict within or between communities?
 - If so, how will these risks be managed and monitored? How will analysis from monitoring/ evaluation be used to influence relevant decision-making processes (project design, staff security planning etc)?
 - What are the root causes of conflict/ instability in the context? (These can be grouped under different types of conflict causes, e.g. political, governance, economic, security, environmental, gender, social, cultural etc. These categories can be grouped and named in whatever way makes sense in the context.)
- What are the structural, proximate and trigger causes of conflict?
- To what degree is competition over access to resources a driver of conflict?
 - Which resources?
 - Where are they concentrated?
 - Which groups have/ lack access to these resources?
- Do men and women play different roles in causing, sustaining, preventing or resolving conflicts? In what ways?
 - Why do you think this is – are there specific traditional norms, social expectations or external pressures pushing people into/out of these roles?
- Do women, men, girls and boys experience conflict or insecurity differently?
 - In what ways?
 - Why is this?
- What are the most likely future scenarios for the country?
 - What are the likely impacts of these scenarios on peace and conflict dynamics?
- Are environmental hazards likely to increase in frequency and severity?

- What are the likely impacts of these on relations between stakeholders?
- Which groups are likely to be most affected? Which are most resilient?
- By working in this area, do we risk providing opportunities/advantages to certain conflict actors
- Are there events or periods that might prevent or make it difficult for beneficiaries, or certain groups within communities to participate in project design activities (such as analysis)?
 - Are there certain times in the year or events when tensions are heightened or conflict more likely?
- Are our partner organisations impartial, and perceived as impartial?
 - Do they have a good understanding of the local context?
 - Do they embrace organisational/project-specific values?
 - Are they willing to learn about and apply a conflict sensitive approach?

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this Action-Learning-Research framework has explored the theoretical and practical issues, challenges of the learning process, as well as opportunities that can be realised through effective learning practices. It has been established that within the LPRR project, there is a need for rigorous evaluation, and that balancing accountability and learning is essential within this process. Periodic and predictable learning reflection periods are crucial in demonstrating the importance of learning within the wider project context. In order to ensure learning and accountability are achieved through evaluations, they must be well-planned and budgeted for. As a result, engaging in learning activities on a regular basis helps to improve action moving forward, while demonstrating the value added of this practice to beneficiaries and donors alike.

Program implementers are encouraged to use the bank of guiding questions provided in this framework, as well as those that they come up with that are relevant to their project, to reflect on what has been working, as well as what has not, and use this information to improve action going forward. This type of learning will help to improve accountability practices, as it seeks to reconcile what is demanded by the project with what is actually working well on the ground, according to the beneficiaries of a project.

5. References

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