Cross-organisational learning: improving effectiveness

Feed the Minds currently works in partnership with NGOs, FBOs and CBOs in over 20 countries to deliver educational projects supporting some of the most marginalised communities. We also contribute to a wealth of networks with a focus on issues as diverse as literacy, faith and fundraising. These networks and partnerships all offer valuable opportunities for Feed the Minds to learn from interacting with people from other organisations.

Since 2008, Feed the Minds has been strengthening the way in which we work with our partners, increasing our focus on organisational capacity building. One way of promoting capacity building is through enhancing cross-organisational learning: providing opportunities for our partners to enhance their work from interacting with each other, sharing experiences and expertise.

We have engaged in cross-organisational learning where organisations involved, including Feed the Minds, have

- gained knowledge and practical skills which led to changes in techniques / methods, increasing the impact and effectiveness of their work
- identified their own strengths and sharing good practice to the benefit of other organisations
- identified solutions to some of their challenges and taken positive action to address these
- extended their networks to draw on in the future.

With the support of Comic Relief in 2011 and 2012, Feed the Minds has reviewed our cross-organisational learning initiatives. We have shared our experiences through workshops and dialogue in the UK and overseas with other organisations at various stages of developing cross-organisational learning. We have learnt from what has worked well and what has been less successful. As a result of this work we have identified some factors which promote effective cross-organisational learning and others which hinder the process.

These guidelines aim to provide some insight to

- What kinds of activities are most effective in promoting cross-organisational learning?
- How can resources allocated to cross-organisation learning be justified and the impact measured?

Education makes a world of difference

Recommendations

Underpinning principle:

Cross-organisational learning is about learning 'with and from' others. It is most effective when all engage in the process with no-one seeing themselves as purely 'facilitating cross-organisational learning'.

The following recommendations overlap closely with each other. For example, the process of negotiating roles and responsibilities is, in itself, a shared decision-making process.

1. **Cross-organisational activities linked to shared agenda**
   Cross-organisational learning activities are more effective when based on the *exchange of experience and skills on specific area(s) linked to project implementation or achieving strategic priorities of each participating organisation.*

   WHY?
   - Motivation and engagement is generally higher when organisations can see a potential advantage in terms of achieving their strategic priorities or improving their implementation.
   - Selecting specific area(s) provides a focus for the activities. This enables organisations to select the most appropriate people to participate and increases the chances of practical outcomes which will impact positively on the work of the organisations.

   HOW?
   - By exchanging strategic priorities and challenges in implementation during the planning process and selecting organisations where common interests and needs have been identified.
   - By using techniques which are based on mutual sharing of experiences, avoiding seeing one organisation as the 'expert' in all aspects.

2. **Clear expectations, roles and responsibilities**
   Cross-organisational learning is more effective when organisations have discussed their expectations and there is a shared understanding of what is, and is not, possible. The role and responsibilities of each organisation need to be agreed, and where possible, recorded in writing.

WHY?

- Organisations will come with their different expectations, based on their own experience and history of interacting with other organisations. Where expectations differ this can lead to tension, misunderstanding and different organisations working towards different goals.
- Each participating organisation should have a specific role to play, together with responsibilities. Ensuring that these are mutually agreed and recorded enables organisations to be clear about the resources they need to allocate to the cross-organisational learning and what they can expect of others.
- Mutually agreed roles and responsibilities can help focus limited resources to achieve a shared goal.

HOW?

- By inviting all organisations to say what their expectations are and then to negotiate these to arrive at shared expectations. These could be incorporated into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).
- By inviting all organisations to suggest what they are bringing to the initiative and what expertise they have to share?
- By each organisation agreeing to take on specific tasks. Some might be excellent at organising workshops, others at programme planning, report writing or participatory facilitation, or have skills in IT, or have access to a local community leader.
- By drawing up an action plan with roles, responsibilities and resources clearly identified. The action plan needs also to have someone who is responsible for coordinating particular activities and who has the support of the group in this role.

3. **Shared decision-making, planning and facilitation**

Consultation and joint decision-making processes often take longer than decision-making within a single organisation, especially when organisations are geographically distant. It is unrealistic for everyone to be involved in all decisions. However, in the early stages of a cross-organisational learning initiative, investing time and resources into joint decision-making brings benefits in terms of drawing on a wider range of expertise, increased shared understanding, greater ownership of the decisions and action plans in each organisation.

WHY?

- Shared decision-making builds trust and helps the organisations to get to know each other, their priorities, strengths and challenges.

- Shared planning and facilitation enables different organisations to take on different roles and to develop their skills in new areas.
- If an initiative has been planned collaboratively by a number of organisations, it may use the available resources more effectively and be more sustainable in the future.

HOW?
- By seeing the joint decision-making process as an important element of the cross-organisational learning process to which time and resources are allocated.
- By making all relevant information available to partners, including budget and reporting information and any other information which might influence the cross-organisational learning activities.
- By being clear about which decisions have already been made and which are yet to be made.
- By adopting democratic decision-making processes, like voting or ranking where collective ownership is beneficial.
- By delegating some decision-making to those with responsibility for that particular aspect. For example the organisation with responsibility for the logistics of a workshop might be left to make decisions about all workshop expenditure, within an agreed overall budget.

4. **Starting small, using existing resources**
Whilst large scale, cross-organisational learning initiatives can be immensely valuable, there is also merit in focused, carefully planned initiatives which enable 2 or 3 organisations to develop the skills in promoting cross-organisational learning.

WHY?
- Cross-organisational learning is an approach which strengthens organisations and can result in new collaborative initiatives. However, it is not an end in itself and therefore is most effective when used to enhance the work of organisations.
- Securing funding for cross-organisational learning is challenging and needs to link to improvements in effectiveness of core work. Small, focused initiatives are more easily incorporated into funding applications.

HOW?
- By encouraging organisations to offer places at workshops and other events to other local organisations.

> - By sharing materials, policies with other organisations and inviting feedback, perhaps even meeting to discuss.
> - By encouraging organisations to identify what skills or resources they have to exchange, then to engage in an 'auction of promises'.

5. **Culturally appropriate approaches**

    The approaches selected for learning and exchanging experiences should be culturally appropriate and reflect the different ways of learning used in the different organisations (e.g. not always formal meetings with written minutes but also including drama, storytelling etc.)

    WHY?
    > - Using a variety of approaches from different cultures encourages participation, reduces hierarchies, values different cultures and increases the sense of shared ownership.
    > - Participants gain experience of new techniques which they can adapt to their own context.
    > - Encouraging each organisation to bring their own techniques, results in the leadership of sessions rotating and a more equitable atmosphere of exchange is encouraged.
    > - Organisations and individuals will come from different backgrounds and will have different levels of confidence with formal language, the written word and Information Technology.

    HOW?
    > - By involving a range of people and organisations in the planning process and in leading activities.
    > - By inviting participants to contribute ice-breakers, energisers, songs and prayers as well as presentations or case studies of their work.
    > - By using local stories or metaphors to illustrate issues and trigger discussion.
    > - By considering the most appropriate language(s) for exchange and avoiding relying too heavily on the written word.
    > - By taking into account the different levels of IT access and skills.

6. **Multiple points of contact**

    Cross-organisational learning is more effective when exchange is based on contact between several people in each organisation with different roles and responsibilities. This promotes organisational exchange and learning, rather than exchange primarily between individuals, which might benefit the individuals more than the organisations.

WHY?

> When two or more people from one organisation participate in a workshop they can bring different perspectives (e.g. men, women, community groups, the CEO) and areas of expertise.
> When two or more people from one organisation participate they can support each other in disseminating to colleagues and following up on actions.

HOW?

> By avoiding over-reliance on a single channel of communication between organisations and supporting different people being in communication with each other.
> By inviting participating organisations to involve a range of stakeholders in cross-organisational learning initiatives and encouraging exchange of relevant experience.

7. **Evaluation of the impact of cross-organisational learning**
Like any project initiative it is important to assess the impact of cross-organisational learning and evaluate whether it has met its objectives and was an effective use of resources.

WHY?

> To learn what has and has not been effective and therefore adapt our approaches in the future.
> To enable us to report on the value of cross-organisational learning drawing on an evidence base, rather than individual anecdotal reports.
> To share good practice with other organisations.
> To support the case for cross-organisational learning.

HOW?

> By identifying the intended outcomes at the beginning of the process using SMART indicators. These should include specific ways in which the different organisations will gain.
> By encouraging each organisation to draw up an action plan for change as a result of the cross-organisational learning activities.
> By following up on the impact after a period of time, e.g. through a questionnaire, inviting case studies or bringing the organisations together to review change (either face-to-face or virtually through the internet).

Case study: *Collaborating in Kibera*

Note: A report on *Collaborating in Kibera is available from*
info@feedtheminds.org

In 2011 Feed the Minds and Tatua Communications undertook a cross-organisational learning initiative as part of a larger peacebuilding project involving schools and women's groups . Seventeen 17 NGOs were involved in workshops in Mchanganyiko Women's Hall, Kibera, co-facilitated by Feed the Minds and Tatua Communications.

The following 'themes' were identified as being of specific relevance to all participating NGOs and formed the basis for the workshop activities:

- developing project plans from 'good ideas'
- taking literacy into account
- measuring the impact of our work
- strengthening our networks
- mobilising resources.

Tatua led on identifying themes; recognising that many participants had recently formed organisations, so had little experience in project planning and felt their activities were limited only by lack of resources. Both organisations contributed to the design of creative, practical activities, building on each other's ideas. The facilitation was shared with one person from Feed the Minds and Tatua sharing responsibility each day. The logistical support provided by Tatua (printing of posters, mobilising local groups, organising a local venue and food) was invaluable.

Towards the end of the workshops participants took part in an 'Exchange of Services'. Each organisation identified a service which they could offer to another organisation either for free or at very little cost. These 'offers' included providing a venue for workshops for 2 days, giving 5 days IT support, providing 3 days training on HIV and AIDS and mobilising youth for a health campaign. These offers were exchanged with all organisations gaining by receiving a service which would enhance their work, at little or no cost. The organisations were energised and three months later the vast majority of offers had been fulfilled, with some exchanges resulting in longer term organisational relationships.

Collaborating in Kibera was an extremely valuable learning experience, with positive, practical outcomes and areas identified for development.

At the end of the workshops participants rated each of the themes in terms of how much they had gained, using a bull's eye target for each theme and adding post it notes to explain their scores.

The most positive feedback was on taking the literacy skills and practices of stakeholder groups into account in community-based projects where the majority felt they had gained new insights into an area they had not previously considered. Actions relating to literacy were widely included in the organisational and personal action plans.

Most participants also felt they had gained valuable practical skills in project planning, recognising the importance of focusing on the change they wanted to achieve and taking a step by step approach to project planning. Many were going to use the process they went through during the workshop as the basis for project planning in their organisations.

The sessions on networking and resource mobilisation also scored highly with participants valuing the different networking models and looking forward to following up on the agreed exchanges of skills and resources. Many commented on the participatory nature of the workshops, enabling people to get to know each other and the diversity of backgrounds and experiences of participants. Almost all of the organisation action plans included exchanges of training, skills or resources with at least one other organisation. The first of these exchanges took place one week after the workshops.

Issues for consideration:
- All participants gained considerably from the event, however, most participating organisations were already known to Tatua. Tatua's links were definitely strengthened, but perhaps not extended as much as had they reached out beyond their existing networks.
- At times, Tatua staff were juggling facilitation and dealing with the logistical arrangements. Clearer allocation of responsibilities and more advanced planning might have reduced the tension.
- Planning the workshops remotely was a challenge, with use of email and skype. In order to ensure that the ideas from both organisations were combined it was necessary to leave much of the planning until a face-to-face meeting in Nairobi.

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