

## Building local learning systems in community development efforts (health, food security, livelihood, risk mitigation) to support social capital formation and local resilience

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### Problem Statement

Whether development projects focus on health, food security, livelihood or risk mitigation against environmental threats such as global climate change, they face the challenge of sustainability. Many of these challenges are fairly similar across the sectors. Several reasons for this cross-sectoral similarity are:

- Projects are an important way to achieve progress in development, but projects also inherently work against their own purpose when it comes to sustainability due to the unwanted effect of the human and financial inputs they bring to resource-constrained environments, as well as their timeframes and requirement for rapid change. Short timeframes, high financial inputs, and pressure to achieve lead to competition more naturally than cooperation.
- Communities are beneficiaries but are also co-opted by projects to achieve objectives and “results” which they may be disinclined or not capable to sustain on their own. Whether programs target “health”, “nutrition”, “food security”, “household livelihood” or a range of other areas, life at the household level and at a social level (in the “community”) is where these different efforts are integrated into a set of human and social behaviors. In our experience these social behaviors are central to community capacity and to the social capital formation which is required to advance sustainable positive development outcomes.

#### Common Key Principles articulated by Recent Global Development Initiatives

(e.g. International Health Partnership, Paris Declaration, Rome Principles, Global Health Initiative, Feed the Future etc.)

- Country ownership/country led plans
- Strategic coordination and harmonization
- Focus on women and girls
- Focus on equity
- Strengthen national systems
- Strengthen and leverage key multi lateral organizations, global partnerships and private sector engagement
- Strengthen monitoring, evaluation and research capability
- Promote innovation

Our question is thus, when working at local/community level and regardless of intervention sector, can key principles be operationalized to [1] respect best practices on sustainability approaches, [2] build rather than decrease social capital, and [3] build collective competency and adaptive capacity within communities while organizing these communities toward the achievement of development objectives. In other words, how can beneficiary communities be more fundamentally owner communities?

We suggest an approach, which aims to achieve this, and fits current concerns about sustainability and impact in development programs across sectors (see Box).

*Caveat: we do not claim that any of the proposed principles and steps are original; we simply try and suggest ways to tie them into a coherent programmatic whole.*

### Approach

Our starting point is to acknowledge the complexity of development issues and the need to constantly learn and adapt approaches so as to maintain relevance and respect at the community level and to enable communities to gather information, digest it, and identify and prioritize their needs. The issue is not the philosophical debate about whether

“communities” have the inherent wisdom to know what they need unassisted, or whether “experts” just know better. The two sides of that caricature have long been invalidated. The issue is more pragmatic. No matter how much know-how and skills are brought by development experts, the ability of communities to absorb and utilize these external good intentions and inputs into the management of their needs (aka, their best understanding of their needs at a given point) is critical to ownership.<sup>1</sup> As needs, risks, challenges, and external offers evolve communities which have a better grasp of information / intelligence on their situation will be in a better position to maintain ownership and to force sustainability into development efforts, which are by nature disruptive of community ownership.

Systems function better when the conditions are present for new ideas (adaptive mechanisms) to emerge. This defines an important role for national policy makers--to create or facilitate the conditions in which individuals and communities can thrive, innovate, problem solve, learn, adapt, grow, and develop resiliency.<sup>i</sup> Communities that thrive, that will adapt to climate change or other threats, from food insecurity to natural disasters, are those which have developed resiliency and standing capacity,<sup>ii</sup> notably via the development of social capital. We posit that this requires (1) information-based decision-making; (2) multi-level decision-making and coordination of action; (3) creating opportunities for lateral learning and sharing; (4) attention to equity not merely in assuring that vulnerable groups are “beneficiaries” but that they are “around the table” at which decisions are made; and (5) effective conflict management mechanisms (Davis and Sarriot, 2010).

This puts in question our role as external agents and the following table seeks to present core principles for our practice, along with some of the operational implications they should carry.

### **Suggested Elements of Implementation**

The Sustainability Framework has been our main approach to date for operationalizing these principles in community health and HIV/AIDS project design. The challenge here is to offer practical steps, which various types of sectoral projects can apply to advance social capital formation, appropriate information use, equitable progress, and collective learning within community groups, implementing partners and donors.

Figure 1 maps essential operational elements, which can be implemented iteratively and in a coordinated manner to develop local adaptive learning systems. Obviously these key elements need to be tailored to a particular program and life context, and there is no way to prescribe how this will be done independently of that context.

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<sup>1</sup> While recognizing that many of the terms used here have multiple meanings and can be overused, we will dispense with the tiresome repetition of quote marks for the time being.

**Table 1: From Principles to Approach**

As external agents in community development with a commitment to sustainability, we should:	Practically this should lead us to:
1) <b>Establish project objectives within the framework of the pursuit of a “public good” by different groups in the community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop strong participatory consultations, where               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Information is shared, produced, debated</li> <li>○ Differing voices (women, minorities, disenfranchised, traditional leaders) are solicited and validated</li> <li>○ At least minimum shared goals for progress are defined</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
2) <b>Build adaptive capacity and learning among local actors, able to change based on local circumstances and information.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote pragmatic solutions that meet clearly defined and understood needs of individuals and communities</li> <li>• Build information (monitoring) within efforts to provide solutions and open review of progress to the oversight of local actors</li> <li>• Maintain reference to minimum shared goals over time, even when and especially when new priorities or opportunities arise</li> </ul>
3) <b>Be culturally sensitive and respectful of national and local priorities, processes and experience, even when challenging the effectiveness of policies and practice.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain strong consultative processes, but also use evidence and support local voices’ advocacy toward decision makers.</li> <li>• Understand decision-makers’ metrics for management and success, and build evidence to support our positions.</li> </ul>
4) <b>Acknowledge the complexity in social processes and overall development.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refuse quick resolution to mono-sectoral issues (especially when the quick resolution translates into simple resource transfers), without a rigorous assessment of potential unwanted consequences on (i) larger social processes, (ii) other sectoral efforts aligned with local development priorities</li> <li>• Maintain the diversity of agents (stakeholders, groups) in the review of progress and the pursuit of common goals. Try to incentivize collaboration rather than competition.</li> <li>• Acknowledge and expect conflict; use conflict management and negotiation to work toward resolution, recognizing that policy makers, power brokers and local communities may not have the same agenda but through negotiation it is often possible to build a “good enough” next phase, which will encourage further learning and progress.</li> <li>• Allow time for learning and time for building results.</li> <li>• Expect change in community group perceptions and aspirations and show programmatic flexibility – the role of the external agent (i.e. project) is to accompany change, not stymie it.</li> </ul>
5) <b>Be consistent over time</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Once again, track specific indicators with communities but refer back to shared goals.</li> <li>• Focus community stakeholders on consistent review of few indicators of progress, and only slowly allow the evolution of the set of metrics used to track progress.</li> <li>• At project level, document learning iteratively, constantly improving on our hypotheses and implementation approaches.</li> </ul>
6) <b>Show integrity and invite honesty.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be open and honest about constraints and condition of our work (generally donor-funded contract or grant work) and objectives, as we solicit open and honest discussion with community members.</li> <li>• Identify and document where sub-optimal choices are made, and avoid bringing marketing language and bias to the hard work of forging ahead with community partners, institutions, and authorities.</li> <li>• Use monitoring information to report on both project specific required deliverables and broader community goals. Identify overlaps and possible differences.</li> </ul>

## **1) Community agenda formation**

Element one, which is also often step one, involves identifying key local actors, including women and marginalized groups, and convening this group to articulate and develop a community agenda or vision for the future. This process promotes the identification of community strengths and intentional recognition of opportunities for collaboration and synergy with existing activities. It also informs the content, collection and use of appropriate data. The steps are:

- Identify key stakeholders, with specific focus on women and youth, and marginalized or excluded groups;
- Assess and learn about specific local community understanding on issues at hand (for example through Participatory Learning and Action approaches). Identify what is present and already working well for the community (local strengths, social networks, adaptive systems and factors of resilience).
- Using a collaborative process, develop a positive future scenario for the community. Build on sectoral opportunities (i.e. improved livelihoods or increased market access for farmers) but define a greater public good inclusive of the most vulnerable (i.e. proper nutrition of vulnerable children, marginalized girls, etc.);
- Favor the identification of gaps / areas for strengthening in achieving public good and future scenario, instead of inventories of needs. Help community identify potential risks, hazards and shocks to their life and livelihood.
- Take time to identify and build with sometimes latent and unrecognized community strengths and potential resources (prior successes and constructive experiences, community associations with recognized results in other areas, successful partnership experiences with civil society and government from which lessons can be drawn);
- Plan for follow up over time balancing the need for consistency (the Achilles' heel of all projects / stop-go approaches) and the need to progressively allow the shared vision and goals of stakeholders to evolve.

## **2) Appropriate technical inputs into local information systems designed to be informative at community and local levels**

An essential element for building a learning system is to make appropriate reference to information and data. One challenge is to use information as an integrative tool for decision making, which requires using appropriately presented information at the appropriate level. The other is to balance project-requirements (in a context of increased demand for monitoring) with the need for parsimony especially in community-level information systems. Projects need to make a conscious effort to work with communities to generate data that are useful to them and to keep data collection and numbers of indicators to the essentials, regularly reviewing them for relevance and applicability to the local scenario.

It is important to exercise a clear understanding of information systems, including where and when it is appropriate to use old and new technology. In this process, it is easy to focus on the needs of the project vis-à-vis its donors and lose sight of the essential, albeit different, community information needs.

Efficiency will demand a single data production process, but learning will require dual packaging (presentation) of information elements in order to be adapted to each set of stakeholders (community groups, district level partners and authorities, national decision-makers, donors).

### **3) Alignment and evidence-led negotiation with authorities, professionals, and policy makers.**

Alignment with national priorities is not negotiable, but projects also have responsibility to use their resources to emphasize two things which can easily be missed by policy makers:

- Data and evidence based on rigorous methodologies; and
- Community and stakeholder perspectives, both in terms of needs and in terms of capabilities, which may be neglected.

The project should encourage constructive engagement and give-and-take with communities.

- Using community learning and information gathered from above processes, negotiate with governing authorities to achieve a common approach bringing together the community's vision and agenda and that of national policy makers and professionals to create a win/win situation.
- Are policy changes needed? Develop community capacity to advocate with authorities for needed change.
- Is more information needed? Is the project helping authorities in producing, analyzing and interpreting data?

### **4) Intentional learning through involving professionals with community stakeholders**

Learning, the fourth element, needs to be deliberately built through opportunities to review data and experience at the lowest possible level. Professionals have to work with community stakeholders to promote collective learning and confrontation of perceptions about what “works” and what doesn't—for example providing PLA-type activities with different types of stakeholders to develop lessons learned and bring these groups together to share their respective assessments. Ultimately, it links to decision-making starting with the field level where data were initially collected. The information should then flow to community, district, provincial and national levels.

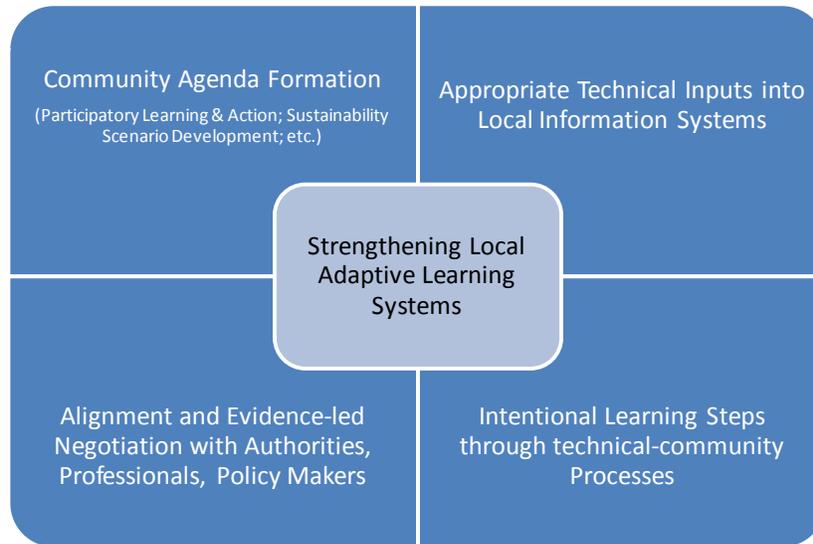
At the local level (district and below) this element should ensure that the information collected informs the pursuit of the community agenda, which was articulated in the initial phase. This can take different mechanisms. Ideally, it should also:

- Build collaboration across communities (cross-learning);
- Incorporate collaboration, learning and adaptation as new ideas and solutions become available;
- Document and disseminate learning for ongoing communication;
- Include ‘upstream’ information to decision makers about local understanding and appreciation of progress.

### **5) Monitoring and Evaluation as “meta-learning”**

In this approach, project M&E becomes a ‘meta-learning’ tool, not just documenting progress on activities and results—which presumably has been delivered to various reporting levels under appropriate format, but also documenting how learning is happening, how it is being constrained or challenged, and how this learning is influencing the possibilities which local actors (community stakeholders, private, civil society, government) are able to imagine and pursue.

### **Figure 1: Suggested Operational Elements for Strengthening Local Learning Systems**



**Conclusion**

This paper has not offered an intervention to improve child nutrition, increase livelihoods, promote health, or strengthen local cash or food-crop production. We merely suggest fundamental process steps for any intervention in order to:

- Strengthen local capacity to make decisions based on the most valid information possible;
- Allow sharing and learning between stakeholders having different agendas, needs, and social functions;
- Advance the possibility of informed conflict management, notably when the needs of the most vulnerable conflict with the benefits of the more connected members of society;
- Establish local learning processes, which build social capital and adaptive capacity around the pursuit of clearly articulated public goods.

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<sup>i</sup> ORTIZ ARAGÓN, A. & TAYLOR, P. 2009. *Learning purposefully in capacity development: Why, what and when to measure?* In: IIEP (ed.) *Rethinking capacity development*. Paris: IDS

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid