

Thematic Learning Programs

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1. Introduction

Since 2007 PSO finances capacity development of civil society in developing countries with the purpose to stimulate learning of PSO members with their partners. This so called “strategic financing” takes place within the framework of Learning by Doing Trajectories (LWTs). The LWT instrument has become the basis of the relation between the PSO bureau and member organisations and proves to be effective in focusing learning processes around capacity development. In the mean time collective learning around capacity development related topics has continued to take place between PSO member organisations.

November 2008, stimulated by its International Advisory Board and based on an analysis of the LWT's, PSO identified a number of key themes related to the development of capacity of civil society. Since that time small theme groups have built up a knowledge base and identified key actors among the members and academic partners.

The strategy of PSO is based on learning and generating knowledge from practice. A new (web-based) monitoring system has been developed to learn more systematically from what the members and their partners do. As such the thematic Learning Programs (TLP's) provide a logical bridge between the organisation-specific LWT and the collective learning trajectories, as illustrated in figure 1. They enable joint learning and knowledge development on the key themes.

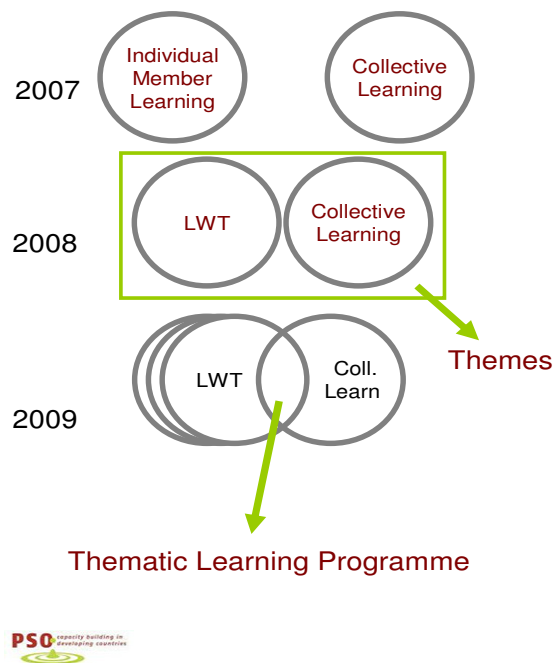


Figure 1

The present paper provides insight in the why and how of *thematic learning programs* (TLPs) PSO will assume an active role that enables an inspiring environment for learning by :

- Reduced bureaucracy and inviting to be creative on learning and innovation
- Enabling conditions for member organisations to invest time in learning activities.
- Pro-active involvement of the PSO bureau, as a centre of knowledge and expertise

2. Thematic Learning Programme (TLP)

2.1 What is a TLP?

A Thematic Learning Programme (TLP) is a series of learning activities undertaken by member organisations to respond to a central learning question. This learning question is related to specific aspects of capacity development.

2.2 Why TLP's?

Efficient learning does not come about easily:

- The development sector does not take sufficient time to systematically observe and reflect on signals in order to arrive at new insights and working hypotheses that are better linked to reality (conscious learning and thinking).
- Organisational learning in the development sector is difficult; organisations are dealing with complex and dynamic external environments and have many 'anti-learning elements' in their organisational culture¹.
- Apart from a poor learning culture the fact that some Northern NGOs are more and more decentralizing makes it a challenge to continue sharing experiences.
- Existing and new insights do not automatically lead to new behaviour, attitudes, systems and procedures in the relationship with Southern partners.
- Learning does not only involve new insight and concepts, but also required a changed attitude and new practical manners to apply the new knowledge (tools). the latter aspect is somewhat neglected

In summary: experiential learning leading to improved practice is still not commonplace.

There is a considerable number of knowledge institutes and knowledge centres researching methods and models for capacity development of civil society. Practice shows that the generated knowledge does not automatically feed into the civil society organisations both in the North and the South. For many civil society organisations it is a challenge to translate the outcomes of research due to a number of reasons. The present development that knowledge generation gets a more prominent role in the sector carries a risk that the gap between so called experts and practitioners will even grow larger. To bridge this gap, civil society organisations need opportunities to test methods and tools in their context, and/ or to develop practical methods and tools so as to be able to apply available 'academic' knowledge to their specific context..

Besides, insights from scientific research often have a Western bias. Input from Southern researchers and practitioners is still an exception rather than a rule.

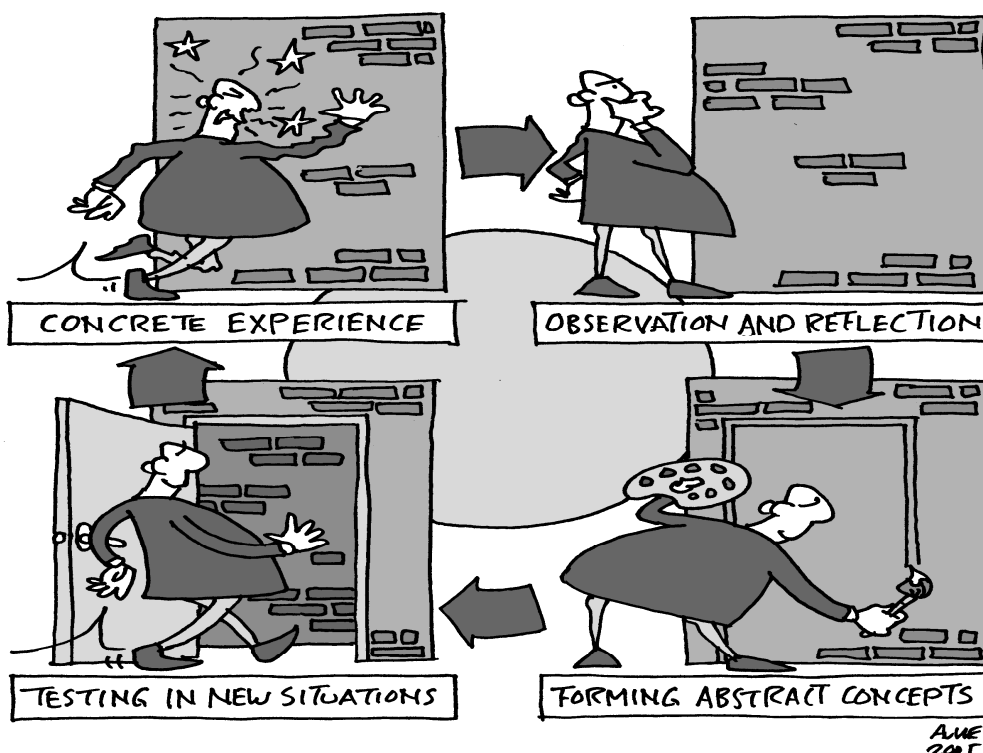
In the actual Dutch context of co-financing, the knowledge sharing and learning in the sector is under pressure. Formally the secretary of the future coalition (of different CSO's) has a role in facilitating. sharing

¹ From: Why aren't Aid Organizations Better Learners? E. Berg, 24th of August 2000

and learning. But it remains to be seen how this learning role within a coalition will develop in practise.. A combination of roles like the management of new partners, and developing new funding mechanisms can be a complicated starting point for effective learning.

Thematic Learning Programs aim at two major outcomes that are strongly related:

- *Generation of applied knowledge.* Applied knowledge results from the application of concepts, tools and methodologies that are developed by experts and academics, in the operations of civil society organisations in North and South. Typical questions are: how does this work in this specific context? Does it provide answers to problems/ issues that have been identified in this specific context? What adaptations might be needed to make this work even better in this or a similar context? Or more general, is this new way of looking at the reality fruitful?
- *Action learning.* Applied knowledge by itself will not lead to improved practice. It is related to the learning culture of an organisation, means and conditions for learning and access to methods and techniques that can lift learning practices to actual change. TLPs are an opportunity for member organisations to systematically investigate their own practice, to compare experiences and to experiment with new insights together with their colleague organisations and (coalition) partners; PSO will play an active role in creating (collective) reflection and learning moments.



2.3 Thematic focus of TLPs

In 2008, PSO decided to work towards a more thematic approach. The identification of PSO themes are largely derived from the various learning questions in the LWT's.

PSO theme's are²:

- Development of Civil Society
- Power and Partnership
- Capacity development of organisations
- Capacity development and networks
- Capacity development of civil society in Fragile States
- Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation (PM&E) of capacity development
- Migration and Development
- Capacity development with specific areas of interest: Gender, HIV/AIDS and others.

The TLPs are defined around one or more central learning questions within a theme or, possibly, at the crossroads of themes. The bureau plays a proactive role in suggesting the thematic content and focus of the learning programs. The bureau will do this on the basis of :

- insights in, and overview of, the (Dutch) development sector,
- knowledge on emergent (international) CD discussions,
- analysis of defined learning questions of PSO members in the existing LWTs, and
- day to day contacts with PSO members expressing their emerging learning needs

2.4 The learning process and learning activities

Activities within a TLP can cover a variety of learning activities *to bridge the gap between practice and academic knowledge and vice versa*.

Activities to learn from existing practice

- 1) *Evaluations with the purpose to learn*. The focus and learning goals of these evaluations are clearly defined beforehand. Examples are: peer evaluations, field consultation processes, meta evaluations, process evaluations, etc.
- 2) *Collective learning activities*. These activities aim to learn from others involved in similar practices and processes. Examples of such activities are: self-help learning groups (learning cycles), communities of practice, facilitated learning trajectories, etc.
- 3) *Collective research and analysis*. Specific research activities in relation to existing practices between various actors, carried out with the main purpose to gain analytic and factual information which is not or insufficiently available in the sector. Clearly, to carry out collective research a variety of social academic methodologies and means can be applied. Examples of *outputs* of such activities are: Desk studies, synthesis reports, PhD's , etc.

² We realize that the themes are of a different nature and might require a slightly different process to come to a TLP. In 2010 we will further gain insight in how the themes relate and what way of working fits best.

Activities to test new and/or adapted practices

1. *Try-outs and pilots for the purpose of learning*; the focus and learning goals are defined beforehand. The activity is carried out based on a completely new approach. The activity is likely to contribute to the learning community³, in the context of a specific theme.
2. *Experiments in the context of applied research*; the aim here is to experiment with scaling up and or broaden experience on the basis of existing knowledge and tools
3. *Collective research*; a learning activity that aims to verify or falsify a certain hypothesis or leading assumption. Collective research in this category aims to be groundbreaking and is carried out by various actors. Examples of *outputs* of such activities are: Desk studies, synthesis reports, PHD 's, documentaries, etc.

3. Organising TLP's

3.1 Design, Management and Organisation of TLP's

Each PSO theme group develops a concept note describing the rationale and the learning question(s) for the theme. This concept is the basis for the development of one or more thematic learning programs. For the further design, management and organisation of a TLP, different scenario's can be followed, all adhering to the following principles:

- Full participation of at least two PSO members in planning, management and/or decision-making;
- For each TLP one PSO staff member will be assigned as contact person/coordinator, and will take charge of the general communications between the various actors participating in a TLP;
- "Voice of the South" is well organized and integrated in the design and management of the TLP;
- A clear task division, keeping in mind human and financial resources needed to carry out identified tasks
- Transparent process of decision making on financial support to the implementation of learning activities
- Criteria and operational set up for monitoring the learning process amongst participants of the TLP (who, what, how)
- A mechanism to organise learning within the program; ensuring development of generic knowledge, contributing to the original central and/ or sub question and with an added value to the existing knowledge base.
- Involvement of Northern and/or Southern knowledge institutes/ universities with a track record on the theme to advise and support the learning process (operating in- or outside the development sector)
- Commitment to the TLP proposal through signatures from at least two member organisations

3.2 Roles and responsibilities in the learning process

Role PSO members

Participation through learning activities

The LWTs and other practice of the PSO members are the basis for the thematic intention papers. PSO members (and their partners) further participate in the TLP formulation and through the learning activities

³ A (professional) Learning Community is basically an extended learning opportunity to foster collaborative learning among colleagues within a particular work environment or field.

they conduct as a part of the TLP. A TLP activity can be carried out by one member organisations or by a collective group of member organisations. Documentation of lessons learned and approaches and processes are crucial to enhance inter-organisational learning. Therefore, process documentation should be considered thoroughly within the proposal (and budget). Signing the proposal commits the members and their partners to openly sharing and exchanging their experiences with others (be it other PSO members or the wider development community).

Other recommended ways of participation...

Besides the above, PSO will strive to have it's members actively participate in management and organisation of a TLP. For example, a member could become part of a to be set up committee within a TLP. PSO will proactively invite members to take up such roles. Members can be compensated for this work.

Role of southern CS partners

Participation through involvement in learning activities

Southern partners of PSO members will participate through their involvement in the TLP proposal writing and in the implementation of TLP activities. Like the member organisations, they will be asked to support the sharing and exchanging of experiences. Eventually, Southern partners and the respective PSO member organisation will jointly be responsible for documenting their experiences.

Participation based upon existing southern experiences

Another, and strongly recommended form of participation by southern CS partners, is through contribution on their (already existing and wealth of) experiences on a particular topic. This type of participation should be pro-actively looked for in a TLP, by respective PSO thematic teams and/or a participating PSO member organisation.

Role of knowledge institutes in North and South

Knowledge Institutes and/or Research Centres will be involved to provide the necessary support to the learning process in a TLP either as a partner or as a contractor. This role can vary in content and intensity within each TLP. PSO thematic teams and participating members will jointly decide how to shape the cooperation with these (strategic and process) partners. If relevant, strategic partnerships can be pursued beyond the traditional development sector

Role PSO bureau

The PSO bureau is responsible for the overall management and coordination of the TLP's. The PSO theme groups play a key role in initiating and coordinating the learning programs. The TLP core group is overall responsible and will provide feedback on TLP programme's concept proposals, with special attention for:

- content, set up and potential partners
- organisation of the TLP, reducing bureaucracy where possible
- match with (minimal) PSO working procedures, methods and systems
- cross-fertilization (and possible interlinking) between TLPs
- link with strategy as from 2011

It is the task of the TLP Core Group to give a 'go' for each TLP including an assignment of a maximal yearly budget. After the approval of the TLP core group the thematic group will ensure that regular contracts will be drawn up with involved member organisations and consultants.

Internal PSO theme groups support the design and setting up of TLPs. They will do so on the basis of the learning needs of PSO members as well as the learning questions expressed in the LWT agreements. Out of this information each of the thematic teams has formulated central learning questions per theme (see annex 1 for an overview).

Once a TLP has been designed, it will probably need a facilitated virtual community to exchange experiences, discuss problems and learn from each other. Within the context of a TLP, experts from Northern and/or Southern Knowledge Institutes or Research Centres can be deployed in order to support the activities and give input where needed. Administration of the TLP is another role; the costs of member organisations to carry out the learning activities and disseminate the results will be compensated by PSO, including staff time (to a max. of 25% of the total budget of the activity). Funds available will depend on the quality and the quantity of proposals per TLP. Financial guidelines for the TLPs can be found in annex 2.