

## Why Lesson Learning is Not So Easy:

Disincentives and recommendations for implementing agencies to learn and document lessons

**Learning lessons from demand-side governance or social accountability initiatives is no different in principle than learning lessons in other development projects. Evidence from Cambodia however, suggests that a range of disincentives affect the learning process. Capacity, financing, competition, a desire to be seen to succeed and a lack of willingness to do things differently, all curtail the lesson learning process. This note sets out some of the issues encountered in the Demand for Good Governance (DFGG) project and makes recommendations for innovative projects to be cast as learning initiatives that address disincentives and create space for learning about what works, what doesn't work and why.**

At the design stage, the DFGG project in Cambodia built in lesson learning as a key dimension of the project. Its importance was underlined by the inclusion of lesson learning in the project development objective. An indicator was added to capture lesson learning in the results framework, and project documentation emphasized the importance of documentation and dialogue to promote greater understanding, awareness and capacity building in relation to the new and difficult concepts embodied in the project. By mid-term however, with delays in monitoring and evaluation and a number of other issues affecting the project, there had been little reflection on the lessons being learnt. After three years of implementation, implementing agencies had each learned a significant number of substance and process-related lessons, but there was a reluctance to reflect, feedback and/or document. Hurdles and failures in particular, were not being seen as contributing to a common learning agenda. Most implementing agencies were still more focused on reporting their progress in terms of outputs.

In practice, many actors are unwilling or unable to critically reflect on activities or to consider how to improve implementation approaches. Incentives of state and non-state actors to engage in the business of lesson learning, over and above their commitment to execute agreed workplans, is not automatic or easy. Moreover, a distinction needs to be made – some actors have little incentive to learn, others are learning but have no incentive to document that learning, and others are just swamped by the task at hand.

A number of factors would appear to affect the willingness and ability of state and non-state actors to analyze issues and document lessons learnt, and ultimately the project's ability to course-correct as implementation proceeds.

**Unpredictable financing.** As both state and non-state organizations suffer from unpredictable financing, a

primary organizational concern is where the next dollar is coming from. Many NGO and government counterparts perceive donor financing to be contingent on satisfactory completion and often perceive a need to articulate successes rather than struggles. This financial concern can far outweigh pressures to document lessons to enhance social accountability activities now or in the future. These initiatives do not produce lessons unless an external M&E process is established, or (as mentioned below) unless a learning dimension can be embodied in the process. Many donors propagate this by not requiring lesson learning, and not rewarding efforts to do so.

**Capacity.** Small non-state agencies frequently have the capacity to work at the local level to mobilize and engage communities, but little analytical capacity to identify lessons. This trend, which applies to many governmental agencies as well, is exacerbated when activities and approaches go beyond their normal operations. In a learning-by-doing process, actors may not be clear on the objectives or the details of the process. Typically “challenges” are articulated in highly pragmatic terms. The bigger lessons are lost. Evidence also suggests that the capacity to learn is affected by the kinds of skills found in an organization. Experience suggests that even the larger NGOs lack, or do not prioritize, the analytical skill sets for structured learning. Part of this may be definitional – different perspectives, standards and approaches can lead to varying degrees of reflection on experiences be it substance or process related.

**Willingness to change.** A lesson learning agenda also implies that findings are utilized and lead to efforts to rethink and eventually improve approaches. Resistance to change course during implementation may be a key reason implementing agencies, both state and non-state, do not want to take on a lesson learning agenda. Although this affects activities achieving optimal results, it can be understandable in some instances where processes take a long time to establish, have not yet been fully tested, or where there is simply insufficient capacity to work out the details of any changes to the original plan.

**Cost-benefit.** There may also be a view among the stronger implementing agencies that the analysis of approaches that are clearly working, and the time needed to document them, does not bring a cost benefit to their own activities. This becomes a ‘catch 22’. Because there is no lesson learning, there is no robust and systematic evidence that lesson learning brings demonstrable return. This can limit the willingness of the higher capacity agencies to engage in the lesson learning process.



## Learning Lessons in Social Accountability

**Timespans and budgets.** DFGG grants for non-state actors, and some of the activities planned by state implementing agencies also have a very short implementation periods (3-18 months) and tight budgets. This not only affects impacts in the field, but also the lessons that can be learned, and the time and resources available for reflection and documentation.

**Sensitivities.** Despite requests and follow up, the project has confronted significant issues with the structured lesson learning planned in one large state-led component. At the start the implementing agency did not have the capacity (in skills or number) at the national level to ensure that experiences were properly identified and analyzed, but there is also some evidence of this agency being very timid about documenting the lessons that were being identified. In such cases, project managers can be reluctant on the grounds that many of the issues are sensitive, and that exposing struggles may not help in the ongoing dialogue with other state agencies.

### Setting the scene for learning and documenting learning

Given the experience harnessed in the first stage of the DFGG project, the Bank team has started working intensively with implementing agencies to prioritize the analysis and documentation of these experiences and lessons: what works, what doesn't and why. In the final year of the project, each IA is now producing three or four implementation lessons in quarterly progress reports. In order to enhance this process, the Bank team is then developing these reflections into rapid learning notes for social accountability / DFGG practitioners.

While this has produced a new momentum to reflect and learn from project activity, in some areas it may be too late. In the future, when there appears to be constraints to effective learning, managers and development partners might consider a more structured process.

Donor-financed projects will always lack critical self-assessment if state or non-state implementing agencies believe that their financing is, or will be, threatened by exposing poor results. Donors can manage this better. Projects (or components of projects) can be cast as "learning projects" with a core learning objective being articulated and visible to all. Framed in this way, documentation of lessons is not only expected, but encouraged, and accompanied by appropriate learning budgets, skills and timeframes. This could take a laboratory approach where a pre-articulated learning goal is paramount and M&E is carefully structured for the purpose of acquiring that information and knowledge. It could also mean that projects are structured with a learning phase (e.g. the first half of the project focuses on the identification of lessons which are then taken up in the latter years) and short timeframes for social accountability activities might be avoided.

The process of lesson learning tends to empower, build capacity of all actors, and enhance dialogue, but it is not a natural tendency for many of the organizations engaged in a new and unfamiliar set of activities. To increase the momentum, a number of strategies might be considered.

- **Identify the natural agents of learning.** It may be necessary to accept that the incentive structures of some actors are not easily changed and there is a need to establish by example. In some cases, third or independent parties may need to take the lead in the documentation of lessons, setting standards, conveying the messages implementing agencies may not be able or willing to document (this needs dedicated budgets). In others, the implementing agencies themselves may be willing and able. Identifying the agents of learning will be vital in difficult and fragile contexts if the social accountability agenda is to become more informed. Moreover, this approach sends the message that assessing challenges, analyzing lessons and even documenting failures is part of the job at hand.
- **A lesson consolidation phase.** Another strategy for enhancing lesson learning is to put in place a consolidation phase to establish, generate and consolidate the lessons that are learnt. This may take place when short activities are completed or at milestones in longer initiatives, and might involve joint/collective learning facilitated around a structured analytical framework that draws out the lessons around particular focal areas.
- **Learning and disseminating.** It needs to be accepted by all stakeholders that lesson learning is an ongoing process. Social accountability/DFGG initiatives need to develop space for safe lesson learning, absorb and articulate what has been learned, and be willing to share experiences so that the subsequent round of activities are continually informed. This is not always easy and needs ongoing monitoring, support and resources.

**As the DFGG project moves forward, a number of these strategies will be adopted to develop a learning platform. There is a large body of information to be shared with practitioners of social accountability, government and development partners. The degree to which these will make a difference however will depend on time, commitment and willingness of key actors to work toward the identification and compilation of lessons for more informed social accountability activity in the future.**

*The DFGG Learning Note Series provides quick summaries of the lessons learned in the DFGG project. The information is obtained from progress reports, meetings, workshops and World Bank Implementation Support. It is anticipated that the end evaluations of each component will provide further reflection on these issues.*

*DFGG Learning Note 7 reflects on lessons learned by all components of the DFGG project. Written by Janelle Plummer and Rawong Rojvanit.*