

Exchange as capacity building



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PSO wants to thank the participants of the PSO “Learning Event” on exchange (annex 2). The sharing of their questions and experiences, their openness to learn from each other, their search for new insights and understanding of capacity building, have been of great value.

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Cartoons: Auke Herrema

Exchange helped one African HIV/AIDS worker improve his vital work. At his first conference at Kadoma, Zimbabwe in 2003 he met men from different organisations with vast experience on HIV and AIDS issues. Some, actually living with the virus, could offer first hand information. "My major reason for participating in this conference was to convince men in my community to pay attention. I left the conference filled with confidence. I was equipped with skills, knowledge and enough information to share with my constituency back home. Rubbing shoulders with people who have hands on experience has helped me gain confidence, courage and desire to focus ahead and never look back."

Why Exchange

People just do things, they rarely look back at what they have actually done to ask, why, and how? But strengthening your organisation is about learning to do things better. Many believe they can achieve this through training where a teacher tells you something, you learn and your organisation gets stronger. But you learn most from experience, and exchange is about meeting people who may have different experiences, experiences that can inspire you with ideas you never had before.

As an interviewee stated: "Exchange forces you to look at your own experience, whether you are a Tanzanian farmer or a European donor NGO." It functions as a mirror, explaining what you have done and making you conscious that many things are done as they always were...and can be improved."

PSO values the strategy of exchange as an important way of supporting capacity building in organisations. In the South PSO does this mainly by making funds available through our members for exchange activities of partner organisations.

To PSO exchange means exchanging experiences with your peers, where staff from similar partner organisations exchange experience, knowledge and contacts in several ways.

Exchange can mean a working visit or a secondment by one or more staff members during a short trip to a similar northern or southern organisation or company. It can also be participation by one or more staff members in a conference or seminar. Finally it could take the form of a virtual exchange, disseminating knowledge and lessons learned via various media such as the internet, publications, video, and radio.

In the North PSO supports exchange between its member organisations by organising learning and exchange events on several issues related to capacity building. Exchange between northern and southern parties is valuable in these processes as well. People have ties, they know when to call each other, to ask for advice, to brainstorm and have fun together, for exchange may bring back ideas for your organisation, but also for yourself. In PSO's view exchange can be an important strategy to improve the capacities of individuals within organisations, of organisations themselves and of with networks of organisations .



Exchange, however, is more than just bringing people together. It needs to be a well thought through process that should contribute to greater learning and change. More dialogue is needed to understand capacity building and development processes better and so embark on new ways of exchange. NGOs must ensure exchange really contributes to the capacity building of an organisation. It must be continuous. It is a process not merely a single event.

A Learning Trajectory on Exchange

Since 2004, PSO has been developing a learning trajectory on exchange as a strategy for capacity building. This trajectory on strategies of capacity building will focus on the seven other identified strategies for capacity building in the years to come. The eight strategies as identified by PSO are: exchange, facilitation, advice, training, coaching, research, management and implementation. These are further discussed in the PSO policy paper on Capacity Building: Conceptual and Methodological Framework. The general goal of this learning trajectory is defined as fostering sharing and learning from experience within the various strategies used by member organisations to support capacity building among partner organisations. The ultimate goal of this process has been to facilitate the choice of a suitable support strategy and improve the quality of that support.

Members of PSO and their southern partners have built up a wealth of knowledge and experience on capacity building and the strategies which can be used to support this. However, in practice lessons learned are seldom shared, let alone incorporated into the working processes of member and partner organisations of PSO. Exchanging and learning together on the strategies of capacity building is seen as key to solving this.

So, in September 2004 PSO asked CDRA in South Africa and Forente Consultancy & Change Management in The Netherlands to carry out a study on Exchange as a Strategy for Capacity Building. Studies on other strategies will follow in the future.

Twelve member organisations were interviewed on their practice and policy regarding capacity building and exchange, their experiences, lessons learned and questions. Member organisations were asked to come up with suggestions for case studies in the South.

A wide range of partner organisations of PSO members were visited by the consultants in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Tanzania. Later consultants designed a two-and-a-half day exchange and learning event for PSO members on Exchange as a form of Capacity Building. It aimed to provide an opportunity to explore the issues related to the notion of exchange as a form of capacity building designed to strengthen horizontal learning and thereby deepen their practice. It also hoped to generate different perspectives on exchange based on actual practice.

A Belgian based rural development NGO Coopibo has worked in Tanzania helping farmers visit their counterparts in different regions of the country. Its representative said: "I do not think we ever systematically measured the impact of these exchange visits, but I recall that the farmers loved it. I was sure meeting with counterparts operating in other circumstances helped our farmers to know other farming and livestock techniques, crops, tools, storage and marketing methods.

We sometimes noted changes, most prominently with regards to the use of ox mechanisation, organic methods and crop diversification. This was more at the physical and technical level.

I wished we could have had the ability to also put on record the change at other levels; the ability to appreciate better the particularity of their own farming system, higher sense of innovation and entrepreneurship, enhanced self confidence, and more peace of mind after realizing that farmers living far away face similar, if not worse, problems and hardship."

This Report

Drawing on PSO's work so far this report explains **why** exchange is so important and **what** exactly it is, including its relationship to capacity building. It also goes further, explaining to members and partners **how** exchange happens in practice drawing on experiences in the North and South. Finally it lays out the **Do's** and the **Don'ts** of exchange offering tips and tricks to success. And the real life testimonies of individuals are included throughout to remind readers that this is practice not just theory.

This little man with an exclamation mark indicates a key lesson



How to build capacity – theory into practice

In this report, exchange is seen as a strategy for capacity building. But before going into the concept in more detail we need to ask: What exactly is capacity building? Capacity building is a natural opening up process, unblocking barriers to sustainable development rather than closing things down. It should enhance potential by supporting existing capacities, based on learning from previous experiences, rather than bringing in from the outside what appears to be lacking. For example case stories of previous struggles and successes can stimulate people's will to change by making them more aware.

It must therefore help people and organisations to find their own solutions, involving those that it is meant to support. It cannot be delivered from the outside or on behalf of others.

Ownership strengthens relationships of trust so allowing capacity to be built up.

A Tanzanian agricultural engineer who worked in the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security as a trainer and researcher first experienced exchange after joining the NGO sector in 1997.

He saw his first international workshop, organised in Uganda by the Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM), as a turning point in building his confidence. "We shared our experiences a lot. Through this sharing I realized that I also had enormous knowledge and experience on the subject."

After the workshop he convinced the management within his organisation to run a similar one in Tanzania and wrote an article published in the PELUM magazine. "You can imagine how I felt!"

He went on to become involved in workshops on Organisational Development (OD) with South African NGOs such as Olive. "It was an eye opener in this field of OD. From then onwards I started reading and understanding books on OD."

How can exchange contribute to capacity building?

Exchange can be a powerful strategy for stimulating the capacity building processes of people, communities, and organisations. These processes are characterised by periods of change that contribute to growth. Through learning exchange can contribute to shifting relationships and patterns. But it must be done consciously, as a way of examining the status quo of partners as well as that one of donors. A capacity building approach truly aimed at development demands that an organisation is ready to let go of its old ways of doing things and embrace a new way of doing and practicing. As one participant in the PSO exchange event stated: "Exchange should awaken sleeping qualities".

The notion of capacity building understands that the exchange process is not totally predictable and therefore must be open to unforeseen outcomes.

No two contexts are the same and each must be treated in its own right. It is risky to try to replicate examples of capacity building through exchange. This implies that the cases cannot be packaged into another context. They need to be relevant to a context. However it can be enriching to understand that learning can be brought from one context to another and be used effectively.

The same idea applies to organisations. They are different and will respond differently to an exchange experience, partly due to different capabilities and capacities to implement learning and translate them into their own reality.

It is crucial to ask when intervening in the life of a “living system”: How can exchange contribute to capacity building in our situation? This is key to understanding the systems of support that are needed for an organisation to be “capacitated”. Crucial too is for exchange to be part of a continual process and not just a single event.



Preconditions for exchange

Before embarking on an exchange there are several factors that need to be in place first. It may sound obvious but there needs to be an **organisational commitment** to capacity building and management styles that support effective exchanges.

Then crucial in any intervention aimed at capacity building is **clarity of purpose**. If those taking part understand the purpose right from the outset they will be conscious of what they are doing, how and why. So a common understanding of the benefits of exchange, for purposes of capacity building, helps build a shared understanding of what it is they are trying to achieve.

Once the purpose is clear then decisions on the right form and time for intervention are needed. Exchange that is going to build capacity needs to create the **right space, pace, time and opportunity** for learning including moments for individual as well as for collective learning. Participants need to **step out** of their daily situation and **see the whole picture** in order to contribute towards change.

The next requirement is for a dedicated process to build a culture of honesty and trust for all involved starting right from the beginning. This in turn will help those participating to **unlearn in order to learn**. This process of capacity building should then trigger a **gradual change, that is not forced, but** is natural and transforming, an action-learning process.

And this should be guided by **experience and practice** rather than academic theory. Theory helps, but it is in doing and practicing that experience is built and capacity strengthened.

Finally exchange as a form of capacity building should therefore be seen not as an “**add on**” but as an organisational strategy. It should not be just considered as an event but a **process over time** that contributes to the organisation’s internal strategy and systems of learning.

“VSO-RAISA exchanges have proven to be effective for acquiring new knowledge and skills But participants argued these exchanges could be improved further through offering more study visits than oral presentations and the chance to create genuine networking,

along with the empowerment and solidarity a feeling of ownership that this can build. "Experience has taught us that no matter how much we research our issues or correspond with our partners, both local and international there is no substitute for sharing experiences and practices one-to-one."

Action Learning

As we have seen exchange is one of the strategies to be used while developing the capacities of a network of organisations, an individual organisation, or of an individual within an organisation. One of the crucial means for supporting learning processes within exchange activities is through action learning. This is not to say that action learning and exchange are one and the same thing. Action learning is a much broader concept, which can be used in non-exchange situations as well.

It is natural for human beings to learn from experience. The experience of one action is ploughed back into our next experience, our next action. We have all been doing it all our lives, usually unconsciously. Through being more conscious of how we learn we can improve the way we learn and help others too.

Action learning is the opposite of only being taught by experts or trying to learn from someone else's theories. It is about drawing on our experience and applying these lessons to new experiences, each time improving what we do. It has been said to be based on: "the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning".

Action learning values the experience of the learner. Of course ideas or theories from books and teachers are valuable, but usually only after the experiences of the learner have surfaced, and been learnt from. If we are only taught theoretically then we struggle to find a place to put this theory. Experience offers a hook on which to hang the theory, to relate it to the outside world.

Action learning is useful everywhere in capacity building. In training or supporting organisations, questions or exercises are brought in. These help organisations to remember their experiences. They **own** their learning, they **feel** the learning, and it is relevant because it comes from them! And what they learn they can then more easily apply back into their own reality.

By helping organisations to learn from their own experience they become more independent, more able to learn from themselves in future than from outside experts - they become their own experts! In action-learning circles a cyclical model is used. This is as follows:

Action: Nobody knows your experience of your actions better than you do, becoming more conscious of your "experience" while acting, can impact dramatically on the next step.

Reflection: Re-examining and thinking about the event or action makes it more conscious. One can analyse it, evaluate it, understand it better or on a deeper level. The problem is that we do not do this naturally. Often it is only as a result of a crisis that we reflect. A more active approach is vital to become a good action learner.

Learning: Reflection is no guarantee that learning has taken place! Very often people "reflect" on practice and repeat the same mistake. Therefore the distinction between reflection and learning in the Action Learning Cycle is important; learning means drawing out the core generalised lessons; moving from "what actually happened" to "what tends to happen as a result of such circumstances".



Planning: This is the key link between past learning and future action. The core “insights” from the previous step must now be translated into decisions that will ensure improved practice. These decisions then need to become part of the plan. The end of each learning cycle becomes the beginning of the next cycle.

In conclusion, exchange thus aims to enhance the existing potential of an organisation. It can’t therefore be brought in from outside but must be owned by the participating individuals and organisations. In this way a trusting relationship can be built up between the two or more parties that

allows the organisation to have the courage to open up to new ways of learning such as action learning where lessons really change behaviour. This requires exchange to be a process rather than an event and for preconditions such as people being genuinely prepared to unlearn in order to learn.

So much for theory. Now, let’s have a look at the practice of exchange as a strategy for capacity building.

How do PSO members experience exchange: the view from the North

A wide variety of policies and practices emerged from interviews with 12 PSO members. For some exchange was very much rooted in their practice, in some cases it is even a core activity for capacity building. Yet for others exchange was almost a “stand alone” activity. The roles adopted varied too with some being the donor, and quite often the initiator of an exchange, while others got more involved as an organiser and even facilitator. Yet through this diversity common patterns, questions and themes emerged. These were further explored during the Exchange Event.

The experiences of the interviewed PSO members covered a wide range of exchanges in which their partners participated: conferences, north-south and south-south exposure visits, and virtual exchanges. There was also a great variety in themes and sectors: AIDS, labour unions, cooperatives, tourism, health, youth, education, and media.

Participating in exchange can offer many advantages for member organisations in the North. Members have the chance to learn from each other through exchange. It offers a space where different strategies can be shared and different practices can be built up, for example by developing methods of virtual exchange rather than the traditional ways of bringing people together. Ultimately it enables members to interact better, sharing their insights that can in turn inform and improve practices.

And such interaction can be lacking among members keen to focus instead on building capacity through exchange of partner organisations in the South. Experiences showed that members rarely questioned their own understanding of capacity building and exchange, nor the relation between these two.

Although capacity building intends to contribute to development of people and organisations, the authors observed that reflecting on the real meaning of development does not take place amongst partners in a conscious and systematic way. Therefore exchange is very often seen as a tool and an event, instead of an element of a broader capacity building process.

There appeared to be a lack of a clear understanding of capacity building and how exchange can be part of a wider coherent strategy for capacity building.

Exchange aims at real learning and this will only happen when people understand the real purpose behind it, that is by taking learning back into the way of doing things.

The authors felt that exchange for members was often about doing it in the South and not among themselves. Yet in order to be good capacitors members needed to question internally what was capacity building. For in order to drive forward capacity building members must set an example, become conscious of their own learning and needs for capacity building so enabling them to speak about it to others.

People were aware of something lacking. Questions were asked such as: "How can we move from events and techniques to a living process driven by curiosity?"

However a large proportion of members were clearly more concerned with the capacity building of others than of themselves. Learning is something that is happening "to and for others and not for us". Members seemed to have no culture of systematic and conscious organisational learning. Learning instead just happens in an informal and unstructured way.

Another common pattern was that members struggle with their own role regarding exchange. For example members question whether and how their role could be more re-active and responsive.

Until now members often play a pro-active role by initiating exchanges. Members have their own agenda plus a wide network of organisations and therefore initiate and organise conferences and other forms of exchanges.

But often there is no real request nor link with the processes of partner organisations themselves. This appears to reflect the nature of the usual relationship between PSO members and their partners.

Members also questioned what it means to be involved in exchange as a donor: One asked: "When you consider exchange you realize it needs trust and equality..... how does this work in a 'donor-partner' relationship?"

Together with their role, questions were also raised about the management of the exchange process, especially before and after the exchange.

Exchange has often become a tool that is implemented with little consciousness of the deeper and broader processes and approaches that underpin and encircle our work. As a result the exchange processes have become tools to deliver capacity building and have failed to facilitate development and learning that yields capacitated organisations.

In addition, members raised questions regarding the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of exchanges. Members asked: "Who sets indicators for success and how are these measured? And: "How do both individual participants and their organisations address the new and unpredictable outcomes of an exchange".

Finally PSO members sought new ways of facilitating horizontal learning processes among their partners, as opposed to just conferences. For although PSO has identified more forms of exchange besides conferences, such as working visits by staff, or secondment of staff during a short trip to a similar northern or southern organisation, members have used these forms in a limited way. A lot of interest has been shown for virtual exchanges. However only a few PSO members have experience and expertise in this area.



Experiencing exchange: The Southern view

Exchange may not always have followed an organisation's strategy but nevertheless it often sparked new ideas, innovations and helped people to think about their work. As one participant in several exchanges said: "Exchange is a place to reflect on yourself. It is a good environment to learn about yourself and deepen the understanding of your own context. You become arrogant when you don't exchange. Exchange helps you to listen more".

Southern partners organisations in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and South Africa who participated in exchanges including conferences, study tours and training were interviewed. Clearly everyone had learnt something and tried to implement it. They all valued the chance to participate in the exchange.

And there were examples of how exchange had helped change organisations. In Zimbabwe, following a regional conference on HIV/AIDS and gender, various VSO partner organisations had begun to involve men in their home-based care programmes. Also in Zimbabwe management involvement in a study tour resulted in an organisation widening its residential care for orphans towards community-based care practices. In Tanzania, a medical college drew up new training materials for students after an exchange with a Dutch university. A Tanzanian coffee co-operative, meanwhile was able to improve the quality of its coffee to Europe after a member of its staff participated in an exchange with these customers. Also in Tanzania a training and consultancy organisation developed its own capacity through an exchange programme with a similar consultancy organisation in South Africa.

Those cases where exchange had an impact on organisations were those where the initiative came either from the organisation or was a response to their expressed needs for exchanging and networking. It was related to an underlying need for capacity building. It was never a one-off event, but rather made part of a bigger strategy. It concerned mostly: south-south exchanges consisting of different forms of exchange, such as mutual working visits, practical cooperation and common reflection.

A Tanzanian junior editor working at Dar es Salaam University Press in the 1990s benefited from an exchange through an attachment to Zimbabwe University Publishing House. With Zimbabwe's publishing industry far further developed and the country's book fair one of the best in Africa, it was a suitable choice to help Tanzanians build their publishing capacity. "It was during the attachment that I first encountered computer based-designing of books and covers. At home we used the ancient paper galleries and light table designing and layout. Fascinated by the new technology I introduced computer designing at the Dar es Salaam University Press and trained others. "

Despite positive experiences the impact of the exchanges at an organisational level were often limited. This is due to a number of factors.

Often the donor, a PSO member, failed to truly consult the partner organisations properly before initiating and organising an exchange. Exchanges were seen as something imposed from outside, without having a clear link with their own agenda. The purpose, agenda and form of exchange were defined by the donor. The exchange became seen as an event rather than part of a process.

One participant in a regional conference organised by its donor said: “We felt like a subject of exploration, rather than partner in exploring change and transformation. The ability to create genuine networking was denied, along with the solidarity and empowerment that this can build. Consequently, a feeling of ownership and a consciousness of being part of a much larger collective, was lost”. A South African organisation which participated in an exchange with a Namibian colleague organisation said: “ Sometimes it felt forced, with a lack of understanding of the two different realities.” Asked why, the organisation answered: “Perhaps the timing was wrong. We were still forming ourselves as an organisation”.



Another factor is the **selection of participants**. Organisations felt the participants different understanding of the themes and background was quite often too great to make exchange effective. Therefore it had no real effect and impact on learning. In addition some participants lacked the possibility, or ability, to influence policy and practice within their own organisation. They had no leadership responsibility or platform to transmit and transform their learning. Organisations often consider exchange as an opportunity for individual staff members to be exposed to new experiences but with no link with the organisational strategy or need for learning and changing. Exchange therefore has frequently been limited to **human resource development**. Contributions to organisational development as well as institutional development are not taken enough into consideration.

Participants of conferences and study tours often experienced **a lack of real follow up**. Efforts were mostly restricted to spreading the information within and outside the organisation. Few attempts were made to ground experiences properly within the organisation and to find ways of exploring how the new experiences could influence the practice and policy of the organisation. Experiences could have been better grounded through, mentoring, in depth training on the methodologies used, and support for experimentation.

A Mental Health Nurse, member of Mehata Mental Health Association in Tanzania said: “The key success of the change of our services is due to having reliable resources such as funds for training, availability of drugs, being able to follow up of services at all levels, exchange of information with other mental health coordinators inside and outside the country as well as through working with advisors who are more experienced.”

Severe criticism was leveled at how resources were spent. Spending on conferences is very high, “criminal” felt one commentator, while **follow up often lacked resources**. Many organisations expressed clear frustrations about this. One said: “We learned a new methodology at the conference: to make memory books with women affected by HIV/AIDS. But we could only put this into practice with a small group of women from our community

although many others have showed their interest. But we could not go as far as we would have liked due to a lack of financial resources”.

Finally there was a strong **desire for more South-South Exchange** between organisations. Frequently the wish was expressed for a staff member of a more experienced organisation working in the same field, to spend a longer time within their own organisation.

In short the experiences of exchange are very different between the North and the South yet both seemed to fail to grasp the opportunity of using exchange as part of a wider coherent policy of building their organisation’s capacity. Northern, donor, organisations often saw exchange as a tool or event rather than part of a broader process. While they may have been pro-active in organising an event they failed to make a proper link with the processes taking place in their southern partners. This failure to consult left many southern partners feeling like subjects of exploration on which exchange was imposed from outside and as a result the impact was less than if it had been a genuine response to a request.

Southern partners still valued exchange and learnt much from their experiences but this was often seen on an individual level, part of human resource rather than organisational, part of genuine capacity building.

What is important and what is essential: the tips and tricks

The challenge in the practice of capacity building is to address problems in new and creative ways. Exchange can be a powerful strategy to stimulate capacity development processes of people, communities, and organisations but a variety of core principles and needs should underlie the different stages of exchange.

Preparation and selection

All participating organisations should own the exchange. It should be part of their organisational development process. Therefore a genuine consultation should take place before the exchange. The purpose, agenda and form of exchange should be defined by all participating organisations. By ensuring **ownership** the capacity of a partner organisation is already enhanced, the donor’s responsibility clarified, and mutual understanding reinforced, building a good relationship between donor and organisations participating in the exchange.

Capacity building must be a key part of the process, negotiated with all groups, from the design phase to the exit strategy. But capacity building is very difficult to measure. Planning for such exchanges needs therefore to be sensitive and flexible to allow for intangible and unmeasurable outcomes. The conventional paradigm, yearning for predictable outcomes and effects, is often out of context here. It can lead to over-planning, disrupting the natural processes of capacity development. There should be some space for experimentation.

You need to understand the positions of possible partner organisations before **selection** for an exchange. Organisations should be selected who will best contribute to an exchange, have a willingness to change and are most likely to take on board what they have learnt. More fundamentally also: Who is responsible for the selection process?

Selecting like-minded organisations can contribute to an exchange process, yet on the other hand diversifying the partner participation can also be beneficial in helping the different partners to learn from each other. What counts is that all involved should have the **desire to learn** and be open to influences that bring about change.

Finally it is not only about selecting the ‘right’ organisations but also the ‘right’ participants. Participants should not only be strongly motivated and inspired, but should have the position, capacity and credibility to **influence change** within their own organisations. Exchange should be seen as part of enhancing its organisational learning and capacity.



Managing and monitoring

Managing exchange involves emphasizing empowerment and unlocking capacity. Things should be allowed to grow in a nurturing and supportive culture of learning.

Monitoring, a **continuous process** of observing, reflecting and responding, should be built in as an integral part of the process based on action learning principles. Understanding of one's own practice, based on self-evaluation, reflection and learning, is essential for monitoring and follow up.

Building capacity is a continuous process, **not an ad hoc event**. It is crucial during implementation and requires long term investment from both the partner and the donor that emphasizes the process itself not just the end product.

Learning and accountability should re-enforce each other. If you focus on learning then accountability will follow. Organisations may link accountability to an event, something that happens, rather than something which consciously builds learning. But it is not about pleasing a donor, saying we have done something, it is about saying we have learnt through it. Once learning happens then accountability will be much stronger. Therefore accountability happens because learning has happened.

Follow-up

Follow-up should be **budgeted from the start** in order to implement and build on what has been learnt. Here depth is preferable to breadth as it allows for greater impact which is related to learning and understanding what is being implemented.

Each participating partner or organisation may need a different approach to follow-up. It depends on their capabilities and their own organisational development. It can entail mentoring, or training in the tools learnt

through exchange, or even a capacity building within the organisation itself. Follow-up can also require time and space for experimentation.

One participant in an exchange reflected on the experience: "Exchange is meeting people. It is difficult and it is simple. I bring myself to the exchange. My capacity, knowledge, curiosity, dreams. I must too bring my willingness to change. I have pushed myself to contribute. I have forced to give away something of myself – in order to receive something from others. I feel liberated and trapped. I have changed but nothing has changed . What do I do with my new knowledge? We search for ways of optimising everything that is creative and good about human interaction, because we want to build something, a better world and exchange is a driver of that change."

Annex 1:Peer Review for the PSO “Exchange as Capacity Building” paper

by Jennifer Morfin, Mexican Conservation Learning Network- Impact Alliance

I definitely identified with the whole paper, nodding as I read, recognising the experiences concerning the added value of exchange as a form of capacity building. I also recognised the common mistakes that organisations make as they fail to perceive the potential of exchange as action learning and what this form of social capital can mean to their own organisations.

It would seem obvious for organisations to budget for exchange events in order to learn from others, with the right person attending the right events to learn from peers. These persons should then be allowed paid time to implement the lessons into their activities and continue their jobs with innovations. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case.

The North-South difference is a phenomenon that even occurs within organisations if the director does not allow workers a chance to be capacitated in a different manner. If donors do not stop thinking they know everything the organisations they fund needs, including the timing and the way they need it, the pattern will continue. We have to be more sensitive and realise how much we can learn from all positions. In fact, nothing will truly work in an organisation that is reluctant to go through a process of organisational change — no matter how much you pay for an event, technical assistance, or training. The key, as the paper mentions, is for organisations to realise the importance of taking advantage of their staff's intellectual capital, and to realise how much it is enhanced by participating in exchange processes (from events to list servers) and something even more valuable than human capital, such as social capital (the result of exchange and networking).

Within the Mexican Conservation Learning Network (IMAC), I have been working with Learning Communities (LCs) since 2001. We started them from scratch and have been fortunate to identify best practices and to implement them during these four years, especially with the Fire Management LC (www.camafu.net). You could say we had the ‘North’ position, as donors had paid for the process and we had to sell it to the organisations we wanted to connect and exchange. Initially, our method was tight, trying to get all the organisations in the group and within a tight schedule. Later on, experience showed us the importance of including everyone in the invitations, but to limit investing resources to those that showed real interest and commitment. Forcing the process only ended up in checking off a list and no learning whatsoever. When we became more sensitive to their needs and had more flexibility, they started to feel much better and also like owners of the process.

In addition, one of our greatest lessons has been to involve and include the whole organisation with the different interests of each member. If you only include the contact (i.e. the director or capacity building manager), the process is not embraced by the organisation as a whole. Horizontal learning deserves more promotion within and between organisations.

I believe the conclusions and recommendations are adequate and respond to reality throughout the world: North, South, East and West. As a peer reviewer, I feel honoured to have read this paper and happy to have learned that whatever your location, it would be a serious mistake to neglect exchange as a form of capacity building and as a way to improve efficiency and organisational learning.

Organisational development through networking and exchange is a core activity for any organisation that wants to achieve its goals, go through an action learning process, and improve. And yet, most institutions remain reluctant to allocate budget for it. The old practice of attending to urgent matters instead of important matters is still the first thing we have to be aware of. If we do not stop to sharpen the axe every now and then, chopping the wood will take much longer. Once organisations realise so, they still need to continue, to follow up and make an effort to change things, instead of going back to how things used to be. It is imperative to programme time and resources to it systematically.

The only thing I would add is that the key to a successful learning community is having an enthusiastic coordinator to identify with, someone who understands the people in the group, who knows what they are going through (like the lack of time to share information), someone who can direct them to others that have made similar efforts or experienced the same problems. This will provide hope, a sense of belonging and perhaps inspiration to learn more about each other's communities and share experiences. It is a process in which the coordinator is initially the key to the dynamic, but after some time identifies potential leaders within the community who are interested in the thematic groups so they can take over their role. Eventually, the goal is for the coordinator's role to fade out, leaving an autonomous learning community with thematic groups exchanging on their own accord, based on their own interest.

However, one of the biggest challenges is finding ways to make people realise their coresponsibility for the learning communities to function. After the first face-to-face events, the ongoing learning processes and future face-to-face events should rely on them and only be boosted by the coordinator.

I am truly thankful for this opportunity of exchange and hope that within the Impact Alliance, we can do some more 'Exchange as Capacity Building' as there is always more to learn from each other.

August 18, 2005

Annex 2 List of interviewees

PSO Member organisations and PSO staff

Name	Organisation
Saskia Boumans	Tie Netherlands
Wilfried Schasfoort	ICCO
Christine Fenenga	Cordaid
Astrid Aafjes	Mama Cash
Christian Kuijstermans	NiZA
Arjen Mulder	VSO
Conny Habraken	VSO
Jimmy Navarro	Green Development Foundation
Marcel Daniels	Rode Kruis
Gemma Claessen	Pax Christi
Lara van Druten	Network University
Catherine van der Wees	HIVOS
Julie Ferguson	HIVOS
Peter Moers	Strohalm
Geert Rhebergen	PSO
Akke Schuurmans	PSO
Mayke Harding	PSO
Maike Smit	PSO
Bram Langen	PSO

Partner organisations

Name	Organisation
Joyce Chavarika	Connect Zimbabwe
Regis Munyaradzi Mtutu	Padare Men's Forum on Gender Zimbabwe
Tapiwa Manyati	Padare Men's Forum on Gender Zimbabwe
Moses Nyangombe	Padare Men's Forum on Gender Zimbabwe
Eddington Mhonda	Padare Men's Forum on Gender Zimbabwe
Astonishment Mapurisa	Matthew Ruskie Children's home Zimbabwe
Joshua Nyampimbi	Nhimbe Trust Zimbabwe
Kasirayi Hweta	The Loving Hand Zimbabwe
Darlington Changora	Zvishavane Aids Caring Trust Zimbabwe
Kidzai Dhongo	Zvishavane Aids Caring Trust Zimbabwe
Andrew Moyse	Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe
Abel Chikomo	Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe
Wedzerai Chiyoka	VSO Zimbabwe
Obrian Nyamucherera	VSO Zimbabwe
Hebron Mwakalinga	Business Care Services Tanzania
Emmanuel Kwiligwa	Trace Tanzania
Paul Bottelberge	Trace Tanzania
Rogers V. Cidosa	Trace Tanzania
Elisa Mandara	Trace Tanzania
Daud R.N. Kweba	Trace Tanzania
Simanga Sithebe	Trace Tanzania
Octavian Mushi	Trace Tanzania
Marian Muller	Mehata Tanzania
Mary Ringo	Mehata Tanzania
Raymond A. Kimaro	Kilimanjaro Native Co-operative Union Tanzania
Amen Mtui	Kilimanjaro Native Co-operative Union Tanzania
E.M. Kessi	Kilimanjaro Christian Medical College Tanzania
Marycelina H. Msuya	Kilimanjaro Christian Medical College Tanzania
Lucky Yona	Kilimanjaro Christian Medical College Tanzania
Jennifer Seif,	Fair Trade in Tourism SA

Annex 3 List of participants to the Exchange Event

Name	Organisation
Joyce Chavarika	Matthew Rusike Children's Homev /
Lorentz Forsberg	Connect, Zimbabwe
Mayke Harding	Swedish Mission Council
Vic Klabbers	PSO
Christian Kuijstermans	The Network University
Bram Langen	NiZA
Arjan Luijter	PSO
Anneke van der Meij	ZOA Vluchtelingen zorg
Gabriella Oakley	Cordaid
Paul van Oers	BOND, United Kingdom
Willie Rückert	Nederlands Rode Kruis
Annemarie Sweeris	MCNV
Marcella Tam	Pax Christi
Christine Wipfler	PSO
Betty van de Veer	Agriterra
Deem Vermeulen	ZGG
Suzanne Olivier	IICD
Ronald Visser	Strohalm
Sibrenne Wagenaar	VSO-Raisa, Zuid Afrika
Catharine van der Wees	PSO
Hamisi Mwango	HIVOS
	TRACE, Tanzania

Annex 4 Suggestions for further reading

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