EGDI
Expert Group on Development Issues

WORKING PAPER 1998:3

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING IN DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION: HOW KNOWLEDGE IS GENERATED AND USED

Kim Forss
Basil Cracknell
Nelly Stromquist

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Authors;

Kim Forss
Basil Cracknell
Nelly Stromquist

Short version

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The Swedish government in 1995 decided to establish an Expert Group on development issues, with the objective of contributing to an increased understanding of development issues in a global context and to increasing the effectiveness of development cooperation policies. The group is expected to initiate studies that have the potential to make a major contribution to development thinking and policy making. During its first meeting the expert group identified three subjects that were to be studied in depth. One of these concerned organisational learning; that is, to what extent and how international development cooperation makes use of past experience to improve performance. The purpose of this study is:

(1) to discuss the extent and significance of organisational learning in development cooperation; that is, to what extent has the development community (project staff and management, aid agencies, research establishments, NGOs, consulting firms and others active in "official development assistance") learnt?;

(2) how does learning take place, what does it mean to learn and which are the organisational features that appear to facilitate and consolidate learning?, and;

(3) which are the factors that form obstacles to learning, or that block the acquisition of new knowledge or that make people and organisations hesitant or reluctant to use the knowledge that they may have?

A team of three researchers was recruited to undertake the study: Dr Kim Forss was the team leader, Dr Basil Cracknell specialised on the case study of the evaluation function, and Professor Nelly Stromquist specialised on the case of gender issues in educational cooperation. The team started working in November 1996, and presented its report in June 1997.

Why organisational learning?

The first issue is to specify exactly why a learning organisation is desirable. Is it for reasons of efficiency, or effectiveness, or for promoting development in the Third World - or globally. Our viewpoint is that all these reasons are relevant, but the last is more relevant than the first two. But organisations often pursue learning in an effort to become more efficient, hence they may at times overlook the even more important need to improve the effectiveness and development relevance of their mission.

Learning in development cooperation is different from that of many other organisations. The sheer geographical spread of most aid agencies means that distances between the centre of experience and work stations are long. The environment changes rapidly. The goals and objectives are at times overlapping and contradictory. Many stakeholders seek influence over the activities because of vested interests or different ambitions. The development community at large may benefit from experiences in other organisations, but the organisations must develop their own solutions to improve learning.

In this report, learning is defined as changes in the way we think about the world, make sense of and store experiences and knowledge. But when we move to organisational learning a conceptual change is proposed; that learning must become manifest in changing behaviour. Although one can assume that there is a learning process of some kind in every organisation, we do look for verifiable evidence that learning has taken place. In summary, let us look at the answers to six practical questions on organisational learning in development cooperation:

1. Do organisations learn?

Yes, the aid agencies learn, but slowly and cautiously. They are concerned not to make any mistakes, and hence much of their learning takes place through the exploitation of old knowledge. In all cases; girls' education, technical cooperation, as well as evaluation, we could identify advances in learning. Knowledge structures were changed and as a result we could see changes in the practice of development cooperation. But the changes were not adequate, particularly not in the fields of girls' education and technical cooperation. They did not learn enough to improve performance as much as is necessary. Also,

the major weakness was not in generating knowledge, but in making the organisations change. Many people knew what to do, or the knowledge was readily accessible in evaluation reports, handbooks and manuals. Still, the organisational response was often hesitant and piecemeal.

2. How do the organisations learn?

The aid agencies mainly learn internally; that is from contacts with people in the organisation, or from each other. Imitation of each other is common. Codified procedures, such as logical framework matrixes, monitoring systems, data banks etc. all play important roles. During interviews people point to the importance of learning from contacts with the partners in developing countries, but in actual practice these contacts appear to be rather limited. Such contacts are a potentially rich source of learning, but one that is severely underutilised.

In the balance of sticks and carrots to induce change in organisations, it would appear that the stick is most commonly used. It is mainly through the exercise of power at the board level that some of the "owners" can affect wide spread change in organisational practices. The member countries of the UN and the World Bank have acted forcefully to initiate change in the delivery of technical cooperation, and in promoting evaluation. It is often the parliaments that have forced the development community to pay more interest to the role of women in development, for example as in Sweden by adding gender equality as a specific objective of development assistance. The question is if external pressure is a necessary and sufficient cause of organisational learning?

3. How is knowledge shared?

Knowledge travels rapidly within and between the aid agencies, often between the actors that are like-minded. Many important communication channels appear to be informal, although formalised structures and systems are rapidly becoming more prevalent with the spread of information technology. Knowledge centres have been formed in many organisations, and these have important roles to play, particularly in respect of cross-cutting issues and other types of meta-competences; that is, the ability to address problems at the policy and strategy level. There is a great interest in learning from "best practices", but there seems to be a general reluctance to learn from mistakes - indeed, even to talk about and analyse mistakes in depth. Many obstacles to learning are similar in the case studies. Among the most important we find that the building blocks of the organisational structure make the diffusion of knowledge on cross-cutting, general issues hard. Professionalism develops around core competences such as infrastructural lending, regional and country economics et cetera.

4. How is knowledge made available for future use?

Many organisations are rapidly developing computer based knowledge management systems, indeed, they tend to take a rather broad view of knowledge management as a field. The organisations that are exposed to stronger competition appear to be more sensitised to take the lead in this field (for example the World bank and UNDP). Agencies that work in a more supportive domestic setting tend to lag behind. However, much depends on the quality of the information that goes into these systems. It is vitally important to keep the link between the information and the people who supplied it. In fact, successful databases seem to build as much on putting people in contact with each other as on providing bits and pieces of information.

5. In what ways does knowledge lead to holistic approaches to development?

There are no guarantees that increases in knowledge will lead to holistic thinking. In fact, many times it appears as if significant advances are made in reductionist - simplifying - approaches to aid generally and technical cooperation specifically. We have found that agencies are stronger at generating single-loop learning; that is, the type of learning that gradually reinforces standard technical competences. The lack of access to external sources of competence is an important causal factor that impedes double-loop learning.

6. How is knowledge used?

Many simple aspects of work affect learning negatively. Time is often mentioned as the most important constraint, both for learning per se and for the application of learning. Making new ideas and approaches work takes more time than sticking to old practices, and the benefits are uncertain and long-term. Exploitation of existing knowledge is a more common approach to learning than is exploration for new knowledge. However, job performance is evaluated on other factors than successful outcome of development cooperation. Thus, the basic incentive structures for the application of new ideas in order to deliver better, more effective assistance are largely absent. There are also political constraints on learning. Often the actors appear to know what is the right thing to do, and may even want to do it, but still they do not follow the desirable course of action. Not only is there a lack of incentives to apply the right knowledge, but there appear at times to be strong, hidden disincentives for doing so. These are not always easy to identify, and appear to be of discomfort and embarrassment to the agencies.

Recommendations

Management in aid agencies needs to take a holistic view of the learning process; that is, view it as a process which builds on knowledge acquisition, distribution, analysis and storage (organisational memory). Learning is integrated in all aspects of management, and the study has made it clear that there are no aspects of structure, processes or organisational culture that do not also have an effect on the propensities for organisational learning. In order to improve learning, we would like to emphasise the following:

Learning must be developed in partnership. Learning is not primarily an internal and domestic affair. Learning must permeate the relationship between the partners in development, and it should be an integral instrument in creating effective, relevant and sustainable results of cooperation.

Bridge the gap between individual and organisational learning. Individual human learning can be strengthened by incentives that support the acquisition of knowledge, that encourage sharing of knowledge, and which recognise and reward those who put knowledge to use.

Develop structures conducive to learning. The most important structural issues that affect learning are the design of units and the division of labour. Our studies indicate that in most cases traditional structures of divisions and departments are rigid. Few organisations have managed to break down such boundaries and make team work the order of the day. Top management should attend to this issue as a priority. The second most important structural issue is decentralisation, but here many agencies are currently undergoing change, and it is necessary to assess how far these processes have gone before the effect on learning can be properly assessed.

Develop processes conducive to learning. Learning is a chain of processes, starting with the acquisition of knowledge, followed by its distribution and use and the establishment of an organisational memory. All four steps are essential, but many learning efforts fail to recognise their interdependence. The balance must be maintained, otherwise investments in one area may simply fail to yield an effect overall. The most common imbalance today is that distribution and memory functions get too much attention, thus risking that the organisations invest in technological systems with only limited usefulness. The most important process issues that affect learning concern the configuration of roles and the scope for generating feedback, It is vital that task teams, or individuals can follow through to see the effects of initiatives and decisions they have been involved in. It is also helpful if they can be engaged in substantive tasks.

Develop a learning culture. In this field, it is specifically important to engage in cultural development; that is, to foster an organisational culture with sufficient variety in visions, ideas and values, and a culture that stimulates and rewards curiosity and the pursuit of new knowledge.

These are examples of structures, processes and cultural issues that can be influenced by management to create better conditions for learning. There are also the direct learning functions, such as staff training centres, information data banks, knowledge management systems, et cetera. These are explained in the report, and need hardly be elaborated here. The main managerial task is to establish a balance between instruments. Some organisations run the risk of pursuing one mode of learning to the neglect of others. But learning is a multifaceted task, and the learning instruments need to be equally multifaceted.

Top management attention to learning is essential The chief executive must assume a visible role as a champion of organisational learning. Rhetoric is not enough, it must be followed by money and other resources, particularly enthusiastic and motivated people. Learning, more than any other function, is a balancing art. Learning is affected by almost every aspect of organisational design, and learning occurs in the space between too much order and too much turbulence in the organisational system. Thus management has to pay attention to the balance between, for example:

<u>Continuity and change among personnel.</u> Make sure that there are adequate sources of new experience, and new ways of interpreting old experience. Monitor changes in internal and external staff turnover. Develop targets, such as for example having an annual external personnel turnover of 5%. Keep records of progress.

<u>Exploitation of old knowledge and exploration of new.</u> Develop budgets for knowledge management. Assess cost-effectiveness and introduce markets for selected aspects of knowledge. Use assessments of competence bases to identify areas of exploration of new knowledge.

<u>Top-down leadership and bottom-up initiatives.</u> Top leadership is not only a motor of change, but may also be a target of learning. Develop systems to solicit ideas and knowledge from all levels of the organisation. Be prepared to react to initiatives from below. Keep budgets flexible so that resources can be made available to respond to learning ideas.

<u>Technical specialisation and cross-cutting issues.</u> Even though a balance must be maintained, the emphasis at present is on standard technical competences must be supplemented by major efforts at knowledge acquisition in the field of meta-competences.

<u>Stable boundaries versus flexible teamwork.</u> People need recognisable structures and patterns in organisations, but the task may require flexibility and rapid adjustment. Emphasise flexibility and use other means to help employees cope with a messy organisational structure.

<u>Informal versus formal processes.</u> Informal processes in learning are important and must be supported, but they often leave it up to chance whether learning takes place or not. The informal processes are not adequate in themselves, but must be supplemented with stringent follow-up, targets and indicators of performance.

The difficult thing is how the balance should be struck in any particular case. Our research leads us to think that there is an imbalance towards the left hand side of each of the dichotomies mentioned above; that is, we found too much continuity, too much exploitation of old knowledge, too much top-down leadership, too much technical specialisation, too much stable (rigid) boundaries, coupled to a reliance on informal processes. There seems to be a need to tilt the balance in favour of flexibility, change, bottom-up initiatives, cross-cutting competences and more formalised processes of follow-up and learning.

1.1 Background.

Do we learn enough from experience in development cooperation? That question has been asked repeatedly and with increasing urgency over the last few years. Perhaps the Cassen Report (1986) was the first to emphasise the importance of learning. Although the report came to the conclusion that aid generally works, it mentions two major shortcomings; that donors mix selfish commercial and political objectives with the development objectives, and that all fail to learn from experience.

Robert Cassen and his colleagues wrote at a time when the subject of organisational learning was still in its infancy. Argyris and Schön (1978) had recently published their influential work on organisational learning. Both bilateral and multilateral aid agencies rose to the challenge and initiated studies of learning, which in general pointed to serious short-comings (RRV, 1989; Samset, 1991; UNDP, 1994). But the question remains: Is there really a learning problem? Is it true that aid agencies fail to learn from experience? (Note that the statement in the Cassen report really has the form of a hypothesis, but it is often interpreted as a fact). Why do they need to learn (more than they do)? Which are the issues to consider, and what are the obstacles to the design of effective learning organisations? Is it true that improved learning would immediately improve effectiveness?

But is it correct that development cooperation has not learned from experience? Since its inception in the late 1940s, it has changed considerably. Is not that evidence enough of learning? The volumes of aid have increased remarkably and then declined again, almost equally remarkably. The number of agencies has proliferated, both at the bilateral and multilateral level. The number and type of "recipients" has changed considerably. Those that were major targets of aid 20 to 25 years ago often receive but scant attention today, and new countries have emerged as major recipients.

The type of aid has also changed. Projects have been in and out of fashion as vehicles for the delivery of inputs. Today people speak more of programmes and frameworks, rather than projects as such, but in some cases projects are in fashion again because they are more amenable to planning and evaluation. Aid is also being granted for new purposes; such as peace-keeping and various forms of emergency assistance. Capacity-building and institutional development have become keywords, substituting and possibly supplementing, notions like integrated rural development, balance of payments support, and strategic development planning. More aid is targeted to address gender issues, environmental deterioration, and abuses of human rights. Democratic governance has emerged as a major goal for most aid agencies during the 1990s.

The point is that the theory and practice of development cooperation has changed, and is changing dramatically. But are the changes driven by increased knowledge and accumulated experience? Are the actors primarily reacting to external changes as well as they can, or are they taking a more active role in shaping the nature of development cooperation? Does learning help the actors to keep abreast with a complex and chaotic world?

First of all, let us note that the practice of development cooperation probably is one of the most complex activities undertaken. It takes place amidst rapidly changing and radically unpredictable social events, involving many actors with conflicting and competing interests and ambitions, under intense and often hostile public scrutiny. There is no "market" for the product and hence the feedback is far from clear cut. There is no price system that signals whether the "product" is in demand or not. The conditions in development assistance resemble those described in the sciences of complexity (Kauffman, 1995; Kelly, 1994).

Naturally, complexity arises in many other human organisations. Technology- intensive firms are often said to be in complex environments, and there is a vast body of management literature which attempts to

probe the best organisational forms under such conditions (Stacey, 1996). But our point is that development cooperation is at least as complex as any of those other situations, not least because of uncertainty about goals and objectives, the uncertainty of feedback mechanisms, and the high transaction costs to implement organised action. Note that development cooperation does not take place wholly within any one organisation, but in an arena which brings together many different actors - thus transaction costs generally tend to be high.

Second, the actors in development cooperation are mostly part of a national administrative environment, or in the case of the multilateral institutions, moulded on the bureaucratic form of organisation. They are largely designed as stable hierarchies, primarily built to operate effectively under conditions of gradual change, reasonable certainty and a benevolent environment. They were seldom explicitly designed to deal with turbulence and chaos. Still, the organisational literature is quite unanimous in stating that rapidly changing, complex and turbulent environments require other forms of organisation than do stable and predictable environments. At a very general level, there would seem to be a mismatch between the task of development cooperation, and the organisations in the donor countries who are the main actors.

Environmental turbulence means that the level of uncertainty in the performance of tasks is quite high. So, everything else being equal, we would think that the need for additional knowledge is always very high. Decision-makers in aid have a constant need for more information, and hence there would often be a feeling that one has not learnt enough - that part of the gap in knowledge occurs because of a failure to learn. Decisions are taken under uncertainty everywhere, but probably more so in aid management than in most other situations.

But is additional knowledge the answer to the problem? Can one transform uncertain situations to situations of decision-making under certainty? The quest for learning could be elusive. However much the actors in development cooperation learn, they will never know enough. The number of unanswered questions is increasing faster than the knowledge at hand. Hence, it would always seem desirable to learn more - which would also be correct. But the quest for more knowledge does not rise out of a lack of learning - but as a natural consequence of initially rather high levels of learning.

In sum, there is a lot of talk about learning - and the failure to learn - in the world of development cooperation. There are good reasons; learning needs are high under conditions of turbulence, and often the aid agencies would a priori not have the structure, working processes and cultures, that are most conducive to learning. But we could also hypothesise that the significant changes we have seen in the practice of development cooperation also result from learning, they are not only reactions to trends or crisis situations. Hence there is a basic skill in generating knowledge and putting it to use, but where is that skill located and how does it work?

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is threefold;

(1) to discuss the extent and significance of organisational learning in development cooperation; that is, to what extent has the development community (project staff and management, aid agencies, research establishments, NGOs, consulting firms and others active in "official development assistance") learnt?;

(2) how does learning take place, what does it mean to learn and which are the organisational features that appear to facilitate and consolidate learning?, and;

(3) which are the factors that form obstacles to learning, or that block the acquisition of new knowledge or that make people and organisations hesitant or reluctant to use the knowledge that they may have?

The approach to learning is wide, as we are attempting both to find out whether learning occurs or not, and to explain how learning happens - or why it does not happen. We are concentrating on the aid agencies and their networks of contacts, we are not analysing learning in the organisations in the Third World that these cooperate with. We are not undertaking a full study of aid management, but concentrate on managerial aspects that are obviously related to learning.

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1.3 Methods of studying learning.

The study was initiated by the Expert Group on Development Issues which has been convened by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Stockholm. The Expert Group in turn created a reference group consisting of James Adams (Director for East Africa, the World Bank), Anne-Marie Fallenius (Head of the Department for Evaluation and Internal Audit at Sida) and Stefan Molund (Senior Programme Officer at the same department). Following a tendering process our team, consisting of Dr. Kim Forss, Dr. Basil Cracknell and Professor Nelly Stromquist, was appointed to carry out the study.

We cannot claim to be detached from, or independent in relation to the subject of development cooperation. We have all spent most of our lives working with development cooperation in different forms. We have approached the task with a basic commitment to the effectiveness of development cooperation. But effectiveness for us means not only a well-trimmed bureaucracy. We see the task of the actors in development cooperation as one of working for a better world, and to develop competence and intelligence around that task. But with this bias in mind, we should also mention that we are not necessarily biased in favour of large organisations, or in favour of particular institutional mandates. If anything, we may have a bias in being rather impatient about the shortcomings of the development community in interacting with other stakeholders, with NGOs, and with the partners in the Third World.

We started working in November 1996, and our draft report was completed in April 1997. The first part of the task, to review the literature on learning and bring the forefront of knowledge to the attention of policy-makers in the form of an essay, was completed in January 1997. The case studies and the preparation of the final report followed from January to May 1997. The report has been discussed with the reference group before being finalised. We have benefited from their comments as well as from comments and viewpoints of many others we have met during the process. The responsibility for any remaining errors or omissions is ours.

Let us now turn to how the study has been conducted. The first part of the study consisted of four steps; (1) tracing the relevant literature in research libraries, (2) contacts with consultancy firms in the field and a selection of reports from organisations that have developed learning strategies, (3) tracing ideas in ongoing research projects, where discussion groups on the Internet have played an important role, and (4) compiling an easily readable but theoretically sound essay on learning in aid administration. In the second part, we turned to empirical evidence of how, why, and if, learning takes place in practice. This took the form of longitudinal studies in three areas:

The topic of girls education is interesting as an example of fairly rapid change; that is, where new knowledge is generated and applied in development cooperation. Since the early 1980s, much has been written on women and education, and the performance of girls in school more specifically. Many large educational programs today hold components that try to promote girls education, and to find and combat the social structures that force girls out of the educational system. At a first glance, this would seem to be a case of rather successful learning, where a problem receives attention, where the media, UN conferences and specific agencies (UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA) play a lead role. But it also raises questions concerning the knowledge status, and under what conditions agencies seek and attain low status knowledge (feminist theory as perceived by men).

The topic of technical cooperation illustrates a different learning arena. Here too, a number of studies have pointed towards problems in the traditional conduct of technical cooperation, starting with the Cassen Report, via the Nordic study of Technical Assistance, and onwards to the UNDP study "Rethinking Technical Assistance". During the past 15 years, there has been much thinking on the constraints of traditional modes of technical assistance, and the concept itself has undergone considerable change. But, the impact of the conceptual and theoretical development could be questioned. A priori, this seems to be an area where learning has taken place, but where the new insights fail to change existing practice.

Finally, the issue of how to organise an evaluation function would reflect on the administration itself, and discuss to what extent aid agencies are designed to perform a task effectively as opposed to being constrained by bureaucratic inertia. Contrary to the two previous studies, there has not been much theoretical attention to the organisation of an evaluation system, and consequently whatever practice may be observed rests on other bases. A priori, we would expect that external pressures play a large role,

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and thus issues of legitimation can be expected to play an important role in this case study - both as a force for learning and as an impediment to real learning.

In all, the three case studies supplement each other, and have lead us to seek different patterns of explanation in each, but they also illustrate much of the diversity in development cooperation. Each one of us undertook one case study; Nelly Stromquist the one on girls' education, Basil Cracknell the one on the organisation of an evaluation function, and Kim Forss the one on technical cooperation. The case studies are based on interviews with personnel in development agencies, analysis of numerous written materials (policy statements, project descriptions, annual reports, country strategies) produced by the agencies, their consultants, and project partners, and observations of activities in three selected projects. Interviews were chosen so that they covered a variety of roles and responsibilities in the structure of the agencies and triangulated with those of peers, report findings, and observations in the field, to ensure reliability and validity.

Which are then the major threats to reliability and validity? First of all, even though we have used much written material, our confrontations with practice are fairly limited. In particular the case study of technical cooperation suffers from not building on direct observations of field activities. We might have revealed structures, processes and cultures that affect learning, but we have to acknowledge that there are many parts of the operations we have no knowledge of.

Second, in respect of learning itself, we are almost totally confined to assessing what people told us and what we could find in the written material, as well as the practice we observed. But there is also the tacit knowledge - the things you know but do not talk about, or that are implicit. We suspect that tacit knowledge plays a major role in determining why things are done or not done, but it lies in the nature of the phenomenon that you do not get a grasp of tacit knowledge structures through short interviews or case studies of some weeks duration.

Organisational learning is a subject that has caught the fancy of managers, politicians, consultants and researchers. Firms in competitive environments seek to improve learning, but many other organisations also strive to improve performance through learning. In the public sphere, organisations have to learn in order to satisfy the demands that citizens put on them (Leeuw, et al; 1996). Organisational learning is the focus of this study. But we work on the assumption that it is, after all, individual human beings who learn (or fail to learn). An organisational structure may encourage and help learning, provide incentives for learning - but it may also be an impediment to learning. In this section we will explore the elements of the learning process and aspects of organisation that have an impact on learning. The framework presented here will later be used when we turn to the case studies.

2.1 Elements of the organisational learning process

In an effort to gather a more complete understanding of organisational learning, Huber (1990) proposed a distinction between four processes that are integrally linked to organisational learning; (1) knowledge acquisition, (2) information distribution, (3) information interpretation, and (4) organisational memory. These are useful distinctions for a closer look at processes that sustain learning in organisations. They focus on practical things that can be done to develop and sustain higher levels of organisational learning.

(1) Knowledge acquisition is the process by which knowledge is obtained. Many formal organisational activities in an aid agency are intended to acquire information or knowledge. Examples are country studies, policy research, development of working procedures, new tools for thinking, performance reviews, and analysis of results. Much informal behaviour is also directed to obtaining information or knowledge, for example, reading professional journals, or listening to the coffee break news.

Organisations do not begin their lives with clean slates. The individuals that create the new organisation have knowledge about the initial environment, and ideas about working processes that will be used to carry out the creator's intention. More generally, organisations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined in the prevailing rationalised concepts of organisational work and institutionalised in society (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). After their birth, organisations acquire some of their knowledge through direct experience. Sometimes this learning is a result of intentional, systematic efforts. Much more frequently it is acquired unintentionally and unsystematically.

Organisations commonly learn about the strategies, administrative practices, and especially technologies (Czepiel, 1975; Sahal, 1982) of other organisations. Borrowing from other organisations is one form of organisational learning. Manufacturers such as automobile and computer companies have for years routinely examined in detail their competitors' products as they appear in the marketplace (Eells and Nehemiks, 1984). Aid agencies have their fora for an exchange of experience, and actually work towards streamlining their methods and procedures in many fields.

Finally, organisations acquire knowledge by searching, for example through scanning, focused search or performance monitoring. Scanning usually refers to the relatively wide-ranging sensing of the organisation's external environment. Focused search occurs when the organisation actively searches in a narrow segment of the internal or external environment.

(2) Many organisational members that serve as knowledge acquirers also have, as part of their role, sharing what they have acquired as one of their duties. Information distribution is a determinant of both the occurrence and breadth of organisational learning. People at work develop new information by piecing together items of information that they obtain from others. Huber (1990) notes that organisations often do not know how much they know, and consequently design for information distribution leads to more broadly based organisational learning. Except for their systems that routinely index and store hard information,

organisations tend to have only weak systems for finding where a certain item of information is known to the organisation. But when information is widely distributed in an organisation, so that more and more varied sources for it exist, retrieval efforts are more likely to succeed and individuals and units are more likely to be able to learn.

Cohen and Levinthal (1990) show that the ability of an organisation to recognise the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it, is critical to its innovative capacities. This can be labelled the organisation's absorptive capacity, which is largely a function of the organisation's prior knowledge. To develop an effective absorptive capacity, whether it be for general knowledge or problem-solving skills, it is insufficient merely to expose an individual briefly to the relevant prior knowledge. Intensity of effort is critical. Lindsay and Norman (1977) noted that the more deeply the material is processed, the more effort is used, the more processing makes use of associations between the items to be learned and knowledge already in the memory - the better will the later retrieval be. Two related ideas are implicit in the notion that the ability to assimilate information is a function of the richness of the pre-existing knowledge structure; learning is cumulative, and learning is related to what you already know.

An organisation's absorptive capacity is not, however, simply the sum of the absorptive capacities of its employees, and it is therefore useful to consider what aspects of absorptive acapcity are distinctly organisational. Absorptive capacity refers not only to the acquisition or assimilation of information, but also to the organisation's ability to exploit it. Therefore, an organisation's absorptive capacity does not simply depend on the organisation's direct interface with the external environment. It also depends on transfers of knowledge across and within subunits that may be quite removed from the original point of entry. To understand the sources of an organisation's absorptive capacity, we would thus have to focus on the structure of communication between the external environment and the organisation as well as among subunits of the organisation, and also on the character and distribution of expertise within the organisation.

(3) Interpreting information from different subunits leads not only to new information but also to new understanding. This fact highlights the role of information distribution as a precursor to interpretation. Daft and Weick (1984) define interpretation as "the process through which information is given meaning", and also as "the process of translating events and developing shared understandings and conceptual schemes". In other words, should organisational learning be defined in terms of the commonality of the interpretation, or should it be defined in terms of the variety of interpretations?

It seems reasonable to conclude that more learning has occurred when more and more varied interpretations have been developed, because such development changes the range of the organisation's potential behaviours. It also seems reasonable to conclude that more learning has occurred when more of the members understand the nature of various interpretations held by others. For example, more complete understanding can either enhance cooperation and thus increase the range of potential behaviours, or can inhibit cooperation and thus decrease the range of potential behaviours. In either case, more complete understanding leads to a change in the range of potential behaviour.

(4) Turning now to memory, everyday experience and some research make clear that the human components of organisational memories are often less than satisfactory. Considering the many factors that contribute to inaccurate learning and incomplete recall this is not surprising. The problem of poor organisational memory is, however, much more complex than people's poor memory might suggest. Everyday observations make clear that personnel turnover creates great loss for the human components of an organisation's memory, that non anticipation of future needs for certain information causes great amounts of information not to be stored, and that people with information needs do not know what knowledge others possess. It follows that variables likely to influence the ongoing effectiveness of organisational memory include membership attrition, information distribution and organisational interpretation of information, the norms and methods for storing information, and the methods for locating and retrieving stored information. Organisations store a great deal of "hard" information on a routine basis, sometimes for operating reasons and sometimes to satisfy the reporting requirements of other units. A great deal of knowledge about how to do things is stored in the form of standard operating procedures, routines, and scripts, and as Mintzberg (1985) indicates, managers routinely acquire and store soft information as well.

What is not well understood, is the extent to which non routine information is deliberately stored to be used as a basis for future decisions. This behaviour could involve anticipating future needs for information. What variables determine such behaviour? Several possibilities come to mind: the degree to which the future needs are predictable; the scope of future needs that can be envisioned; the commitment to the well-being of the organisation; and the accessibility and utility of the channels and mechanisms of storage.

2.2 The links from organisation to learning

In the following, we distinguish between aspects that largely relate to the structure of the organisation, those that relate to its processes and those that relate to culture. The latter we view as mental phenomena, values and attitudes. In processes we include most of the dynamic aspects of work, such as role configuration, decision-making, rules and procedures. Structural phenomena are those that relate to the division of tasks, the locus of power, and the configuration of units and entities. We treat all three aspects, structure, process and culture, as subjects of organisational design.

Structural factors relating to learning

Organisational design carries consequences for most, if not all, activities. One of the most basic dimensions of organisational structure is the degree to which it is centralised. There is widespread consensus in the organisational literature that, in general, high centralisation is not particularly favourable for learning. It has been observed that whereas only modest, incremental changes are likely in centralised organisations, decentralised structures create more revolutionary changes or innovations (Cohn and Turyn, 1984; Kanter 1988). The rationale for the wave of decentralisation that has swept over most countries in the recent decade has been influences, at least in part, by the need to move decision-making authority down to the lowest level possible - especially to where people in the organisation are in frequent contact with the external environment. The main goal has been to make organisations more service oriented, through closer contact with customers, clients and citizens.

Another important aspect of structure which is relevant to learning is the extent to which it allows for contact and interaction across jobs, professions, teams and subunits. If the structure is rigid, various departments are segmented and largely confined to themselves, and most of the communication follows formal channels: exchange of ideas and skills across formal boundaries is made difficult. If, in addition, the structure is materialised through physical division of buildings and offices, cross-unit and cross-functional learning is likely to be even more strongly inhibited. Connections across units and liaison-type assignments can be used to counteract the negative ramifications of structure. Some organisations choose a looser type of structure by applying principles of project work and matrix structures where personnel from different units are blended together to solve specific tasks in cooperation. Organisational design also involves making choices as to the number of subunits and the size of each of these. Small units are generally considered to be more favourable to learning and innovation than large units (Quinn, 1985; Forss, 1996). However, there is a downward limit to size. If units are too small, they cannot encompass all the functions and specialities needed to generate the professional and creative cross-fertilization that promotes learning.

Turning to teams, the structure of groups may inhibit exchange of knowledge and skills between members of a team. According to Kanter (1988) the need for interactive learning makes teams vulnerable to member turnover, since a certain level of continuity is necessary to produce innovation. So, even though personnel turnover largely has positive consequences for learning, there are also drawbacks. It is yet another paradox, and this is one area where practical management has to tread a balance.

Process related aspects of learning

The way work is organised is among the most important determinants of competence development. Central aspects of the work system include how jobs are designed and the extent to which they are being developed, the amount of bureaucratic control routines and decision making, the mobility across jobs and organisational units, and the extent to which development of multi-skills is encouraged. A major choice

which has to be made is that between designing narrow versus broad jobs. Narrow job descriptions are very specialised and founded on a belief that when human beings limit themselves to repeatedly solving a small range of tasks, they can be brought to the peak of their potential performance. These Tayloristic management principles are based on the assumption that high levels of skills are more easily developed in respect of a very specialised task, and a specialised task gives rise to economies of scale in the organisation.

Although they may be applicable to simple manufacturing contexts, these principles have little or no value in organisations characterised by higher complexity. Tasks are no longer easily divided into independent small elements. The alternative is consequently to design jobs covering a wide range of tasks that provide the individual with an opportunity to shift between dissimilar tasks, and there create variety in the daily work. This was pointed out early by Thorsrud and Emery (1970) who formulated a set of psychological job requirements that should be met in order to equip employees with human dignity, challenges, responsibility, and learning opportunities, which in turn would lead to better performance. Kanter (1983) argues that learning is facilitated when jobs are defined broadly rather than narrowly, when people have a range of skills to use and tasks to perform to give them a view of the whole organisation, and when assignments focus on results to be achieved rather than rules or procedures to be followed. Moreover, in innovation-generating firms a substantial proportion of problem-solvers can be found in "libero position", that is, floating around freely in the organisation. Hence, existence of manpower "slack" in the organisation is likely to create learning and innovation, but this is of course inconsistent with short-run notions of efficiency.

How jobs are designed is one thing, but another is the scope of competences that organisations aim at developing amongst their employees. When jobs are predominantly narrowly defined and the organisation practices a one-to-one relationship between jobs and competences, the knowledge and skills will be limited in scope (although not necessarily in depth). The organisation employs individuals who function well within strictly confined jobs, but who possess virtually no potential for shifting jobs or changing the work structure. Hence work systems characterised by rigid and heavily compartmentalised job design and absence of job development generate employees who may be high-performing here and now, but who may be degraded to low performance in the future because no flexibility is built into their individual stock of competence.

The amount of bureaucratic decision-making is another aspect of work processes that has an impact on learning. The more decisions are made on the basis of strict rules, routines, and procedures, the less learning and innovation are likely to occur. Such decision-making easily leads to a reliance upon the past and its solutions rather than on meeting new challenges which require altered behaviour. Instead of finding the best possible solutions to practical problems, people become preoccupied with finding solutions that fit existing instructions and routines as tightly as possible.

A related effect then is that employees concentrate much of their effort on doing things correctly (in the bureaucratic sense) instead of doing them as effectively as possible under the circumstances. Hence, risk averse behaviour is encouraged and rewarded. In such situations there is no wonder that the amount of innovation and learning remains modest, as that is in accordance with the rationality of a bureaucratic work system. A general insight is that the more jobs are formalised, with detailed outlines of work tasks, and specific duties, the less innovation is normally generated, whilst low formalisation is accompanied by more innovativeness (Mintzberg, 1994).

In the new institutional economics, it is quite common to refer to incentives for various independent variables that affect the behaviour of individual agents (Powell and Dimaggio, 1991). We use the term in a more strictly operational sense. Incentive systems are such systems that are installed to influence human behaviour in such directions that prefixed objectives on the organisational level can be obtained, regardless of whether these are profitability, growth, consolidation or just survival. The aim of incentive systems is to determine the rationality of individual behaviour patterns. However, it is an intricate process to design such systems, not least because they always produce some unintended consequences that may shatter the individual rationality context that was sought after.

The literature on incentives has been preoccupied with the relationship between pecuniary and psychological rewards on the one hand and work performance on the other. From our point of view, there are good reasons to include the effects that incentives have on the mobility, exchange, and utilisation of competences. Even though work performance, and organisational performance are ultimate standards of success, those are inextricably linked to the learning - and application of learning - by individuals. Moreover, there are tradeoffs between incentives that primarily promote job performance directly and incentives that stimulate learning.

Turning to incentives directly related to learning, all learners are dependent on some sort of feedback or information about the results in order to be able to assess their own learning. Likewise, it has been demonstrated that feedback received during the learning process increases the amount of learning. The sooner the feedback, the greater its effect. Lack of feedback constitutes an important barrier to individual learning. According to Hall and Fukami (1979) feedback aids learning by clarifying expectations and learning goals, helping to direct and shape effort by correcting mistakes, helping to define and evaluate performance, and serving as an intrinsic reward for good performance.

One of the major difficulties with incentive systems in development cooperation is that the partners in cooperation belong to organisations with widely differing incentive systems, and there is - obviously - no comprehensive incentive system that could be designed for the arena in which the action takes place; that is, the network of cooperating organisations. Instead, we are likely to find conflicting incentive systems that impede the scope for mutual learning.

Culturally related aspects of learning

It is a fairly recent discovery that organisations possess an inner life that can be described as culture. It has not been subject to research for more than 10 to 15 years, following pioneering work by Geert Hofstede (1980), Deal and Kennedy (1982), Peters and Waterman (1982), and André Laurent (1982). However, the term as such caught on, and has led to much research but even more popular and fashionable writing. Our preference is to view culture as a set of values and attitudes that are shared in the organisation.

At the same time as the culture structures learning in organisations, it is itself a repository of past learning and a means through which this learning as well as new knowledge are communicated between individual employees (Frost, et.al., 1991; Sackman, 1991). Language plays a crucial role in all relations, and, in our context, especially language which is specific to an organisation. The language of one organisation can deviate from the language of other organisations. For example, a reasonable hypothesis would be that there are substantial dissimilarities in the languages of firms which are strongly oriented toward creating learning and innovation and those that are not. A language in which there is a high frequency of words like "challenges", "competence", "creativity", "novel ideas", is likely to reflect an innovation centred organisation.

Many firms use language in the form of slogans to pinpoint the need for learning. Illustrations are expressions like "Don't ask me - try it out", "It's better to ask for forgiveness than permission", "Trying and failing are a virtue". Naturally, using a slogan is not the same as following it in practice, but at times there may be a connection. Yet the fact remains that language is a crucial element in communication, and it acts as a means of focusing on what is regarded as important. An analysis of the language used in an organisation can reveal much about its culture, and uncover "attention" biases in organisations (Normann, 1985). Too many organisations are dominated by a poor figure oriented language, focusing on budgets, profit-and-loss performance and procedures - not to mention those who refight the Second World War in the vocabulary used to plan and manage.

Ironically, the current competence in a firm may well be a significant barrier to changes in knowledge structures. Granted that there is a learning need, and that people already possess knowledge structures, it is painful to change these. The less well developed the knowledge structures are, the more will learning have to occur through accommodation, and the more "painful" will learning be. Existing competence can inhibit learning in several different ways. First, the fact that knowledge and skills are no longer relevant will in itself be an obstacle to new learning. Second, as shown by Levitt and March (1988) an individual or a firm may end up in a "competence trap". In short, past success may put a limit on innovativeness, and blind an organisation to changes necessary for adjustment. Employees who feel they are doing pretty well, will often not admit any need to learn new skills - or change into ways where they do not know how good they will be. Third, demonstration of skilful action may in certain instances actually produce incompetence. The reason is that skilled performance may come to occur more or less automatically. It

becomes taken for granted. Thus it is largely based upon the absense of a sense of awareness which, paradoxically inhibits learning.

Competences share one property with muscles - they are strengthened and maintained when activated, and shrink when not in use. People must have an opportunity to practice what is learned, otherwise they lose knowledge and skills. Opportunities for practice are often missing in reality. As pointed out by Senge (1990) the almost total absence of meaningful practice is probably the predominant factor that keeps most management teams from being effective learning units. In fact, the process whereby such teams learn is through continual movement between practice and performance, again and again. In addition to lack of opportunities to practice their own competences, individual learners may be inhibited by not having the opportunity to observe skilful employees practising their skills.

Learning between people in the organisation, or between those on the network, is often reckoned to be among the most important forms of learning. But the frequency and amount depend on the actual relations between colleagues. There is a wide array of potential barriers, some of which are based on tactical considerations tied to giving away knowledge and skills to others, and some of which are based on the personal chemistry between people. Hall and Fukami (1979) maintain that the most potent source of new learning is the immediate superior and the work group, and that requires a good working relationship between them.

The phenomenon of "group think" is probably the most well-known example of dysfunctional processes in teams (Janis, 1982). This describes how homogeneous thinking develops in a group, often characterised by partial isolation from the environment and cultivating self-confirming attitudes and beliefs. The group then becomes less critical of its performance and own ways of functioning - and less open to new learning. Knowledge that may direct attention to critical aspects of the group and its behaviour is filtered away, being automatically regarded as distorted or false. This tendency to develop a sense of joint exclusiveness and self-righteousness is a risk any work team is exposed to, and this may emerge unless group members (and others) are aware of the danger.

This case study discusses learning on the topic of gender issues in education. At first we discuss the broader issues of gender and education, and then review to what extent agencies have changed over recent years. We proceed to analyse aspects of organisational structures, processes and culture that have an impact on learning. The next step is to look at the acquisition of knowledge, institutional memories, and, finally, to obstacles to the acquisition and use of knowledge. The case is based on interviews in Sida, Norad, the World Bank, UNICEF and UNDP. We have analysed educational programmes in Bangladesh, India and Bolivia.

3.1 Advances in knowledge

Crucial values that have dramatically changed the way we live have always been supported by mass movements. Beliefs about democratic governance and the unethical nature of slavery began in the minds of a few but those few soon grew to become the majority. The condition of women in society has followed a similar trajectory. While gender has received refined conceptualisation in the academic world and has been increasingly supported by current political institutions, one must not lose track of the fact that as a social issue it is still very new in the history of civilisation.

The analysis of gender - more precisely, of the social relations of gender - has called attention to inequalities between men and women in such areas as: access to jobs, property, technology, credit; levels in wages and education, control over one's body, political power and representation; and vulnerability to poverty and violence (Boserup, 1970; Sen and Grown, 1985; Mies, 1984; Molyneux, 1984; Kabeer, 1994, among others). Recent important contributions to the understanding of gender bring out the importance of institutional life in many social groups (family, school, the workplace, government) and how this recreates asymmetrical relations between women and men via the existence of rules, roles, responsibilities, and procedures (Kabeer, 1994).

The presence of gender as a development objective is increasingly salient among development agencies. The insertion of gender as a policy pillar took place as early as 1985 in UNICEF. While gender had been important within Sida for a long time, it was only in 1996 that it became one of its six objectives of international assistance. Notwithstanding the increased salience of gender within the policy objectives of donor agencies, its treatment remains weak for several reasons: (1) there is a reluctance to deal with ideological and cultural sources of gender inequality (Moser, 1989; Jaquette, 1997), (2) the main interlocutor of development assistance continues to be the state even though feminist analyses have amply demonstrated that the state itself is implicated in the domination of women, (3) there is a tendency to keep a distance from women's organisations, particularly feminist groups (Stromquist, 1996), and (4) there is a strong avoidance of dealing with structural obstacles to women's productivity and participation such as: women's lack of property rights, including inheritance of agricultural lands; the existing sexual division of labour; women's limited access to credit and technical cooperation; and men's control over women's bodies through sexual and physical violence, forced motherhood, and limited physical freedom (Kabeer, 1994; Jahan, 1995).

The discourse of donor agencies, however, has become more progressive and terms used within the women's movement, such as "empowerment" and "participation," are routinely used. However, empowerment is often conceptualised as income-generation; strong pressures to address market forces make the concept acquire an economic rather than social transformation emphasis. Participation is limited to the involvement of governments, thus the strongest voice of women - that of women-based NGOs - is often not at the negotiation table in country and sector agreements. In the area of education, most agencies today report a strong interest and concomitant involvement. Typically, however, the agencies have a weak understanding of education since it is often limited to ensuring access of girls to schooling. This tendency results in a failure to examine and subsequently affect the experience and content of schooling for girls and

boys. It results as well in a lack of action on behalf of girls in those countries in which educational statistics indicate parity between girls' and boys' enrolment - the assumption being that there is no problematic situation regarding gender in those countries when gross rates of enrolment are about equal, forgetting the substantial differences between gross and net enrolments, dropout, and completion rates among girls and boys.

Ramachandran (1997), a careful observer of educational projects in Asia seeking to benefit women, notes that social and economic issues that inhibit women's access to these programs are usually recognised in introductory and objective sections of programs, but usually ignored at the program strategy and implementation stages. Gender sensitisation is invariably reduced to a few workshops and activities to screen textbooks. Governments, in principle, provide equal access to schooling for boys and girls. In reality, a number of features - notably, school location and class schedules, the teachers' gender (parents tend not to send older daughters to schools run by male teachers), expenses in securing textbooks and uniforms, lack of latrines - operate to make schools less accessible to girls. In addition, teachers' practices in the classroom and the content of textbooks sustain gender-asymmetrical socio-cultural norms and values. Against this background, it is important to note that governments rarely borrow on regular interest terms for girls' education. They wait to receive grants from bilateral agencies or seek loans on generous concessional terms from IDA or regional development banks when addressing women students.

3.2 Practical changes in educational programs

There is wide consensus that despite current problems in implementation, the "Education For All Declaration" signed at Jomtien in 1990 represented a major watershed in support of education. On the one hand, it broke the monopoly on education held by UNESCO, thus opening the road to action by other UN and multilateral agencies. On the other, it introduced a commitment to much greater levels of educational funding by other agencies. Important shifts can be readily identified. In the case of UNICEF, they have occurred over the last 20 years. By its own account, it has shifted from viewing women as mothers to viewing women as individuals in their own right and as agents of development. UNICEF has also seen it important to promote the concept of the girl child as a way of expanding its work on children. The realisation that children's rights cannot be promoted without at the same time promoting women's rights is said to be a product of previous efforts in the development field. UNICEF realises that the "children themselves are gendered, since the girl child is the woman of tomorrow."

Ironically it was not easy for UNICEF to convince NGOs to recognise the importance of paying attention specifically to the girl child, but this was successfully accomplished in statements produced and agreed upon at the end of the Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995) meetings. According to UNICEF staff members, Jomtien (1990) helped them shift from "We pay for the supplies" to "Why aren't girls in school?" In the past 1.5 years UNICEF has been actively moving into content and process (classroom interaction) issues, as the product of "an internal realisation that we were not doing enough," and external influences coming from its contacts with many NGOs in the field. Also it reports the occurrence of policy shifts from needs (for survival) to human rights (the right of the child).

UNDP also reports great shifts after 1990. In the words of one of its officers, "Prior to Jomtien, our focus on education was in scholarships and higher education. Assistance was given to a fairly small number of people. Jomtien opened our eyes to a large number of people. It became obvious that UNDP resources to education were very small (US$ 50 million for field programming and about US$ 2.5 million for global and regional initiatives). Listed as constraining parameters was that UNDP must work with government and that it has four foci to cover: gender, environment, poverty alleviation, and human rights - which makes attention to gender often compete with other priorities."

Since December 1996 UNDP has taken steps to ensure that 20 percent of its budget goes to gender. This mandate has come as a result of an evaluation of 471 project, which found that only 6.7 percent of all project budgets went to gender objectives. This mandate has been presented to an Inter-Agency Task Force that reports to ECOSOC. Reportedly some of the other agencies expressed reluctance to target the budget so specifically, but in the view of UNDP, "If this is not done, there is no accountability. It is necessary to narrow the gap between intent and impact."

Sida and Norad recognise the importance of targeting girls in education projects. Of special concern for

Norad is the training of women ministry personnel and the strengthening of the interplay between government and NGO provision of educational services (Norad, 1995). Sida's strategies on gender and education cover a wide range, from curriculum development to rehabilitation of schools. At the same time, Sida maintains that "the responsibility for gender equalities lies with national governments" (DESO, 1996; see also Lexow, 1995; Ehrenpreis and Johansson, 1996).

The current World Bank's policy paper on primary education was produced in 1990. It gives priority to issues of educational effectiveness (thus paying attention to curriculum, learning materials, and classroom teaching) and equity for rural children, girls, and poor children. Specifically in the area of girls' education, the World Bank seeks to make schools more accessible, support the recruitment and training of female teachers for at least 50 percent of the classrooms to be constructed, provide incentives and eliminate disincentives for girls' attendance and completion of the primary cycle, and educate parents about the importance of girls' education (World Bank, 1990).

It is evident that gender figures prominently in agencies and that educational policies focusing on gender are also important. Challenges at present include the fact that gender must compete with other issues - environment, human rights, democracy, poverty alleviation - in the design of projects. While there should be substantial complementarity between these issues, the fact that many staff members in these agencies see these issues as mutually exclusive in terms of resources gives reason for concern. The majority of the officers interviewed believe in paying attention to girls' education, but a few are still reluctant to do so. Some argue that an emphasis on gender will produce a lack of ownership by the recipient. Others, in obvious ignorance or disregard of existing global agreements, think that girls' education is a cultural issue that cannot be imposed. Yet others, invoking the issue of quality of education, argue that work on girls' education cannot begin until the major problem - that of improving the overall quality of education involving teachers, curriculum, and infrastructure - has been resolved. This false dichotomy is invoked more frequently than compliance with gender policies would suggest.

Except for the case of UNICEF, girls' education is still seen by donor agencies as essentially a question of access. Therefore, efforts in projects designed to help girls' enrolment consider one or more of the following elements: *the building of new schools, the improvement of old facilities, free education for girls to a certain level, specific incentives to augment female enrolment, measures to have more women in teaching positions, mobilisation of public opinion and community support for allowing girls to attend school.* Less frequently - and much less monitored - are such elements as: *equality of sexes taught through the curriculum, common curriculum for boys and girls, income-generation skills for girls after school hours, strengthening science teaching in girls' schools, revising curriculum of pre- and in-service teacher training programs, the provision of coeducation in social settings that unduly separate the sexes*

Like the development agencies, governments have also learned about the importance of gender. Often, however, the use of progressive language among these agencies ("empowerment", "women in development") surpasses actual implementation. NGO advocates of girls' and women's education observe that, "old-fashioned bureaucrats dismiss gender; new-fashioned bureaucrats use the proper language but do little." During my interviews, only one agency was found to be sensitive enough to the question of education to make the statement that, "We are trying to talk about gender and education, not girls' education. If we are to sustain education, we have to give some substance to it and this means we have to cover the whole spectrum."

There is a trend among agencies to translate gender and education policies into projects with multiple components such as construction, teacher training, curriculum and textbook review, community information campaigns, and girls' scholarships (see Odaga and Heneveld, 1995, for the World Bank). At the same time, there is an overwhelming emphasis in defining problems in girls' education as essentially those concerning access to schooling. Heneveld and Craig (1996), after reviewing 26 World Bank projects in Sub-Saharan Africa to improve primary education, found that most textbook support is for publishing, printing, and distribution of books; only eight projects included plans to train teachers in the use of the new books and "not one project included a reference to the supervision of the books' pedagogical use in the schools," and that while 254 of the projects had components for strengthening pre- or in-service training, only eight included in-school dimensions to the training. None of the 26 projects was found to deal with issues related to school climate (teacher expectations and attitudes toward students, rewards and incentives for students, order and discipline, etc.) (pp. xiv-xvi) - issues that affect directly the lived experience of girls and boys in schools.

3.3 Explaining organisational learning

Structural aspects of learning

At the time the development agencies were visited, most of them were going through a process of restructuring. The only exception was Norad, but even there some shifts were afoot, spurred in part by an increased availability of funds with no concomitant increase in the number of personnel. The structural changes occurring in the agencies were in the direction of giving the organisations a flatter hierarchy, distributing more work across sectors, and entrusting more discretion in the hands of stakeholders. Today, most agencies have structures to call organisational attention to gender issues.

The World Bank established its first gender-related structure in 1987, when a WID unit with three professionals was created (Murphy, 1995). While there were WID coordinators working at each region, it was not until 1990 that full-time slots for WID advisors were created in these regions. Today, the Bank has a central unit that provides technical assistance in the area of gender and another that provides assistance in education. None of its regional desks has staff who have been assigned responsibility to serve as specialists in the intersection of gender and education. What had been the WID unit in previous incarnations at the Bank is now called the Gender Analysis and Policy Group and has been moved to the Research Division of the Bank. This group has a staff of six persons. The Education Group of the Bank comprises 25 people. One of them defines the group as follows, "We are knowledge managers. We find, assess, disseminate, and produce knowledge." This group provides advice on the design and implementation of educational projects. Educational access is a major concern, but it also works on questions of equity, school effectiveness, economics of education, early childhood development, and project design and implementation. In addition, the Bank has educational specialists located in the various regional desks.

An important structure, whose creation derives from previous World Bank work, is the Association for Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), previously named Donors for African Education (DAE). DAE was instrumental in supporting the creation of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), a group comprising current and former women ministers of education and university chancellors in Africa. From all reports, FAWE has been very successful in promoting initiatives to address the education of girls in the region, through both development and research. A staff member of the World Bank who was centrally involved in the creation of DAE indicates that the existence of this group has enabled change agents within the bank to have the legitimacy to ask the operational divisions (which do the cross-cutting work in the Bank) about their activities in girls' education.

Within UNDP, there is a Gender in Development Program (GIDP) comprising three program officers. There is now also a Gender Advisory Committee composed of focal points from each bureau (the geographical desks), divisions (the substantive areas), and gender focal points from each country; it meets once a month. Following important developments in February 1997, the resident representative in each country has been appointed the senior focal point and will be supported by a program officer serving as the (regular) focal point. A UNDP study based on experimentation with focal points in 20 countries found that countries with a strong focal point accomplished much more than those with weak focal points. It found that some focal points had little access to program design and could not make an impact. UNDP decided, in consequence, not only to keep the focal points but to strengthen them. GIDP also fulfils the task of gender training of UNDP staff at headquarters and country offices. This training, begun in June 1966 in collaboration with UNDP's Learning Resource Centre, includes key government and NGO staff.

As noted earlier, gender now has a much higher profile in Sida, having become the sixth goal of Swedish assistance. Paradoxically, its Gender Unit at headquarters has a very small staff and there are no longer WID officers at the country level. On the assumption that Sida's work on gender should be mainstreamed, such specific officers have been eliminated and the work these individuals used to perform has been expanded to cover broader responsibilities such as democracy and human rights. There is little consensus within Sida about the wisdom of this measure. Some staff members, including those at the country level, are convinced the decision was for the best: *"I was the first to get rid of my WID officer. I don't believe in special posts. If you want to mainstream you should not just hire a local program officer to do the job. Every program officer is supposed to do it. Every country strategy should have a section on WID. What we are missing are tools but these are going to be present in the Action Plan for Gender. It will indicate responsibilities of counsellors".*

The opposite view is that the Sida WID officers at the country level served an important catalytic role securing important information on gender developments in the country and within the international donor community operating there. WID officers, according to this view, should have a discretionary fund that they could use to help women-based NGOs. Reportedly, these officers were also instrumental in bringing important innovations addressing girls' education to the attention of the embassy. The local staff working on education and gender at the Swedish embassies in Dhaka and Delhi were found to be very informed of the women's movement in their countries and to have an active network of pertinent contacts and sources.

The experience of Sida with WID officers at the national level was based on officers with low status within the agency, as these people were mostly local consultants, often working on a part-time basis. The current decision to replace the gender consultant with a "social sector" consultant offers limited promise of improvement. According to a gender focal point who had carefully read the "social sector" job description, "As it is now stated, that person may choose to do nothing with gender." At present, each of the Sida units at headquarters is supposed to have a WID focal point, whose charge it is to facilitate the work that is to be shared by all members in that unit. The reality is that the person selected as the focal point usually has to shoulder most of the responsibility in the tasks related to gender, in addition to her (most often it is a she) regular tasks as a program officer. "Focal points" may not be able to create the mainstreaming climate and outcomes that are anticipated.

One observation in regard to the several structures to address the intersection between gender and education is that perhaps the important element is not the structure per se but what a given structure is enabled or knowledgeable to do. In many cases, individuals charged with responsibilities in gender are not given the proper training and resources. There is some indication that having structures close to the institutions being supported increases the degree of understanding of such institutions and generates better support. This is illustrated by UNICEF's claims to be more sensitive to gender on the grounds that its offices are much more decentralised and present in the field, including offices outside the capital city, as in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Tanzania.

In short, the structures at work in development agencies are now in a state of flux. Certain principles are orienting new arrangements, such as having flatter lines of command, greater interaction among sectors, and the creation of multidisciplinary teams. At this moment, it cannot be assessed to what extent the new structures will be gender-sensitive when promoting learning. The creation of learning centres represents an effort to promote explicitly learning activities by all agency members. It does appear that the decision by UNDP to strengthen the role of WID focal points and link them to a more explicit role definition and to rewards, as well as its decision to assign an explicit proportion of the national budgets to gender (20 percent), is likely to ensure accountability in gender learning and action.

Among the changes in motion within the agencies is the creation of flatter structures and more interdisciplinary teams on the assumption that knowledge will thus be shared throughout the organisation. UNDP is actively seeking to create a culture that is less organised by department and less hierarchical. The new culture will be more based on teamwork and reduce the gap between management and staff. To ensure the creation of a new learning culture, UNDP will soon be issuing guidelines on staff evaluation; further, people who have worked in exemplary fashion will be profiled in the training modules. Norad's Quality Surveillance Unit intends to create sanctions for people who do not perform well, noting that effective institutions exercise punishment under certain conditions (see above).

Process related aspects of learning

In this section, we discuss several types of process: those dealing with the creation of a more holistic understanding of development, those concerning the design of sectoral programs and individual projects, new principles affecting gender such as mainstreaming and co-financing, and the existence of tools to facilitate planning and design of gender-sensitive projects and programs. As noted earlier, the World Bank intends to create thematic networks to address some key blocks in the development process. These networks are: Human Development, Finance and Private Sector Development, Environmentally Sustainable Development, and Poverty Reduction and Economic Management. The role of the networks, according to a research officer, will be "knowledge building and sharing across the Bank, the

development of strategies for work on the network theme, the promotion of staff development and evaluation use, and external outreach." Within networks there will be affinity groups, such as gender and education. It seems that girls' education will be addressed primarily by the human resources network. Nobody is particularly in charge of gender in education because the issue is considered mainstreamed.

UNDP is another agency in which considerable change in procedure is in evidence. Managers are now seen as people who have to stimulate people to do new things. Thus, UNDP is also pushing for cross-sectoral work along four broad areas: poverty, democratic governance, sustainability, and gender equality. According to a leading officer, UNDP now has a "greater emphasis on doing things that will have a measurable impact on improving the lives of the poor." According to this UNDP manager, "The gender dimension is definitely part of the new horizon." This agency is currently working on team-based planning and design; it intends to work on gender across sectors.

In the World Bank, procedures for project development involve the submission of the proposed projects to peer review for the design and budget allocation. Authors of these projects are to use guidelines for gender analysis, now available in tool-kit form for several sectors (though there are none for education, see below). To ensure staff compliance with the new strategies, the country directors will conduct more evaluations of individual performance of the technical specialists.

At UNDP there are gender guidelines and training on gender strategies to support effective gender efforts. This knowledge will be supported by a computerised knowledge bank and an Internet network of focal points so that they can keep in touch through e-mail and break their isolation. This agency anticipates that the computerised knowledge networks will be user-friendly, better organised. Reportedly, the new computerised knowledge bank will have a narrative accompanying each project; in the past, only quantitative data was used.

One of the important lessons UNDP has learned regarding its procedures, is that, "Everybody must have a gender competence. This gender competence has to be improved in the organisation and focal points are to serve as catalytic, monitoring agents." A consequence of this realisation is that more gender specialists will be brought into the organisation. UNDP has made a decision to have more than 20 gender advisors in the field; these gender specialists are being hired at mid-professional levels (P-4 levels), a wise decision of incorporating professionals with a certain degree of expertise and experience, who are thus likely to encounter more respect than junior officers.

Procedures for project development on gender and education at UNICEF are fluid and reportedly based on a considerable amount of information exchange. The agency claims to rely on an informal and person-based network that works extremely well. Reportedly more than 85 percent of country officers at UNICEF have e-mail facilities and use them constantly. UNICEF is trying to use evaluations as a tool for learning. As in the case of UNDP and the World Bank, UNICEF is also trying to develop a computerised bank of knowledge that includes project evaluations. This bank will have a narrative on lessons learned and "an assessment of the development situation in a given country based on strong theoretical underpinnings." Gender performance is not a regular part of UNICEF's evaluation of staff and program, although there is consensus that it should be.

A rather recent development in international development cooperation is the growing number of "co-financing agreements" as a modality of country support. Essentially, this arrangement involves a formal coalition of agencies to fund country-level programs or specific projects. Several advantages have been identified for this, such as; (1) large amounts of money can be distributed easily and the coordination task is facilitated by assigning one of the co-financing agencies to be the leading agency; (2) for the development agencies and for the partner country, the umbrella of donors facilitates the request/provision of more standardised information rather than numerous and separate reports; and (3) key questions can be raised in meetings and the project benefits from these open exchanges. The dialogue between ministers and donor agencies is much more equal so it is more focused on particular needs of one country and directed toward mobilising support for one issue.

Drawbacks to co-financing emerge in practice, some of which clearly affect the consideration of gender in these country initiatives. These disadvantages include the following: (1) while all development agencies are equal partners, the leading agency tends to have more authority and power; (2) the pooling

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of resources, characteristic of co-financing, does not allow agency members to identify either uses or impact of their "slice financing" (i.e., their funding of specific activities); and (3) ironically, co-financing agreements tend to fragment projects into components. Since a donor agency funds only a certain component, it does monitoring only on that component, even though the component may be substantively related to other products being sought. For example, in the case of a bilateral organisation in a major project to improve the educational conditions of women, the officer in charge declared, "We only deal with the provision of paper for textbooks; we have nothing to do with content or curriculum."

Although a problem not exclusive to co-financing agreements, these arrangements tend to call for the creation of an implementation unit on the part of the government to focus solely on the co-financed project. This unit facilitates the implementation work and the monitoring of the project. On the other hand, the creation of special units within the ministry tends to: (a) draw the most competent staff from regular functions, and (b) lead to the skills learned not being institutionalised in the government machinery because this implementation unit works on its own and reports directly to the chief coordinating agency.

With increased attention to gender in development, mainstreaming has become a central concept in development agencies. Its meaning, however, varies considerably. According to some respondents, it means that gender issues should permeate every project and every sector. Therefore, it is no longer needed to talk about projects specifically for girls or women. This group sees as the main advantage of mainstreaming the development of activities that do not result in "the small women-thing on the side."

According to other respondents, mainstreaming means "working toward the project cycle with a women's perspective from the beginning and trying to influence all phases in the project cycle." In the minds of still others, mainstreaming means that gender issues are a constant consideration in development projects, regardless of sector, and that in some instances it becomes quite important to target girls and women (see also Lexow, 1996; Buvinic et al., 1996).

According to a leading staff member in charge of gender issues in the World Bank, "The issue of girls' education will never again be ignored. It is mainstreamed now. I am just providing technical assistance. I don't have to push it. There is also increasing understanding in the Bank that education cannot be treated only as a gender problem; you need to look at the economic situation and the role that poverty has in low enrolments."

For UNDP, mainstreaming has been a much more complicated operation. In the words of the head of its Gender Program, "Mainstreaming raises all kinds of issues: the need for gender disaggregated data, gender equality in training and learning, emphasis on women as beneficiaries. We still have programs for and about women. We intend to mainstream not male-stream." UNDP faces two major challenges at this point in its treatment of gender issues. The first is to "narrow the distance between rhetoric and resources," a situation demonstrated by a recent UNDP table showing the various budget allocations in which "gender doesn't even appear because it's too low." The other challenge is the identification of solid mainstreaming indicators. As noted above, in the case of UNDP, mainstreaming is seen as entirely compatible with the proviso that at least 20 percent of all project budgets be explicitly addressed to gender components.

Both multilateral and bilateral personnel reported problems when trying to mainstream. Even though some agencies have developed tools for gender analysis and Sida, for instance, has developed several country-level gender analyses (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Lesotho, Namibia, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Nicaragua), they feel that they do not have guidelines and tools to operationalise girls' education. A second problem in mainstreaming, which has been noticed by UNDP and several observers (Stromquist, 1985 and 1996; Buvinic et al., 1996), is that WID objectives can become invisible in mainstreaming efforts if a careful gender focus is not sustained in all phases of project design and implementation, and if staff are not committed or knowledgeable.

And how is mainstreaming received by the national states? Development agency officers and personnel from women-based NGOs report that most recipient governments always express an interest in gender. But, they add, in reality many governments are not convinced there is a need. "They are interested because donors are interested." The strategy of most agencies is that of persistence, bringing up the importance of gender over and over again in their dialogue with government. There is a realisation, however, that statements and agreements may be contradicted in practice.

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Despite the importance of education in improving the conditions of girls and women, none of the agencies has yet produced tool kits on education, much less on the intersection of education and gender. Tool kits exist for several other sectors, e.g., agriculture, health, environment. Agency-wide efforts in both Norad and Sida to improve the use of explicit objectives and monitoring indicators have resulted in intensive personnel training within the agency and even among recipients. Sida, for instance, is now actively engaged in two- to three-day training sessions at the country level for mission and recipient staff. It is of interest to observe that both the training and existing documents describing the LFA promote a cohesive internal logic for project or sector assistance design. Yet, these efforts do not address the intersection of the project logic with gender issues, or with any of the other crosscutting themes.

In the case of Sida, several staff members noted that the agency has produced guidelines in various areas, among them: integrated water resource management, gender, corruption, sustainable development. The problem was, in their opinion, that these guidelines are never enforced and that often they contain conflicting principles. One officer stated, "I cannot follow them because there are so many and they see things from different perspectives. The headquarters writes guidelines and sends them out and that's it. There is no training to work with them; no conscious effort to ensure guidelines are integrated into the program." Another staff member stated, "Guidelines tell you what to do but not the methods. We have too many issues: poverty, gender, sustaining development. You don't know where you need to show what you have been doing. Too many policies ... so you choose yourself."

The absence of tools for addressing education and gender within it is felt even in organisations that have been traditionally sensitive to gender issues. In UNICEF itself, some personnel feel that they could have better tools to address gender in their planning activities. They also consider that mechanisms for institutionalising monitoring need to be developed. In response to these felt needs, the Executive Board of UNICEF has requested that 80 percent of all staff must be trained on gender issues. In the view of several agency officers, a problem with many development projects was that people who do the analysis are not those developing projects, a pattern frequently at work in World Bank projects. This problem, the lack of continuity between design and implementation, remains to be resolved.

Cultural aspects of learning

What are the values and norms of development agencies that have a substantial impact on the way gender is perceived and on the types of girls' education projects that are designed and implemented? Below we examine a number of steps being taken within development agencies to make them more gender-responsive.

All agencies are extremely aware of the need to have more women among their professionals. In the case of the two bilaterals in the study and UNICEF this issue has long been addressed. In the World Bank and UNDP, major efforts are in place. UNDP recognises that its current organisation culture has been based on individual "shining," hierarchy, and a fair amount of rigidity. UNDP is attacking the patriarchal nature of the organisation by invoking the concepts of yin and yang and calling for the importance of recognising feminine and masculine values in the organisation.

In the World Bank, its current president is extremely interested in gender issues. He was the first Bank president to attend a UN world conference on women (Beijing, 1995). He has charged the Bank's Senior Advisor on Gender Equality to increase the number of women professionals. The Bank has also engaged in a process of gender and nationality diversification as part of management training and is seeking to have more women in "key professional jobs" - a target that they have reached; he is also trying to move more women into top positions such as vice president and division chief and has appointed an External Gender Consultative Group, composed of activists, feminist leaders, and academics, to give him advice. The Bank has also embarked on a comprehensive project that includes increasing recruitment of women professionals, establishing a management pipeline, exploring career development, and improving the working life of women workers at the Bank.

To change the institutional culture regarding women as workers in the World Bank, this institution has hired Genesys, one of the most reputable U.S. gender consulting firms. This firm has been working on a four-phase organisational renewal effort. Unlike other practices involving consultants, the Bank is using

Genesys staff throughout the implementation phase (February-November 1997). In addition to the areas listed above, Genesys is also attempting to change the gender culture through large-scale efforts such as Bank-wide events including panel discussions on gender over a two-week period.

Additional motivation for changing the proportion of women professionals in the Bank comes, according to Bank personnel, from international pressure on the Bank to change its gender profile. As one official stated, "We understand that to address poverty we have to build an organisational culture that considers women in management and uses externally-generated knowledge about women. It is in NGOs and at the smallest village levels where women are." A group of non-economist women working at the World Bank who are very outspoken in introducing gender issues and the need to bring other disciplines into development work is also credited for the ongoing changes.

UNDP also recognises the role of top leaders in shaping the organisation's attention to gender in development. In November 1996 the UNDP Administrator directed all resident representatives to allocate 20 percent of their regional resources to the "advancement of women and gender mainstreaming programs or projects" (Speth, 1996, p. 3) and to report in writing how they were meeting the "challenges and opportunities in supporting gender equality" (Speth, 1996, p. 7).

Another concept in great use among international development agencies is that of "partnership." This is being sought at various levels (with governments, local and international NGOs, foundations, bilateral and multilateral agencies, and universities), but most often it refers to more egalitarian relations with governments. Some organisations assure that their approaches to program and project development have changed dramatically. The World Bank affirms that since 1995 its organisational culture has become more client-focused, more team-oriented, and more efficient (defined by some officers as offering quick delivery of the people or inputs the Bank provides). In the words of several Bank officers, "Government is sovereign in our negotiations. As a UN agency, we recognise national sovereignty." But other Bank officers, especially those in education, deny this reality, stating, "We are always presenting the solution. We have very few conversations on how we can help people to get organised and solve their problems."

UNDP affirms that it has developed a more participative process of finding out what the national consensus over development activities is. The limits of such acquiescing to sovereignty are recognised by other agencies, however. Sida personnel note that, "In theory we get a request from government and we fund it. In reality, we pick up an idea, develop it quite a bit, and then negotiate it with government." UNICEF also acknowledges that there is considerable agency intentionality, indicating that program officers pursue two additional jobs when working at the country level: high level advocacy with ministries and contact with communities and NGOs.

There are few incentives to perform well in most development agencies. Although personnel may be recognised informally as having produced a "good project," there are no clear consequences linked to individuals' annual performance review. In fact, in several agencies, this procedure does not exist. In an effort to remedy this, the World Bank has been providing awards for excellence in its annual personnel review for the last two years. Some recent efforts within the World Bank are aiming at the creation of a stronger learning institution. The Bank's current president believes in professional renewal because professionals in administrative positions become deskilled over time. Through his initiative, several bodies and activities have emerged, including the creation of the Learning and Leadership Centre which will be funding sabbaticals and secondments, and bringing people from universities, NGOs, and foundations into the Bank for short periods.

Several development agencies use frequent regional meetings to promote reflection on past and future activities. UNICEF arranges meetings of UNICEF and non-UNICEF educators to exchange information on such issues as monitoring, communications, learning achievement, statistics, early childhood. Sida used to promote regional meetings of country WID officers every year. These meetings were stopped two years ago. In the opinion of WID staff these exchanges had increased the understanding of structural problems within the agency, including those related to work on gender issues and they also provided a space for reviewing promising case studies. Personnel now working on gender feel that they depend very much on the support of their superiors to continue that work: "I am fortunate I have a gender-sensitive boss. If I didn't, what would I do?"

Acquisition of knowledge

How is knowledge about development and gender in development obtained in international cooperation agencies? A wide array of sources are possible, ranging from impersonal reports to communication with recipients in the field. These sources, however, exert their influences in a variety of ways and intensities. Individual members of organisations resort to strategies we will examine below.

Research Studies. All agencies generate studies and reports. The World Bank produces the largest amount of research; it is also the agency that most tends to consume only its own products. The inward-looking nature of its knowledge production is reflected in the bibliographies that accompany its studies; predominant are references to studies produced by its own staff. There are indications that the current leadership of the Bank sees some limitations in this self-centered production. Efforts led by the Bank's president are now under way to promote a greater interaction between the Bank and the academic community, ministries of education in partner countries, and OECD countries. These efforts will include the secondment of people and enabling Bank staff to attend programs in universities.

Research products from academia are seldom read and not considered very useful. Even agency officers with recent doctorate degrees say they do not consume academic publications. Only few such pieces, notably Moser's (1989) analysis of the main types of gender projects, could be identified by agency staff. Reports describing future projects, such the as Project Appraisal Reports (PARs) in the World Bank, also constitute an important source of learning, where program officers may get new ideas. Even so, the reading of these reports is far from universal. As one World Bank officer stated, "I read it if I hear it's good." Commissioned studies by consultants are also considered sources of learning, particularly within UNICEF, Sida, and Norad. These reports, however, tend to be known mostly among the staff or unit that requested them. They do not circulate widely within the institution.

Training. Rare is the staff member who has been trained in the intersection between education and gender. In some multilateral agencies, many of those who work in education are not trained in that field, and even a greater proportion of those trained in education have not been trained in gender issues. For staff members who graduated from their fields 20 years ago, there is a considerable disjuncture between old and current academic knowledge. Notwithstanding their limited formal knowledge, most agency personnel consider themselves qualified to address gender by virtue of their use of informal sources of knowledge, a handful because they are avid readers, and a surprisingly large number of officers because of "having had sisters or daughters." Often, agency officials believe that gender concerns only a few sectors, as in the statement made by an energy specialist, "I haven't done much on gender in energy. But there are lots of gender issues in human rights." Another surprising feature regarding training on gender within agencies is its discontinuous and generally voluntary nature. For most staff members, gender training was a one-shot event in the distant past, usually a two to three-day workshop several years ago. Among higher-management levels, rare is the person who has received gender training. In the case of Sida, which has pioneered attention to gender on several fronts, training for managers usually takes the form of a one-day workshop (Hannan-Andersson, c. 1995).

Informal Sources of Learning. These can be any source not specifically established by the agency for the purpose of imparting information on the subject in question and exclude, for instance, internal meetings or training programs. These informal and person-based sources of learning are the most common modality of knowledge acquisition among donor agencies. A large part of this informal learning involves getting in touch with peers within the same agency as need arises. Program officers approach colleagues during the phase of project design, as they remember their colleagues' involvement in similar activities or recall their participation in some panel presentation. So "people you know and have a reputation within the Bank" are often mentioned by several World Bank staff as sources of ideas and feedback.

A person in charge of technical assistance on gender issues at the World Bank identifies the following as her sources of learning: "My experience with EDI, my participation in Bank efforts to engage in more educational projects in Africa, meetings with task managers, responding and preparing for visiting delegations from ministries of education to the Bank." Task managers using the resources from the Gender and the Education units state as their sources of knowledge: "You get feedback from your colleagues. You pick people from around the Bank. You can call other donor agencies."

What operates in these informal processes is well captured by what a Bank officer calls "just-in-time learning" - or the knowledge that is just sufficient to produce the intended report or project appraisal. Occasionally, agency personnel contact consulting firms whose work include girls' education. Sporadic contact involves also agencies such as IDB and OECD. International networks of agencies on special themes, such as vocational education, are also a source of learning.

Contacts with NGOs and particularly women-NGOs - a potentially rich source of learning on gender and girls' education - is very limited. Only large NGOs, such as the Grameen Bank and BRAC, seem well known. Agencies tend to exhibit both distance from and ignorance of women-based NGOs. In fact, some gender specialists in the World Bank evince poor understanding of these women-based NGOs and make such global judgments as, "The type of educational support by those groups is bad. They are badly informed and engaged in traditional education. The quality of their work is not very good. The public sector has the most information."

Visiting the field is also mentioned as a prime source of knowledge. UNICEF claims that its sensitivity to gender issues is a product of its frequent visits to the field. "Being in the field teaches you a lot. If people get out there, they become believers. The field fixes in your head what goes on; you are emotionally touched by it. That's why UNICEF is effective." UNICEF staff members discovered in one project that more boys than girls go to school in the morning.

Errors as a Source of Learning. If much knowledge is informal and based on experience, how do errors figure in this experiential knowledge? Many agency personnel stated that there are no penalties for making errors and that they do not face problems in admitting mistakes. But several staff members indicated that it would be prudent to let some time elapse between the error and acknowledgment and discussion of it, suggesting then that revealing errors does make officers vulnerable.

Another indication of the reluctance to address failure within agencies is the tendency to talk only about "best practices" (i.e., the most successful and effective projects). Some staff professionals argue that there is much more to learn from success than failure. But students of innovations would question this claim, arguing that much is learned from deconstructing errors and explaining failure or near-failure (March et al., 1991). According to several UNICEF staff members, "best practices is more politically correct." Regardless of political preference, methodologically speaking it is not possible to learn only from looking at successes. Since projects are "bundles of components," one factor that worked well in one setting or project will not necessarily work well in others. It is necessary to observe the behaviour of various components under different conditions in order to determine their relative importance and functioning. Focusing only on successful cases can produce incorrect reading of sufficient, necessary, and contingent forces.

External Pressure as a Source of Learning. It is clear that in regard to gender issues in development, the work of the women's movement, particularly through the participation of women-based NGOs in international forums and the growing alliance and coordination between Southern and Northern women NGOs - now tremendously facilitated by inexpensive and instantaneous e-mail - has been a source of "learning" for agencies. This is evident in the number of bilateral and multilateral "initiatives" concerning projects and studies (monographs, reports, evaluations) that shortly preceded and have followed the Fourth World Women's Conference.

It is manifest most recently in the massive letter widely circulated through the Internet and sent to President Wolfensohn of the World Bank, in May 1997. This letter, organised by Oxfam America, states that the group Women's Eyes on the World Bank, U.S. Chapter, in collaboration with Women's Eyes, Latin American Chapter, conducted a review of Bank initiatives during 1996 and found that the "admirable commitment from the top has yet to be translated into concrete action into the majority of Bank programs and operations, where there remains a lack of understanding among many Bank staff of gender inequities and their implications for development." The letter offers the World Bank several recommendations, including "working with a broad cross-section of women's groups and representatives from borrower countries to define clear gender equity and empowerment goals, benchmarks, and regular reporting mechanisms on the Bank's progress toward achieving its gender objectives and implementing its Gender Action Plans."

Among both bilateral and multilateral agencies a factor that affects individual and organisational learning is the lack of time for learning either from the existing literature or even from reflecting on one's own experience. Regardless of rank in the organisation, staff report serious time pressures. At headquarters, officers complain of being "inundated with work. Requests for input, for participation in committees, for comments, etc. take an inordinate amount of time." All staff refer to huge workloads and pressure to get them done. This work concerns "contracts, disbursements, mundane stuff." In the opinion of many staff members, there is "an enormous amount of paper processing but very little value added to the quality of project. After projects are negotiated we do not receive many comments from anybody."

The question of "goal overload" and its conflict with time constraints is also mentioned as an obstacle to learning. Task managers argue having "50 things to pay attention to. Government has its own agenda. So lots of special interests [implying gender is one of these 'special interests'] fell to the side." Staff in the field often feel overworked with requests from headquarters to produce a variety of reports and to provide input within very short time frames. Adding to the discomfort of many professionals in the development agencies are trends toward reducing the staff in both headquarters and in the field. Also cuts in field visits are seen as detrimental to the learning process. The plight of agency personnel caused by the demanding workloads is not always appreciated by superiors. Some leaders tend to see program officers as somewhat derelict in their duties, as reflected in the statement by one of the top authorities in a bilateral agency to the effect that, "We are trying to put the fear of God in them to perform better."

In a few cases, agency personnel considered that the governments with which they have dealt presented obstacles to learning. In the case of girls' education, it was mentioned that governments often manipulated statistics, especially enrolments, and did not allow alternative forms of data collection. In some cases, as in the example of a former socialist country, agency staff needed clearances, not mere provision of notification, to visit schools. Personnel from UNICEF mentioned that, although when involved in the demand-side of schooling it was necessary to work intensively with community participants, especially NGOs, some governments were opposed to dealing with NGOs, so an important potential for learning could not be utilised.

In an organisation in which it is important to spend large amounts of funds within a fixed period of time (the financial year), most effort goes to the front-end of projects. It was often stated by agency personnel that unless a project identifies how to carry out new established procedures more effectively, agency personnel concentrate mechanically on implementing projects as stated: "You don't seek lessons that can be shared. The design phase is extremely important. Once implementation begins you [the program officer] are trying to protect yourself, using the money and implementing as designed, rather than looking at new ways of doing things." The prevailing norms are to spend the funds for "acceptable purposes" and, in consequence, there is little emphasis on innovation in either procedures or content of projects.

A concomitant element of placing energy in project design and approval is that monitoring and evaluation of the projects, departments, and individual staff members of most agencies is limited. During the interviews of agency personnel, not a single staff member - at any level - mentioned self-evaluation or unit-evaluation as a source of learning. A recent analysis of the various efforts conducted within Sida to promote gender equality in developing countries corroborates this, noting that, "While the implicit strategy is that all Sida personnel should take responsibility ... there are no accountability mechanisms to ensure that this actually happens. There is also little evidence of explicit monitoring and support from senior leadership" (Sida, 1996).

Most projects have a weak monitoring process and evaluation is seldom built in. The nature of project renewal is such that often second and third phases take place without a complete or satisfactory evaluation of the earlier activities. This propensity to have weak monitoring and evaluation components does not seem to be a function of the size of a project. The World Bank, which funds the largest projects in education (including girls' education) does not include sufficient monitoring visits.

Rendering the monitoring and evaluation of projects more difficult is the frequent dearth of baseline data. Although this situation could be corrected via the conduct of more qualitative studies of project implementation and impact, there is a strong bias toward statistics and quantitative indicators as the most powerful if not the only valid measures. Also, there is a persistent - if unrealisable - inclination

toward having experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation designs. In the World Bank, for instance, the "counterfactual" ("would we have found the same result in the absence of the intervention?") is constantly sought - and seldom found.

The Swedish and Norwegian bilateral agencies have monitoring visits twice a year and annual project reviews. These efforts create substantial dialogue between agency and recipient. On the other hand, it is relatively easy for the recipient ministry or NGO to prepare itself for the review and come out with flying colours. Even over a four-week period, the length of most annual reviews, it is not easy to touch the lower levels of implementation. Usually, accounts of high-level or medium-level managers on the recipient side form the basis for these monitoring visits and annual reviews.

In development cooperation the technology regarding procedures and intended outcomes is not well defined. The current emphasis on "indicators" presupposes that levels of performance can be identified unambiguously. Yet, the terrain is full of hazards. For instance, one project addressing girls' education identified as a success indicator a growth of 5 percent per year in the enrolment rate of girls in primary school. While this rate seems satisfactory, it turns out that the regular enrolment growth for girls in the public education system of the country is 4.8 percent and that the project itself had been attaining an average growth rate of over 11 percent per year (Lok Jumbish, 1996, p. 126). The question, then, is how to determine the appropriate level of intensity or frequency of an indicator. This can be done only in relational terms, vis-a-vis the existing educational system. But often, indicators are accepted as having their intrinsic values.

There are now efforts within several development agencies to improve monitoring and evaluation activities. At the World Bank, for instance, there are plans to prepare a completion report six months after a project has ended. This report will present lessons from experience and will be the responsibility of the task manager.

Another feature of organisational life that blocks learning in the area of girls' education is the adoption of single-output mind frames. It has been observed at various points in this case study that agencies place almost exclusive emphasis on increased enrolment as an indicator of success. This perspective prevents agencies and governments from seeing girls' education as a multifaceted phenomenon in which several factors are simultaneously at work. The addition of corroborative measurements would make a project on girls' education more complicated and time consuming; it would also be more real.

Some projects continue to be predicated on one intervention. Such is the case of the secondary-school stipend for girls. A single measure is often seen as powerful enough. This idea was considered successful for several years, but recent evaluations of enrolment show that this has been much less successful than initially anticipated. Most projects on girls' education consider several components such as increasing enrolment, promoting more women teachers, providing gender-sensitive training to teachers, removing sex stereotypes from the curriculum. However, there are few mechanisms within a project to interconnect these interventions as different units are in charge of different components. In consequence, what one component may produce and the difficulties it may encounter do not seem to be discussed in the context of the overall project.

It has become fashionable in development agencies to see the problem of the girls as a "demand-side factor." This diagnosis leads to the view that the family is the main culprit and does not fully recognise that families, after all, are products of society. This problem definition casts family preferences not as reflections of cultural beliefs but rather as "instances of market failure in information," often caused by parents' inadequate knowledge of the changes taking place in the labour market, and particularly the demands that urbanisation and industrialisation will make on women's work. These prevailing economistic views of gender tend to result in the avoidance of cultural and ideological factors in project design and reluctance to work with partners who seek explicitly to create new relations between men and women.

Some observers, notably Jahan (1995), consider that country programming (a way to bring all projects within the framework of a comprehensive national context) is one of the most promising strategies to mainstream gender issues, since country programming calls for three instruments: the preparation of the WID/GAD country profile, the WID/GAD country strategy and action plan, and a package of WID components in major sectoral projects and programs. This approach, indeed, would seem to pull together

various sources of information into the preparation of comprehensive plans. The danger in country programming, however, is that, while the knowledge base may be wide, those in charge of making the decisions may be mostly high levels officers within government. Unless special care is taken to guarantee the presence of gender specialists and women-based NGOs it is likely that country programming - even more than regular projects - may not be gender-sensitive.

Institutional Memory

One of the strongest concepts in organisational learning addressed the need for an "institutional memory," in which knowledge may be available at the organisational level and available also to all members of the organisation. As a living concept within development agencies, institutional memory is the object of great variability in definition. It is seen as: "a system that protects people from having to start all over again", "a set of complete files," "individuals with experience and wisdom who become known through informal networks within the agency, and sometimes outside it," and as a feature that "has to do with learning and dissemination of knowledge." Although these definitions are not mutually exclusive, some see such memory as a written product, others emphasise its contribution to learning, still others relate it to person-based knowledge.

All agency personnel recognise the contribution that such a memory could make but are at a loss to identify where it resides and even whether it exists. Some units, such as OED within the World Bank, claim to represent the institutional memory. According to some World Bank researchers, the institutional memory is in the bookstore, contained in the books and reports produced by them. Many other staff members think differently.

There is some agreement that the institutional memory should be located in some sort of written documentation, such as project files comprising monitoring and evaluation findings. Most people would agree that the files are very imperfect and not particularly user-friendly. Reportedly, it is not uncommon for a person to be assigned to a new post and find a pile of files whose content will remain unknown; new personnel seldom have the time to become familiar with them. Norad seeks to create a degree of institutional memory by ensuring continuity in certain tasks. This is accomplished by a requirement that individuals hand their knowledge over to a successor by sharing experiences and working together for a period of 10 days. In this overlapping system, the idea is that "you don't leave a job until your successor has a chance to learn."

There are efforts to rely on cyberspace to create a more effective institutional memory. In the World Bank, UNDP, and Norad there is much hope that computerised data banks and specific WEB sites may be able to contain and deliver information instantaneously. Several agency personnel realise that the computerised system is highly dependent on the information that is inputted: "The real challenge will be to make sure that we tailor the knowledge for specific countries and use and scrutinise it for quality." Others feel that the information that will go into the computerised system may be reduced to a few lines: "Our standards of knowledge might shrink and as a consequence our rigorous selection might be gone."

Within the agencies, there is a realisation that the institutional memory will have to emphasise processes rather than outcomes and that the contributions of NGOs will be considered. Sida is currently in favour of developing a "portfolio management" that would include information regarding impact, costs, and risk in country or sector programs, a strategy that it sees as compatible with the notions of teamwork and strong links among regional departments (Ehrenpreis and Johansson, 1996). It remains to be seen to what extent the agencies will succeed in creating their institutional memory. Specifically on gender, the World Bank is developing a homepage called Gendernet. It will show good practices of lending and non-lending institutions, tools for gender analysis in various sectors and country assistance strategies, research findings, a roster of consultants, and a list of projects with analytical work about gender. A similar effort in underway in UNDP where an interactive research and learning network with all country officers will "share information on expertise, good practices, and lessons learned" (Speth, 1996).

Agency personnel, primarily in the bilateral agencies, felt that one major dilemma regarding their role has not been resolved. Are they to serve as generalists or as experts? Norad staff indicated that the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has instructed the agency to buy professional advice from the outside and that agency staff should concentrate on transfers of funds and on drafting operational

agreements. The nature of their tasks obviously has implications for the type of institutional memory that is required for efficient performance.

In the meantime, the most effective institutional memory resides in individuals. And agency staff locate what they need mostly through informal networks. Given the limited time agency personnel currently face it is unclear who will write the basic narratives for the various projects and whether the impersonal account in a computerised data file will replace the prevailing oral and informal knowledge culture of the development agencies. One issue that questions the use of institutional memory in the learning process is the assertion that some development agencies are quite reluctant to take pilot projects to scale. In the opinion of several external observers, many agencies are content with having pilot projects and seldom seek to make them cover the entire educational system.

3.4 Conclusions

This case study on organisational learning has taken us through different aspects of institutional existence. We have examined policies, structures, processes, and cultural norms. We have also interrogated ourselves about the dynamics surrounding individual and collective learning and the role that institutional memory and managerial incentives play in orienting not only new ways of thinking about girls' education but also in engaging in new behaviours to promote changes in the social relations of gender.

Much of the transformation in agencies to address girls' education, and gender in general, came from outside pressure rather than the internal realisation that some elements in development assistance were missing. Agencies have responded to the environment (represented by the various world conferences addressing gender issues and their intersection with education, the women's movement, and contributions from academics) in several ways. Structurally, they have created WID units and focal points, although the penetration of these units within the organisation and their degree of authority and power has tended to be slight. Procedurally, agencies have engaged in attempts to use more multidisciplinary approaches and teamwork in the design and implementation of projects. The concept of mainstreaming of gender issues has been accepted and has been accompanied by various policy and operational guidelines to facilitate project development. Agencies have also made substantial efforts to modify their organisational cultures by incorporating more women professionals and by including more participatory approaches with counterparts in the recipient countries.

Development agencies today evince major modifications in their gender-related activities compared to the 1970s and the 1980s. The new language refers to mainstreaming, co-financing, participation of stakeholders, horizontal authority patterns, program and sector assistance. At the same time, certain crucial features have changed little. The state continues to be the exclusive interlocutor of development transactions. NGOs have been recognised as effective and legitimate social agents but they are not at the negotiating table for sector or program support; most often they are used as implementing groups.

Development agencies still rely mostly on each others' perceptions rather than on views from the outside. As a result, even though donor agencies engage in frequent changes in their structure and processes, their problem definition of certain issues varies little. Collaboration among agencies is increasing via the use of co-financing agreements, which further reinforces internal (i.e., within-organization) learning. These features have not been helpful to an improvement in the conceptualisation of girls' education.

The dynamics of agencies force attention to the front-end of projects and implementation and monitoring become less salient. Further, roles are not integrated over the lifecycle of development interventions (i.e., different persons assume different phases of the project, with consultants usually engaging in monitoring and evaluation). This segmentation definitely affects learning. Problems of time as well as the tendency to consider the state as the main (almost exclusive) interlocutor inhibits learning by minimising contact with other stakeholders and thus failing to become familiar with their perspectives and solutions.

A close connection between policy formulation and operational structure facilitates the information flow but may not facilitate knowledge absorption if sustained support mechanisms for the use of the new information are not in place and if rewards for policy compliance are not clear. Informal mechanisms of knowledge distribution and exchange are very effective and frequent. These mechanisms do not ensure (a)

that new knowledge will be acquired, and (b) that those without interest and commitment in particular issues will get the knowledge they need. Informal mechanisms of knowledge within development agencies usually support existing preferences rather than promote new ones.

Knowledge that is perceived as leading to controversial decisions or that is not sufficiently rewarded by the organisation will lose ground to conventional and tested knowledge. Development agencies promote uniformity and conformity by limiting problem definition and the set of actors with whom they interact. The more frequently actors come together in a learning arena, the more likely they are to stifle novelty and inhibit new interpretation of events and purposes. Organisations tend to model themselves after organisations that they perceive authoritative or successful in their field (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Settings such as those created by co-financing agreements push in the direction of consensual (not always innovative) solutions and similar perceptions.

What appears to be a clear and focused mission at the policy level still needs careful guidance at the operational level. The clarification of objectives and visions through guidelines and checklists will be incomplete without timely and ongoing follow-up of specific projects and agency personnel. Under time constraints, the use of an institutional memory will be limited, even if it becomes computerised. "Just-in-time" knowledge will continue to characterise agencies where workloads exceed people's energies and commitment.

Efforts to translate individual learning into organisational learning will necessitate time for individual and collective reflection, an incentive/reward structure, and the production of a memory that addresses details of project implementation. For the last feature, the use of narratives and accounts must become part of effective institutional memories. Work in education relies on a low technology in the sense that there are no fixed or precise inputs for attaining desirable processes and outcomes. As such, educational projects require much time in monitoring implementation and assessing ongoing outcomes. This low-technology makes educational projects labour-intensive if they are to become effective. Lack of attention to monitoring details facilitates deviation from intended results.

It has always been taken as axiomatic that institutions learn from their experience (March et al., 1991). However, learning may occur only in very small dosages and might not be transformative. Learning from a decision involves monitoring its implementation and outcomes to know what was really put into effect and with what consequences. But learning from a decision should also involve seeing the proposed solutions (the decision) with new eyes by exposing oneself to the view of others outside the agencies and the participating governments. In a way, this is beginning to be recognised by agencies when they invoke the participation of stakeholders. However, on the issue of gender, sensitivity to stakeholders is negated in reality when women representing the women's movement or feminist perspectives do not enter policy and project dialogues.

By strengthening inter-agency contact and learning from their experience, development agencies acquire new knowledge but always within narrow parameters since few of these institutions tend to engage in boundary-crossing with other social actors in the developing countries. Several contradictions face development agencies at the present time. Though they may desire to become learning organisations, they: (1) seek to cover more issues with fewer staff. The time problems of their personnel remain unsolved; (2) limit their knowledge search to personal experience and individual and organisational peers; (3) are willing to consider only successes ("best practices") but not errors; (4) do not provide sustained training in critical substantive areas to their personnel; (5) do not have mechanisms to reward appropriate behaviour at the individual and unit levels; and (6) seek to create effective institutional memories but they still remain oral cultures when it comes to learning. They want to increase participation and capacity-building in the developing countries but interact mostly with the state and do not give appropriate attention to members of the civil society.

Technical cooperation has always been a preoccupation in the development community. The case study discusses three issues; (1) has any new knowledge been generated in the field of technical cooperation? (2) what are the actual changes in technical cooperation? and (3) which organisational factors can be associated with learning on technical cooperation? We focus attention on the past 10 to 15 years, but occasionally go somewhat further back in time.

4.1 Advances in knowledge

The literature on technical cooperation is vast, and in the following we point to the thematic areas of the debate and indicate the nature of change in each.

Towards a definition of technical assistance.

The late 1940s saw the rise of modern development cooperation and the need for an analytical distinction between different forms of aid, namely flows of capital and flows of knowledge - financial assistance and technical assistance respectively. But technical cooperation is not only about dispatching experts, conducting training, or arranging fellowships. These are budgetary and administrative means for a purpose. The purpose itself can be defined as the transfer - or development - of skills, or in a wider sense building of institutional competence. Quite an important part of the learning which has occurred over the past decades relates to definitions. The UN organisations and the OECD have provided definitions that are accepted by all donors. But the nature of the consensus is still weak. Individual donor agencies may promote mixed forms of aid, and for administrative purposes it will not be quite clear how much technical cooperation actually is provided. Consequently there are no reliable figures on the extent or nature of technical cooperation. In theory, there is a consensus on the meaning of technical cooperation. In practice, agencies use their own standards, and there are no comparable global figures on the amounts and directions of technical cooperation.

Knowledge about the roles of technical cooperation.

Long-term resident expatriates are still the predominant mode of technical cooperation. The expert - counterpart system underlies the policies and practices of most multilateral and bilateral donors. The expert in this relationship acts as an adviser and as a trainer. He or she should not hold any line responsibilities, and should not have any operational duties. The success of the project, including the professional reputation of the expert, is linked to the implementation of the knowledge of the adviser and the trainer. The forces that tend to move an adviser out of his or her advisory role are extremely strong. The knowledge about the inherent difficulties in the roles of technical cooperation personnel, whether short- or long term, volunteers, or on twinning arrangements, can be traced back to the beginning of development cooperation. An important part of learning in technical cooperation has been to make these contradictions explicit and to define when and where different role models should be used.

Knowledge about effects of technical cooperation.

Of all evaluation reports in the past decade, the Cassen report (1986) is the most positive about the effectiveness of technical cooperation. According to the report, technical cooperation has been a clear triumph: it has played a major role in the vast creation of institutional and human capabilities throughout the Third World. A year after the Cassen report was published, Riddell (1987) presented an alternative view of development cooperation. This study is less affirmative, his conclusions about what

we can and do know of effects are significant. Later reports are even more pessimistic. The evaluations of the World Bank point to satisfactory performance on less than 20% of loans for technical assistance. In conclusion, there is much more knowledge about the results of technical cooperation in the beginning of 1997, than we have had at any previous time. Also, there is a consensus on the shortcomings and the lack of results among major aid agencies, host countries, and the academic community. There has been a gradual increase in knowledge. The truths of yesterday are seen as false today.

Knowledge about the technical cooperation process.

Does the increase in knowledge about results also mean that the development community has generated a causal understanding of the processes which lead to unsatisfactory performance? Baser and Morgan (1996) reviewed the World Bank technical cooperation, and conclude that the causes of poor performance are "a source of continuing debate both in the Bank and amongst its members and borrowers". Among the issues under debate are the reasons for inadequate participation by the host countries, the internal procedures in the aid agencies, and the external conditions in the developing countries.

Ownership and commitment.

When the level of ownership is low, the host country's commitment to the intent, design and implementation of the project will be low, and consequently it is not likely that the resources and skills needed to achieve the objectives will be forthcoming. Van de Walle and Johnston's (1996) review of aid effectiveness in Africa points to generally low levels of ownership. Donors tend to dominate the aid process and to pay inadequate attention to the host government's own preferences.

The design of interventions.

Failures in the design of technical cooperation projects cause poor performance. One feature of changing technical cooperation has been the move away from projects to programmes; that is, broader umbrellas under which different activities are undertaken. This is a healthy change. But the broader the programmes, the more stakeholders there are - and the more complex are the governance structures. Purposes of technical cooperation are becoming more complex. When balancing the needs for comprehensiveness against those of simplicity, focus and specialisation, most agencies tend to shift too far towards the complexity side of the trade-off. The result is that technical cooperation projects are comprehensive in scope but difficult to implement given many countries' capacity to absorb assistance.

The significance of good management.

Donor methodologies have expanded rapidly in the 1990s. There has been a strong emphasis on blueprint planning, not only in the traditional industry and infrastructure sectors. The blueprint approach has spread to the social sectors and to institutional development as well. In recent years the tide has started to turn, and we now see a return to process planning, although at a more sophisticated level (Carvalho and White, 1996; World Bank, 1996). There is a resurgent interest in, and role for, management. When less can be planned ahead, more remains to be solved in the day to day implementation of technical cooperation. Management matters and projects with good managerial capacity can also develop commitment and ownership, and in other ways enhance the conditions that promote success. There is a movement "back to basics", that is, an exhortation to remember the importance of design, focus, attention to process factors, preparing for the unexpected, paying attention to various stakeholder claims, and to learn from good practice.

Proliferation of technical cooperation instruments.

The mid and late 1980s saw a fairly rapid development of alternative modes of delivering technical cooperation, such as; short-term personnel, institutional twinning, volunteer services, and national recruitment as alternatives to traditional long-term expatriate personnel. The use of short-term consultancies has been elaborated and combined with long-term expatriate modes of assistance. Organisational twinning is described and elaborated in several studies. Some agencies have found ways of using national staff increasingly. Technical cooperation can be combined in new ways with other forms of development cooperation, such as structural lending, emergency assistance, peace-building, et cetera.

Culture and gender.

The arena where the actors in a technical cooperation project meet is a multi-cultural society in miniature. Many have pointed to the importance of all actors in the process understanding the cultural differences of a national significance that are at play (Hofstede, 1991; Lewis, 1996). Communication between the partners is obscured because of implicit cultural assumptions. The choice of words, messages and body language connote meanings that are not intended, or that are not understood, by other actors.

The vast majority of those engaged in technical cooperation are men. Projects and programmes are designed by consultants and programme officers who are mainly male, and their counterparts in ministries and governments agencies. The ultimate beneficiaries, or so called target groups, are likely to be more balanced in gender representation. What are the consequences of the male domination over the delivery system for impact, relevance and sustainability? Gender is one of the cross-cutting issues which need to be considered in all aspects of cooperation, and it is one of the subjects that people need explicit guidance and training on. The previous case study raised the issue of mainstreaming gender issues in technical cooperation. The literature on technical cooperation shows little progress on how this can be done. On the contrary, many influential authors rather point at cross-cutting issues as additional sources of complexity - and unnecessary complexity at that. There is a reductionist tendency to focus on technical concerns and technical excellence.

Towards a focus on capacity building and institutional development.

Moore et al (1995) point out that institution building has been an important component and objective of technical cooperation programmes ever since they began to take shape in the 1950s and '60s. Institution building can be taken to refer to the process of developing the competence and capacity of a single organisation or a cluster of organisations. The effectiveness of organisations and their ability to develop are often closely tied to the extent to which they have political support. Many projects that are intended to build institutions are linked to establishments that do not have a large internal political constituency (such as statistical offices, standardisation bureaus, research centres, to take a few examples). The aid agencies may thus get involved in ensuring or providing this political support if interventions are to be effective - thus violating the principles of host country ownership. The point is that the political nature of institution building projects needs to be taken into account at the planning and appraisal stages.

In summary, this brief review indicates growth of various forms of knowledge concerning technical cooperation. The analytical understanding of the instruments of cooperation, the reasons for success or failure, and the many internal and external factors that need to dovetail with each other have certainly increased. But on the other hand, the instruments as such are the same. There can be no doubt that many things that were well-known in the mid '80s keep being repeated, albeit at times under new names. The overlap between reports is significant, the "news value" in each piece of writing may not be that high.

Imagine a person who had a good grasp of technical cooperation policies and practices 15 years ago. Imagine furthermore that he or she had no part at all in the developments in thinking on technical cooperation issues for the next 15 years. How much would she recognise if parachuted into a discussion at a conference of aid practitioners? Many of the faces around the table would be new. Many evaluations reports have been printed. But we suspect that most substantial issues would be well-known. After a few days of listening and some weeks of reading, it would be quite possible to have caught up, and again be at the forefront of research and practice.

4.2 Practical changes in technical cooperation.

Let us now turn to what has changed in practice. If there are no differences, we would find it very hard to argue that organisational learning has taken place. In respect of the poor performance of technical cooperation, and in view of the findings that many projects are not much in demand in their host countries, we would expect two types of change; first that the overall levels of technical cooperation would go down and be substituted by other forms of aid, and second, that the most criticised forms of technical cooperation would be substituted by other modes.

Total amounts of technical cooperation.

It is uncertain whether the total numbers have gone down, there are no time series so we cannot compare with previous years. Forss et al (1988) concluded that there were around 1,000 technical cooperation personnel, on long-term contracts, in the three countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia alone in 1987. There were 266 Swedish expatriates - in all categories - in those three countries in November 1995. Assuming that there were several short term consultants previously during the year, it would thus seem that the technical cooperation components as such have not changed much. According to our interviews, management thinks that the number of technical cooperation personnel has been sharply reduced, but they usually take this to mean the provision of isolated expatriate advisers, directly employed by the agency. Whether these have been substituted by other forms of technical cooperation is something we have no concrete figures on.

Towards more institutional twinning?

Sida is held to be the leading organisation in making use of twinning arrangements (Moore et al, 1995). If we take a strict definition of twinning as a long-term cooperation agreement between organisations with a similar mandate, the total number of such projects can be estimated to be 60 to 70. Given that so many studies point to twinning as a successful way of building institutional capacity, it is surprising that it is not replicated much elsewhere. Part of the answer probably lies in the fact that national legislations differ, and in many countries it is simply not possible for the public administration to engage in such projects. The situation is also changing in Sweden. Some projects that were called twinning arrangements in the '80s can no longer be called so. As parts of the administration have been privatised, the Swedish partners are no longer organisations with a similar mandate to the organisation in the developing country - hence the technical cooperation project is no longer a twinning project. Globally speaking, there has not been any dramatic shift towards institutional twinning arrangements.

Substituting expatriate personnel with national experts?

If the number of technical cooperation personnel has remained stable, and possibly shifted from long-term to short-term, and increasingly towards consultancy assignments and institutional twinning in Sida, the reverse can be said of the World Bank. The funds for technical cooperation channelled through the Bank have grown considerably. There are three factors behind this growth (Raphaeli, 1996); the expansion and diversification of the World Bank's portfolio, the intensification of investment development and capacity building efforts, the increasing complexity of investment operations and, paradoxically, the growing needs for technical cooperation of rapidly developing countries.

Parallel to this shift, is one away from technical cooperation for engineering services for project design and construction, towards technical cooperation targeted at establishing processes and capabilities of institutions. The latter is the fastest growing area of the Bank's technical cooperation, and now represents roughly two thirds of all technical cooperation financed by the Bank. In financial terms, the Bank channelled USD 2,849 million for technical assistance during the 1995 financial year.

One of the major differences between the World Bank and most other agencies, in particular the bilaterals, is that it makes extensive use of personnel from developing countries. According to one of our interviews in the World Bank, almost 80% of all contracts awarded for technical cooperation were now signed with firms from developing countries. Despite the fact that all major evaluations of technical cooperation have challenged aid agencies to use more consultants from developing countries, it is virtually only the World Bank which can point at such a track record of shifting the source of technical cooperation expertise.

Promoting host country ownership of technical cooperation?

UNDP's practices concerning technical cooperation have also changed considerably; changes that have been culminating during the 1990s. National Execution (NEX) has evolved as the main modality for

implementation of UNDP assisted programmes. National execution in this context stands for projects that are implemented by the host country governments, rather than by one of the UN specialised agencies, or some other third partner. The genesis of NEX can be found in the UNDP Governing Council decision of 2 July 1976 to experiment with government execution. In December 1992 a General Assembly resolution reiterated that NEX should be the norm for programme implementation. Parallel to these decisions other Governing Council decisions sharpened the definitions and passed related legislation. The shift from agency executed to NEX projects represents a major change in policy, and it is a change that is fully in line with the findings of all major evaluations of the systemic, inherent weaknesses of traditional modes of technical cooperation. As UNDP is the only organisation which has responded fully to the challenge of reforming its technical cooperation programme, it is worth reviewing some of its results in more detail. We quote the independent evaluation which delivered its report in 1995 (UNDP, 1995):

The evaluation found that NEX has a number of positive attributes, each of which also has its limitations. First and foremost, the evaluation concludes that NEX greatly improves and expands the sense of ownership of programmes. The NEX projects were found to significantly increase the level of self-reliance. NEX contributes to capacity building, especially to the development of human resources, and in some environments to organisational capacity building. The change to NEX makes for a better integration of UNDP-assisted programmes into normal governmental operations, a wider participation of national persons and institutions, and a stronger sense of ownership, that in turn enhance project sustainability. Indeed the evaluators argue that sustainability not only becomes a question of simple continuation of project benefits after the termination of the assistance, but an ongoing evolution of a general planning and management capability. Another characteristic of the NEX modality is its cost-effectiveness. NEX substitutes national for international personnel; hence it uses less expensive resources. If done selectively, this improves cost effectiveness and capacity building simultaneously.

By and large, it would thus seem that the NEX modality has enhanced UNDP's comparative advantage as a development agency. NEX has a major positive impact in respect of central development objectives, such as enhancing ownership, self-reliance, sustainability and institutional capacity building. It is also found to be cost-effective and better managed in general. But the shortcomings relate to objectives that are less important, namely spending targets are not reached, planning periods are more uncertain and take longer time, and the international character of the technical cooperation projects becomes less prominent. These shortcomings must weigh lightly in comparison with the advantages.

Curbing the cost increases of technical cooperation

Several agencies can point to increasing amounts of funds being disbursed in the form of technical cooperation. Most of these agencies also make less use of long-term expatriate consultants, and more use of short-term expertise. It is really only UNDP which claims that its technical cooperation has become more cost-effective, and where the costs of the individual projects and programmes are lower, in part because of the change to NEX. Given that the global picture indicates that funds for technical cooperation have increased or remained stable, and that the number of people have gone down, we must suspect that the price of each unit of technical cooperation has become more expensive. If that is the case, it is an old trend which continues. Let us quote a few studies:

Cassen (1986) notes that "The recent sharp rise in the cost of experts is particularly troublesome."

A Nordic evaluation of technical cooperation (Forss et al, 1988) identified the sharp rise in remuneration as a major problem, as it affects the expert - counterpart relationship very negatively. The report found that many expatriates could cost as much as 100 times more than locally recruited personnel, and at times they were not much better at the job.

Bossuyt et al (1992): "Particular reference should be made in this context to the cost of expatriate personnel, which shows a persistent tendency to increase during the last decade. Foreign experts from bilateral aid agencies easily cost between 100,000 and 150,000 USD a year. They absorb between 70% and 80% of total technical cooperation resources... This, understandably, is a rising source of irritation for recipient countries, especially where they see aid as fungible and even more so where experts are financed by loans rather than grants."

Adding the most recent review to the list, Baser and Morgan (1996) note that: "most of the 20 technical assistance loans were facing the issue of rising costs for technical assistance especially with respect to the services of international consultants. In many borrowing countries, the differential between indigenous salaries and international consulting rates, especially in certain specialised areas, has now become enormous, in some cases up to 500:1. To compound the problem, rising rates have not been matched with increased productivity or increased effectiveness. Simply put, many high-priced technical assistance personnel have done questionable work despite their high salaries and benefits".

The brief review shows an amazing track record of more than 10 years of sharply rising costs, solid empirical evidence of the magnitude of the problem and its adverse effects on technical cooperation objectives, and (albeit slower) development of knowledge about the causes of the problem and recommendations on improvement. But the problem persists at the field level, in most agencies.

To sum up the discussion on putting knowledge to use, in spite of the rather rapid growth in knowledge about technical cooperation, the agencies have been slow to develop and modify their programmes. At the field level, the actual implementation of projects and programmes has not changed much, in global terms. Our focus has been on three organisations; the UNDP, the World Bank and Sida. But we have also covered several other bilateral organisations, as their experiences are captured in evaluation reports and policy studies, in particular agencies of the Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, British, Dutch, Canadian and Japanese assistance, and the aid programme of the European Community. The critical comments made in evaluations of one organisation have wide applicability to the others.

Nevertheless there have been some remarkable developments, and it appears that the multilateral agencies in the UN system are leading the process of change, both in terms of analytical depth and in transforming the practice of cooperation. In particular, UNDP's shift to the NEX modality of project implementation must be considered an impressive organisational achievement. The World Bank's change to increasing use of local consulting firms also shows a willingness and a capacity to address one of the systemic weaknesses of technical cooperation.

The bilateral agencies have changed less. There is evidence that the number of technical cooperation personnel sent out has gone down, and that long-term expatriate personnel have been abandoned in favour of short-term contracts, with more training and coaching arrangements. The prevalence of institutional twinning arrangements has increased, but it seems that much of the increase is due to the appearance of new cooperation partners in Eastern Europe, where this mode of operation has been easier to apply. In addition, the growth in twinning is marginal. These projects do not represent more than a small share of the total funds for technical cooperation.

4.3 Explaining organisational learning.

Under this heading we will now return to the structural, procedural and cultural factors that we find at play when following the progress of thinking and practice on technical cooperation.

Structural factors affecting learning

When looking at structural factors, the progress in technical cooperation can be attributed to the division of labour in the agencies, the budgeting system, the existence (or lack) of professional networks, the research community and its approach to the subject matter, and the centralised nature of decision-making.

Division of labour

The organisational structure of most agencies follows a geographical or sectoral logic. Experiences in technical cooperation are not easily transferred from an Asian context to a European one, or from the field of agriculture to that of education, to take some examples. Divisions and departments confront each other over scarce monetary resources, and the budget lines frequently follow traditional organisational boundaries, thus reinforcing the conflict of interest between departments.

On the one hand, we find that some units in the organisations experiment and generate interesting experiences in certain fields of technical cooperation. They can do so without being constrained by coordination or streamlining demands from other units. But on the other hand, these experiences are seldom transmitted across organisational boundaries. People in one department are often unaware of what those in another department do, particularly if this is novel, uncertain and experimental in nature.

Budgeting systems

Development funds are usually allocated according to a political and administrative logic which first and foremost focuses on recipient countries and instruments of assistance. Among the instruments of assistance, we find specific allocations for credit schemes, emergency assistance, country frame programmes, commercially directed loans, and others (depending on the agency - there are of course no two systems that are the same). Monitoring and evaluation tends to follow a similar logic, and hence technical cooperation, which is an ingredient in all financial means, seldom receives direct attention.

Let us take a practical example. The World Bank has a specific budget item called technical assistance loans (contrary to the general trend noted above). Consequently the Bank also follows up and presents results on performance of technical assistance loans. This leads to insights and feedback on this particular issue which no other agency can present. Neither Sida, Norad or any other agency can point to similar figures on the performance of technical assistance. If they had a budget line called technical cooperation (which also reflected the subject matter), it would perhaps have been more natural to generate knowledge and to implement changes in this field. Hence the patterns of knowledge generation and learning on a topic are closely connected to the structure of the budgeting system, and in most cases this works to the disadvantage of an interdiscplinary and cross-cutting issue such as technical cooperation.

Professional networks

There are no outside professional or technical standards similar to those in the field of environmental impact assessment, or gender issues. No outside groups lobby the aid agencies to give technical cooperation a higher profile in the same way that NGOs or environmentalists support their concerns. There are pressure groups who are concerned with the effectiveness of aid generally, and thus with improving technical cooperation. But their concern is generally too unfocussed to be of assistance in learning on technical cooperation. There are no professional networks outside the aid agencies control, where they could participate as equal stakeholders and benefit from the thinking of independent groups. (There are lobbying groups for technical cooperation, but they usually serve their own self-interest in export promotion. They lobby for technical cooperation as a way of securing domestic income and employment in the donor countries).

However, in response to the lack of outside, independent networks, the aid agencies have created their own network for professional development. Under the auspices of the OECD/DAC, there is now an informally convened group, meeting once or twice yearly, to discuss issues on technical cooperation. The DAC group has done much to bring technical cooperation issues to the fore, not least through its publication of "Principles for New Orientations in Technical Co-operation (OECD, 1991). But overall, there is little research or analytical resources dedicated to technical cooperation issues. Few case studies or best practice papers are circulated. The DAC network is a response and an effort to improve the situation. None of the agencies reviewed have any professional technical cooperation network. Hence little intellectual back up is given to task managers. Technical cooperation is not seen as a discrete subject that requires training and the inculcation of a special package of skills.

In the World Bank there is a Technical Assistance Adviser in the Operations Policy Department. That represents one person who is the recognisable focal point for technical cooperation within an organisation with some 10,000 employees. Sida has no specific adviser on technical cooperation, but there are specifically interested persons in various parts of the organisation. There are many weak links between the actors, which illustrates that the professional networks are few and of little importance. There are strong links between the actors in the host countries, and also between some of the actors in the aid agencies. It seems to point at three loops in knowledge production and use; one in the host countries (which generates far more critical knowledge) and one in the donor community (which generates more knowledge

on bureaucratic routines and project management), and one in respect of firms and consultants (perhaps with a contradictory conventional wisdom). The three circles of knowledge production seldom meet, and this may be one of the causes why technical cooperation fails to improve. The diversity in knowledge structures among the actors remains too high. In terms of the theory of learning, knowledge structures remain diversified, and there are no systems of knowledge production to build dominating knowledge structures.

Structure of the research community.

Technical cooperation does not have an academic standing, it is not a subject of specialisation or professionalisation. Technical cooperation is not a substantive area of study similar to economics, health or biochemistry. There is no research community with an inherent interest in technical cooperation, and there is little or no knowledge development which is not specifically requested by the aid agencies. Instead, the study of technical cooperation comes as a residual of development economics, where scholars are concerned with the overall connection between aid and development. Those who make aid effectiveness their field of specialisation are the ones who usually have conclusions about technical cooperation as well. But an understanding of technical cooperation requires more than substantial knowledge of development economics. Technical cooperation would need an interdisciplinary approach.

As technical cooperation is concerned with institutional development, the scientific study of how and why organisations change and interact with their environments would be a natural source of knowledge. However, the linkages between the development community and the academic study of organisation is weak. There are few references to the major journals in organisation theory or to standard articles and books in the organisation literature among the reports we have perused and quoted above. The study of technical cooperation would probably have benefited from a multidisciplinary approach and from a wider frame of reference than it presently has. The contacts with the research community are limited, and heavily biased towards the field of development economics. But the key to an improvement lies more in the field of defining relationships, identifying roles for different actors, understanding coordination and developing the perspectives of organisational transformation, and those subjects are not much present in the debate on technical cooperation.

Centralisation versus decentralisation

When studying structures over several years, as we do here, it is very hard to observe any general trends in how centralisation (or its opposite) affects learning. Some organisations have decentralised many operational decisions in recent years. UNDP's progress in national execution would hardly have been possible without an increase in the power of field offices. By all accounts, the World Bank has also become a more decentralised organisation. These are also the two organisations where most of the change in technical cooperation has taken place.

In other agencies, the trends of centralised versus decentralised decision-making have gone back and forth. By many accounts, the Swedish aid system has become increasingly centralised over many years. Other organisations have seen a growth of power at regional levels, but decreased influence for country levels and headquarters. But we cannot really attribute the lack of learning on technical cooperation to these changes. The nature and extent of decentralisation is too ambiguous.

New knowledge about technical cooperation is generated in close cooperation with the host countries. Those researchers who have spent considerable amounts of time in the project and programme settings, and who have listened carefully to the views and opinions of stakeholders in the Third World countries have generally also come up with more critical, and novel conclusions. Knowledge per se does not always need to be developed, the knowledge of how and why technical cooperation fails has long been present in the countries and institutions that are supposed to benefit from the cooperation. Progress in thinking takes place when the communication between the partners is real and frequent.

However, for participation to take place, it may well be necessary to have a strong regional, or field office structure. The more centralised the organisation, the less competence and the less budgetary authority we find in the field offices, the less likely it is that the host countries' concerns will be heard and acted upon. Most agencies also have a structure where sector units at headquarters have a large say in

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the design of projects and programmes. Coupled to the fact that there are no professional networks, or formal organisational structures on technical cooperation as such, it may be difficult for the experience on technical cooperation performance to penetrate to the right level when decisions of project design are taken. In spite of good intentions, the formal structure and the division of labour between country offices, headquarters, sector and regional bureaus make learning difficult. The lessons from experience, and the lessons that emanate from participatory practices do not penetrate to a level where they can be applied.

Process related factors affecting learning.

Let us now turn to the process related factors that affect learning; that is, the factors that relate to the flow of information and power, the decision making, and nature of the daily work load in the organisations.

External pressure for change

Knowledge is generated and spread mainly through the multilateral organisations. As we have seen, the practice on technical cooperation has changed more rapidly in the World Bank and UNDP than it has in the bilateral organisations. But UNDP has not only changed because the organisation itself wanted to change. In fact, many staff members of UNDP, at all levels, strongly opposed the shift towards NEX. The fact that it took more than 20 years to accomplish change indicates that there was a strong resistance to overcome.

First of all, many staff members feared that technical cooperation would be less professionally conducted and that the overall quality of the programme would drop. But equally fearsome was the prospect of uprooting the existing division of labour between the UNDP and the specialised agencies of the UN system. Even though the specialised agencies stood most to lose directly, as they were no longer guaranteed technical cooperation contracts through the UNDP, it could easily be seen that UNDP might also loose organisational support by changing its modality of operations. There were good reasons for UNDP's professional staff and management to be nervous about what the change might mean.

Consequently, the change occurred mainly because of external pressure. It was the Governing Council which ordered UNDP into the experiment, it was the Council that asked for evaluations of progress, and which urged the organisation to continue the NEX experiment. It was the voices of the developing countries in the first place, which forced the organisation to change. In the final analysis, the request for change came from the General Assembly of the UN. Organisational learning depended on powerful external stakeholders twisting the arm of the organisation, and forcing it to adopt new ways of delivering technical cooperation. Without the decisions of the Governing Council and the General Assembly, UNDP would have kept to the old tripartite mode of delivering technical cooperation and the progress recorded to date would have been non-existent.

The developing countries have power over UNDP which they obviously lack in bilateral organisations. This position, and the consequential pressure, was absolutely necessary for organisational learning to take place. Interestingly, the industrialised countries followed suit, and opted for changes in UNDP policy that they have not been able to implement in their own bilateral aid programmes. The reasons may well be that on the domestic scene, commercial interest groups block similar changes. The consulting community, industrial and commercial concerns, labour market considerations, as well as other policy objectives that are to be realised through aid, impede such major overhauls of technical cooperation. The World Bank's Executive Board has also taken a major interest in the effectiveness of the Bank's technical cooperation projects, and has set up a specific Task Force for improvements. The changes in procurement practice occurred before the Task Force was set up, but the changes have occurred faster because of Board attention to the issue.

Competence bases for technical cooperation

When the importance of macro-economic analysis became increasingly emphasised during the 1980s, the agencies responded by recruiting more economists. Most agencies have also responded to environmentalist pressure by recruiting people with skills in environmental assessments and in environmental technology.

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But there has not been any similar surge in recruiting people with skills in organisational development and organisational assessment. The agencies have not been able to expand their competence bases, nor to create appropriate competence networks to get access to skills in institutional development. Institutional "technology" remains poorly understood, and staff training has not kept pace with the extent and complexity of organisational issues that have emerged in the 1990s. This lack of sustained attention to institutional aspects of development is an important cause of poor technical cooperation performance.

Taking the World Bank as an example, the Bank has developed an improved capacity in public sector reform and other specialised areas such as privatisation, public expenditure and municipal management. It increased the number of staff with specialised skills in institutional analysis, especially in the regions. The Bank has taken some important initiatives on capacity development especially in Africa. Some of its research work on institutional issues is widely read in the development community, and the Bank has taken the lead in introducing the concepts of institutional economics into operational practice. But it still has no central unit responsible for mainstreaming institutional thinking into Bank projects. And it still has not fashioned either a coherent and compelling body of thinking on institutional issues or a body of operating tools to offer either its own staff or others in the development community. The Bank has not generated the critical mass of energy, determination, resources and staff commitment to shift its performance with respect to institutional development to a higher level (Baser and Morgan, 1996).

Sida created the unit for public administration in the mid 1980s, and it remains the centre for thinking on issues of institutional development within the organisation. But the unit works with technical cooperation in public administration, and it is primarily under these programs that the thinking on institutional development takes place. However, there are organisations in health, education, industry, infrastructure, and all other spheres of life as well. There is a danger that the development of skills in organisational analysis is seen mainly as an area of interest to the public administration unit. Its professional skills do not reach out adequately to other parts of the organisation.

UNDP set up the Management Development Programme (MDP) in 1988 to strengthen UNDP's work in the field of public sector management improvement. MDP has particularly focussed on countries undertaking major economic and political reforms, where there is a need for a long-term systematic development of institutions for public management. MDP was required to be comprehensive in its analysis of capacities and needs, and its work is generally considered to be very supportive in the field offices. But the unit consists of a handful of persons, who in theory could have backstopping functions in almost all UNDP's technical cooperation projects. The MDP unit has made a contribution in the organisation, and has made its competence available to the development community. Its handbook on process consultation (UNDP/MDP) remains, in parallel to the World Bank manual on technical assistance, one of the major sources for hands-on, practical advice on the implementation of institution building projects. But at the same time it illustrates the need for additional competence building, and even though an excellent handbook, it is seldom seen being used, and it is not widely known among other agencies.

The donor agencies generally lack the capacity to do institutional assessments especially with respect to issues such as levels of commitment and ownership, the capacity to absorb and make use of external assistance, institutional risk factors and sustainability. The methodological base is weak, and so is it in the organisational sciences. These assessments must be made with qualitative methods that are difficult to apply, that need to be adaptable to external circumstances, and are time consuming. They are also susceptible to tricky cultural differences, and compared to economic and financial analysis, they may appear to lack professional substance. The latter is not true per se, but in organisational cultures that often have a preference for figures and ready-made checklists, the sort of skills needed for institutional analysis - beyond the simple structures and procedures of the formal organisation - may be difficult to harmonise. The agencies we studied have no staff training programmes in institutional assessment, and the level of staff training is insufficient given the background of most programme officers which remains heavily oriented towards economics and finance. The gap between existing staff skills and task requirements may be greater in technical cooperation than in any other type of development cooperation.

Working procedures and technical cooperation

Organisations have core competences around which they build their culture, rewards and incentives, career patterns, resource allocations and other facets of organisational life. Technical cooperation is

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seldom a core competence, even in an organisation such as UNDP. In the World Bank, the technical assistance loans are a small - though still significant - part of the portfolio, so it is not surprising that the core competences, and most aspects of organisational life evolve around financial and economic analysis. In other organisations, the substantial development issues take over. The UNDP has developed its core competence around the issue of sustainable human development as a theoretical concept, and its concomitant practical skills are concerned with aspects of project development in the economic, environmental, energy and related fields. Apart from the above mentioned Management Development Programme, there is limited development of skills in organisational competence.

There are many reasons why technical cooperation projects are difficult to master as subjects of a core competence. First of all, they are widely different. Their work horse character, inherent messiness and intractability at the implementation stage do not make them attractive to many professional staff members. The technical cooperation projects do not lend themselves to convenient detachment or analytical virtuosity. Their outcomes are difficult to measure with any precision and many of the methodological approaches involved, such as institutional analysis, suffer in the eyes of many from lack of rigour (Baser and Morgan, 1996).

There are also other procedural constraints to learning on technical cooperation. Rapid staff turnover may have more damaging effects on learning from technical cooperation projects than most other aspects of development cooperation. The time it takes for institutions to develop is long, and they may need to be followed over several years. It is also important to follow up from a design phase through to project completion several years later. Sida projects in institutional twinning may have lasted as long as 15 to 20 years. Few staff members have a full grasp of the history of such a project - and hence few are in a position to learn fully from the experience. Those who do possess that sense of history are of course found in the host country, so the necessity of joint learning is strongly reinforced.

Time constraints and budget targets.

At the level of day to day operations, people mention time limits and work pressure as the major obstacles to learning (Samset et al, 1991). Most agencies have experienced sharp reductions in the numbers of staff, some by as much as 30%. Naturally, that means that much of whatever spare time there was has gone, and people have to focus sharply on absolute priorities. But learning opportunities often appear under unpredictable circumstances, and in the not always target oriented interaction with others. There is no doubt that while the overall efficiency of most agencies can be, and has been, improved, the overall propensities for learning have suffered. At the level of the knity gritty daily work load, the balance has tilted from learning; from long run effectiveness in favour of short term efficiency.

Closely connected to the time pressure and the need for efficiency, is the requirement to move money. Parliaments and the international community allocate funds in order for these to be spent. Hence, the agencies generally have a pressure to reach spending targets. RRV (1989) identified the need to spend money on time as the most important factor that affected learning negatively at Sida. The pressure to spend allocations on time lead people to opt for old and certain ways of doing things (even though effects were dubious), and promoted a concern for quantity rather than quality.

Cultural aspects of learning.

The attitudes to research and knowledge

The World Bank and the UNDP, as well as the DAC/OECD, have played major roles in influencing the bilateral organisations and in shaping their thinking on technical cooperation. We have quoted studies commissioned by bilateral organisations as well, but it is very clear that the studies that have had a major impact are mostly originating with the multilateral organisations. These reports are more widely disseminated, and for the most part they combine theoretical rigour with solid empirical data. Close interaction between the multilateral and bilateral organisations are thus preconditions for the learning that does take place.

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The lessons learned by the bilateral organisations are more widely spread when they are published in cooperation, and when they are further elaborated through international conferences. The Nordic evaluation of technical cooperation is a case in point. Although the study did not contain much information which was not known already by the organisations commissioning it, the fact that they did so jointly gave it heavier weight.

Contrasted to these, the bilateral organisations produce a wealth of brief monographs that pinpoint problems and elaborate recommendations. These studies are an industry in its own right, judging from their numbers. But their life span is short, and they are not much spread outside each agency. In fact, they seldom appear to be much used within the agencies. The nature of such studies reflects an impatience with theory and with the complexity of the world as it is. The managerial culture looks for easy solutions and quick fixes. To date, none has appeared, but the quest for easy solutions is not harmless. Scarce time and resources are used for activities with limited impact and little consequence for organisational learning.

The development of common awareness and sense of direction

As the struggle around NEX in UNDP demonstrates, there is no clear consensus on how technical cooperation is best delivered. Although there are many research reports on results - or the lack of results - and with accompanying recommendations on how to improve performance, many still challenge these. As an example, Sida launched major technical cooperation projects in the field of vocational training in Tanzania well into the 1990s. These were designed as traditional expatriate advisory services, in spite of the organisational commitment to change technical cooperation practice in the wake of the joint Nordic evaluation of technical cooperation.

However, as Sida is a decentralised organisation, individual programme officers may still design projects without much change - if they do not believe the suggested changes lead the organisation in the right direction. Their practice is facilitated as there are no centres of expertise on technical cooperation which would scrutinise projects from a professional standpoint.

Here is a difficult balance to tread, which connects back to the discussion of knowledge structures conducive for learning. Whereas some diversity is necessary and helpful, the diversity must not become too high - then the organisation drifts into chaotic conditions. But there must also be room for different opinions, and we may not know which of todays follies will be tomorrow's wisdom. Hence, the organisation should not, in theory, enforce all its newfound experience of best practice. But who decides when it is time to throw caution to the wind and make sure that a certain aspect of learning and knowledge development is so certain that everybody should obey the rules?

4.4 Conclusions.

It would seem that the most important source of learning on technical cooperation during the last 10 to 12 years has been in the area of knowledge about results. There has been an increasing number of studies in development economics, as well as evaluation reports commissioned by the aid agencies that report on the low or even negative impact of technical cooperation. Whereas authoritative sources in the mid 1980s concluded that success rates of technical cooperation projects were up to 80%, there are now few who dare to claim such high success rates. This can not only be explained by higher ambition levels, but should be attributed to more rigorous evaluation work, or to accumulative effects that become more visible as time passes. In addition, the host countries where technical cooperation takes place have taken a more determined stance, and have become more articulate in their criticism of prevailing modes of cooperation.

The development community has generated more knowledge about various instruments to effectuate technical cooperation. In particular, there has been much theoretical attention devoted to creating conceptual clarity, defining the objective and processes of capacity building and institutional development. The process of generating new knowledge has not really created any paradigmatic shifts in understanding technical cooperation. By and large, the development community has been engaged in single-loop learning on technical cooperation.

We have not really been able to find any examples of what could be called double-loop learning; that is, learning which would lead to new ways of thinking about and implementing technical cooperation. On

the contrary, knowledge growth can be described through two parallel processes. The first is an increasing complexity of the phenomenon being studied. The development community knows more about the different role configurations of technical cooperation, it knows more about the different instruments and how they interlock with each other, and it knows more about the dysfunctional tendencies in technical cooperation.

The second process can be characterised as one of a growing synthesis about development requirements. In the mid 1990s, there has been an increasing awareness that many of the basic requirements for effective development assistance have been missing. Factors which were first mentioned twenty to thirty years ago have again come to the surface, such as the importance of local commitment, participatory planning, process approaches to development planning, and careful monitoring and attention to implementation. Many of the lessons that are drawn on technical cooperation today, have the flair of a return to basics.

There are changes in practice, but it is almost as if each agency had its own solution to the problems of technical cooperation. Where the UNDP has pioneered the concept of national execution, the World Bank has increased its award of contracts to firms from developing countries, and Sida has emphasised institutional twinning. The solution adopted by one agency hardly features among the changes implemented by another. Though the agencies learn from each other conceptually, and theoretically, they prefer to adopt different practical approaches.

Among the factors which have the highest importance for organisational learning stands outside pressure. It is the external environments which have prompted organisations to take the most drastic steps to improve their delivery of technical assistance. Among these sources of external pressure, the first and foremost are the developing country governments. We are tempted to say that without the strong voice of the developing countries, penetrating right into the executive boards of aid agencies, any meaningful reform of technical cooperation is hardly possible.

Chapter 5. The Design of an Evaluation Function

This case study examines such key issues as: how the design and use of the evaluation function affects its role in organisational learning; how evaluation results are fed into the "corporate memory"; and even more importantly, how the organisational learning so derived is used to improve performance. It reviews major developments in the knowledge about the scope and functions of evaluation, and shows to what extent the practice of evaluation work has changed. Two research methods were used. First there was a literature search, and secondly structured interviews were carried out in 8 international aid agencies viz.: The World Bank (including the EDI and IFC), UNDP, WHO, the European Commission, Sida, the three German agencies BMZ, GTZ and KfW, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and DfID (formerly the ODA) in the UK.

5.1 Advances in knowledge.

The evaluation of development cooperation began in Europe during the late 1960's (it had started rather earlier in the United States), but it didn't reach any kind of maturity until the mid-1980's when it was described as 'coming of age' (Cracknell, 1988). Up to then it had been treated as something rather experimental - a new topic that still had to justify itself. But since then it has been accepted as an essential component of aid management, and there has been a growing volume of research writings and methodological and conceptual reviews which have added greatly to the stock of knowledge on the subject. The changes in attitudes to, and design of, evaluations can be summarised under the following headlines:

Accountability - v - Lesson Learning

The mid 1980's saw the publication of two very influential books which highlighted the fact that evaluation reports, as they were then being carried out, did not enable a definitive answer to be given to the question 'Does aid work?' (Cassen, 1985, Riddell, 1987). In short, these two books drew attention to a key issue that had dominated evaluation work since it first began (and still does), namely the question of what is the underlying purpose of evaluation work - is it accountability or lesson-learning, or some combination of the two?

There is no simple answer to the question as it all depends on the relative pressure bearing on the evaluation function from the (donor side) stakeholders on the one hand, especially Parliament, The Treasury, and the media, and from the aid practitioners on the other. The relative importance of these two pressures fluctuates from time to time, and according to circumstances affecting the aid agency, so that the emphasis on the accountability objective can change, even within the same agency, from one period of time to another. Most agencies have had to accept that an uneasy compromise between the two objectives is inevitable. This is still probably the single most contentious issue affecting the location and role of an evaluation function.

Knowledge Sharing

The last decade has been characterised by a much greater sharing of knowledge about the evaluation function between all the aid agencies, in the private sector as well as the public sector. The process began even before the mid-1980's with the setting up of the DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation, which provides an invaluable forum for the fuller exchange of knowledge. Much of this occurs informally as the evaluators meet together, but the Expert Group has also undertaken a number of more formal attempts to exchange information and to harmonise terminology and practices. The report 'Methods and Procedures in Aid Evaluation' (OECD, 1986), which built on the excellent glossary of evaluation terms produced some

time earlier by the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations (JIU, 1978), was a great step forward towards achieving a common language. For instance up to that point in time it had been common practice to use the term 'evaluation' as if it were synonymous with "appraisal", which was very confusing, but since the publication of the DAC report that has seldom happened. Getting agreement on terminology is a vital first step in enhancing the knowledge base in any new area of study.

The next important step towards widening the knowledge base was to facilitate the sharing of information about each other's evaluation activities and reports, and this led eventually to the creation of the world-wide evaluation database which is managed by CIDA on behalf of the global evaluation community. Evaluators everywhere can now access this splendid database covering virtually all the evaluation reports being produced each year. In addition most aid agencies continue to operate their own internal databases, as these can be tailored to meet the specific needs of each agency, but the existence of the global database ensures that those who have a real need to go beyond what their own agency can offer in terms of evaluation coverage can do so without difficulty. The DAC Expert Group recently evaluated the effectiveness of this data system and various improvements have since been made (OECD, 1991).

The academic community has also contributed towards this general widening of the knowledge base regarding the evaluation function, and two conferences of evaluators and academics were organised by the European Association of Development Institutes which led to the publication of two important books (Stokke, 1991a, and 1991b). The second of these describes the evaluation systems of many of the principal aid agencies, and in a penetrating summing up Stokke offers some insights into the way the evaluation function has evolved which have helped to set the academic agenda in evaluation in the years since then. Some of the aid agencies themselves have organised evaluation conferences, one of the first being the two-day international conference organised by the ODA in 1983 (Cracknell, 1984), which was followed by many other similar conferences, the latest being the International Evaluation and Development Conference organised by the World Bank in 1994 (World Bank, 1995). The UNDP is planning to organise a major international conference on evaluation in two years' time.

This process of widening the knowledge base in evaluation led to the establishment of new coordinating mechanisms additional to the DAC Expert Group. Thus the Heads of Evaluation Units of the European Union Member States meet annually to discuss matters of shared interest (and to organise joint evaluation studies such as the one on Food Aid that was recently completed); and the Heads of Evaluation Units of the UN also meet regularly under the aegis of the UNDP in the Inter-Agency Evaluation Working Group. The World Bank is currently proposing that all the evaluation units of the development banks should meet together regularly to share experiences.

Even more significantly, in many ways, there has been an on-going process in recent years of building bridges between the evaluators of development aid and those working in other parts of the public sector. For example the European Community has undertaken the task of ensuring better co-ordination between the evaluators in Directorate Generals I and VIII, responsible for development, and all the other Directorates covering other fields (Sensi and Cracknell, 1991), and there are now regular meetings between all the evaluators in the European Commission. Then there has been the setting up of Evaluation Societies in Europe along the lines of the large and well-established American Evaluation Society.

The European Evaluation Society held its first meeting in The Hague in 1994; the newly formed United Kingdom Evaluation Society held its first meeting in 1995, and in 1996 the first-ever global evaluation conference was called in Vancouver. This interchange between evaluators in development and those working in other parts of the public domain has been a somewhat sobering experience for the former who had been hitherto rather isolated since their day-to-day work doesn't usually bring them into contact with colleagues in other ministries.

Broadening the Scope of Evaluation

In parallel with the general sharing of information about each other's evaluation work, the evaluation community began, in the late 1980's, to turn its attention to a number of key areas of common concern. Academic researchers were already stressing the need to pay more attention to gender issues in evaluation (Swantz, 1990), and the DAC Expert Group initiated an exploratory study of this topic (OECD, 1989). The

results were very disappointing in that very few of the Member Countries of the DAC were tackling the gender issues in a serious way in their evaluation work and this remains one of the least satisfactory aspects of evaluation activity. Another key topic was sustainability, which was fast becoming the principal criterion of successful development aid, and the DAC Expert Group carried out a study which amply confirmed the importance attached to this subject in all evaluation work.

In parallel with a widespread adoption of participatory methods, there has also been a new emphasis on the stakeholders, especially the 'primary stakeholders' (who, in DfID parlance at any rate, are not those who are putting up the money, as would be the case in most other relationships, but those who are receiving it, i.e. the direct beneficiaries). The DfID has introduced new procedures for identifying the stakeholders and analysing what their respective interests are in the evaluation. These procedures have contributed towards changing the mindsets of DfID staff, from thinking of the beneficiaries as the passive partners in the aid relationship to thinking of them as the most important stakeholders.

Evaluation's Role in Project Cycle Management

One of the most important lessons of feedback from evaluation findings was that in many cases projects or programmes could not be effectively evaluated because the objectives had never been specified in the first place, and no-one had thought about what kind of information needed to be collected to monitor progress towards the achievement of objectives. In other words there was little attempt at project cycle management. This led evaluators to search for improved systems of project cycle management. In the USA, Canada, and some UN agencies such as UNDP, the Logical Framework had already been developed by the mid-80s and was in regular use, but in Europe only the German Technical Cooperation agency GTZ, with its own 'Zopp' system, was applying the same kind of techniques.

Some of the development banks (but not the World Bank) were using it, as were also some of the NGOs. The decade from 1986 onwards was to see a major development in this area, spearheaded in nearly every case by the evaluators in each agency, although not in the case of the World Bank where it was the Operational Policy Group which sponsored the recent introduction of the Logical Framework rather than the Operations Evaluation Department - perhaps an indication that the latter is less closely linked to the operational side of the Bank than is the case with the evaluation function in many other agencies.

In 1985 the ODA decided to adopt the Logical Framework on a mandatory basis, and soon other agencies were also using it. The European Commission introduced its Integrated Project Cycle Management system in 1991, and over half a million ECU were spent on training all the staff in its use (Eggers, 1992). Denmark, Italy, Belgium and Spain, have all adopted the Logical Framework, whilst France uses its own version of it. In 1996 Sida decided to adopt the system and is training all its staff in its use.

The World Bank has also decided to adopt the system, having previously resisted on the grounds that the economic rate of return was sufficient, and it is now investing considerable resources in developing performance indicators. This trend was supported by academic researchers who helped to evolve improved versions of the Logical Framework matrix (Coleman, 1986; Wiggins and Shields, 1993). It is difficult to overestimate the importance of systematic project cycle management techniques for organisational learning: they provide a vital framework for the injection of lessons from experience, at each stage of the project cycle, and they greatly facilitate the monitoring and evaluation process. The Logical Framework constitutes an invaluable tool for learning and is probably the single most important advance that has been made in the field of aid evaluation and aid administration in the last decade.

Trend to Monitoring, and Impact Studies

Linked with this interest in project cycle management techniques, has been the tendency for evaluators to move away from the evaluation of newly-completed projects towards, on the one hand, the evaluation-cum-monitoring of on-going projects, and on the other, to impact studies conducted some years after the aid has come to an end. An ongoing evaluation is sometimes called "formative evaluation" to distinguish it from the evaluation of completed projects (sometimes called "summative evaluation").

There are several reasons for this movement in two opposite directions. One is that evaluators felt they were losing influence because they had come to be regarded as purveyors of stale goods. Their findings were often repeating what everyone already knew (even if they seemed to do nothing about it!). The evaluations tended to take so long to implement that by the time they appeared everyone had lost interest in the results and had moved on to other things. Researchers in Scandinavia pointed out that this delay was threatening the status of the evaluation function in general and urged that evaluations should be implemented more speedily (Samset, Forss, and Hauglin, 1993), whilst a recent evaluation by the DfID of its capacity to learn from evaluations makes the same point (Flint and Austin, 1993)

Another reason for the growing interest in monitoring on the part of evaluators everywhere is that by the time evaluations of newly completed projects appear it is too late for the aid agency to do anything to influence the project or programme being evaluated, whereas with monitoring there is instant feedback to the project or programme itself. It is also the case that just as the evaluators have usually been in the front line in developing improved methods of monitoring, as part of project cycle management, so they are interested in synthesising the results of monitoring to make them more useful for the organisation as a whole at the programme or policy level..

At the same time there has been a growing interest in impact evaluations carried out some years after the aid has finished (Royal Netherlands Embassy, Islamabad, 1989). This is partly to test sustainability, but also to learn general lessons about those factors that facilitate the successful implementation of the participatory approach....how successful are the participatory methods now being developed in terms of sustainable projects? Only evaluators can provide an answer to this question, and so they have been moving into this new field, albeit much too slowly.

The Increasing Role of the NGOs

An important development during the last decade has been the rapid growth in importance of the NGOs, mainly as a result of the switch in emphasis from technology-oriented projects towards socially-oriented ones, and also because the donors came to realise that the NGOs were better placed to implement projects aimed at helping the poor than governments were. Increasingly some of the aid funds were channelled through the NGOs, but the price of this was that the donors demanded at least a minimum level of accountability, and this gave an important boost to the rapid development of evaluation techniques by the NGOs.

However the NGOs were never very comfortable with the sort of formal evaluation techniques that the donors used, and so their response was to develop more participatory approaches of their own in a genuinely partnership relationship. It is probably true to say that it is the NGOs that have done most to spearhead participatory approaches in the UK and elsewhere. It is significant, for instance, that it was 6 European NGOs (with ODA) who sponsored the international conference on the Evaluation of Social Development Policies at the University of College, Swansea, in 1989 (Marsden and Oakley, 1990), and that the most innovative contributions on that occasion came from representatives of the NGOs who had pioneered these new techniques. They called for new evaluation methodologies that see evaluations as 'instruments for liberation and tools for empowerment', and which break away from out-dated evaluation approaches that 'consign insiders and outsiders to separate sides of the fence'.

Fourth Generation Evaluation

Until recently the evaluation profession in Europe did not have very close links with its huge sister profession in the United States, but that has changed with the coming into existence of the European Evaluation Society and other Evaluation Societies in Europe, and the cross-fertilisation of ideas and experience that these developments have fostered. Among the ideas coming from America is the new concept of the evaluator as a facilitator and mediator, or even as a negotiator, which is embodied in the influential book 'Fourth Generation Evaluation' (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Guba and Lincoln worked especially in the educational field, and according to them the three generations were:

(1) The 'Measurement Generation' i.e. the unbiased evaluator simply applied a scientific test of some kind, such as an IQ Test, and then announced the results.

(2) The 'Description Generation', i.e. the evaluator not only applied tests but supplemented these with descriptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the people being evaluated.

(3), The 'Judgment Generation', i.e. the evaluator is not content with description alone but now pronounces judgment.

Guba and Lincoln considered that all three approaches were biased towards quantitative analysis of a quasi-scientific nature. So they introduced the idea of a 'Fourth Generation', which involves identifying the stakeholders, studying the interactions between the stakeholders and their respective claims and concerns, trying to fill any gaps in knowledge, and eventually fostering a debate between the stakeholder groups to try to reach a consensus (Laughlin and Broadbent, 1996). The whole objective of Fourth Generation evaluation is to get away from the former dominance of the agency funding the evaluation, and of the evaluator.

The previous three 'generations' don't match very closely experience in the evaluation of development aid in Europe, but the ideas embodied in the 'Fourth' generation resonate so well with the process approach and participatory evaluation that the term has come into quite general use for development as well as for other sectors. The approach is revolutionary in that instead of the evaluator adopting a detached position, to ensure impartiality, he/she now has to get alongside the people being evaluated and almost become part of what is going on, yet still somehow capable of standing back and taking a detached viewpoint. This indeed is what those evaluators who are implementing participatory methods are trying to do, so Fourth Generation evaluation is already happening and will certainly preoccupy evaluators for many years ahead.

The Design of an Evaluation Function

The way an evaluation function is designed, and particularly the degree of independence it has from other activities within the organisation, depend primarily upon the underlying objectives that it is intended to serve. If accountability is the key objective the evaluation function will generally be given a high degree of independence, and it will be located in the organisational structure in such a way that its independence is assured. For example the Operations Evaluation Department of the World Bank reports directly to the Board of Directors, as does Sida, and the Board of UNDP has been seriously considering moving to this system as well. In KfW independence is assured by the use of the auditing firm Cooper and Lybrand.

However in the other aid agencies in the case study accountability wasn't considered to be so important that it justified this degree of independence, although in nearly every case it was recognised that some element of independence for the evaluation function was desirable, whilst at the same time ensuring that the evaluation function remained integrated with what the agency as a whole was trying to achieve. It is always a sensitive balance because independence can sometimes mean an element of isolation from the operational part of the office (as is thought to be the case, to some extent, with the World Bank, although the Director General of the Operations Evaluation Department denies that this is a serious problem), and at times the balance seems to tilt to one side or the other.

An example of this was when the new Sida came into being, and the location of the evaluation function came under review. Previously it had been located in the Policy Department but the newly appointed Head felt strongly that evaluation should not be so closely linked to policy, so it was removed from Policy and combined with Internal Audit, and it now reports to the Board. The new Department focuses especially on improving the quality of the evaluation work in Sida generally, as well as the evaluation work it is directly responsible for.

There are some agencies where evaluation is already combined with Internal Audit (Sida, FINNIDA, CIDA and KfW for example), but the general consensus in the evaluation community as a whole seems to be that evaluation should be kept separate from any other responsibility because of the obvious need for it not to have any direct involvement in the activities it may have to evaluate. In the DfID a review of the work of the Evaluation Department was recently carried out by the Internal Audit Department, and

one of the key outcomes was that the latter would prefer the projects being evaluated to be selected on a random basis, but the Evaluation Department felt they could not do this and at the same time meet the requirements of the office for lesson-learning - the resources were not adequate.

This neatly illustrates an important difference in approach between Internal Audit and evaluation. Sometimes there is a rather confrontational relationship between the aid agency and the auditors (as has generally been the case between the Commission and the Court of Auditors for instance) and this is not good from the evaluation point of view. Although the internal auditors work closely with the evaluators in most agencies (especially as the former now emphasise 'value for money' as much as financial probity and adherence to laid down procedures) they are not really charged with the responsibility of reviewing the objectives of what the aid agency is doing and that is what most clearly distinguishes the audit function from the evaluation function. In some cases the decision to link the two functions seems to have been due more to short-term personnel management factors than to the merits of the case.

Some aid agencies are not free-standing organisations in their own right but are agencies responsible to a parent Ministry,, and this often affects the way the evaluation function operates. The classic cases of this are of course GTZ and KfW, both of which are agencies reporting directly to BMZ, but it is also the case, if to a lesser extent, with Sida and Norad which have to report to their respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs. Reference has already been made to the important role played by Cooper and Lybrand in acting as BMZ's eyes and ears in KfW, and in the case of GTZ there is no doubt that their status as an agency severely restricts their freedom to develop new approaches to participatory evaluation, despite the assurances given by BMZ staff that they do not unduly hamper GTZ's freedom to innovate.

There is not much evidence that Sida's evaluation activities are much influenced by its role as an agency of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but that may be because Sida has established a very close and intimate working relationship with the Ministry, whereas this is more difficult in the case of the two German agencies because they are over 100 miles from Bonn. The Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs apparently doesn't feel the need to interfere too much in what the Department for Evaluation and Internal Audit does. The evaluation function in Sida has been remarkably stable over many years, as indeed it has been in the DfID and the World Bank, but the recent merger of the old Sida with the three former separate agencies, SAREC, Swedecorp and BITS, will considerably widen the scope of the evaluation work of the new organisation.

Another important factor affecting the work of the evaluation function is the extent of outside pressure. Reference has already been made to the way pressure from the Member States led to a massive increase in the budget and staff of the Evaluation Unit in the European Commission. In the case of the DfID pressure has come from a number of outside sources, such as the National Audit Board and the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aid. Pressure groups, such as the Real Aid Committee, make effective use of evaluation reports to put pressure on the Ministry, e.g. to evaluate poverty focused aid. In the Scandinavian countries, and in The Netherlands, the aid agencies seem to have developed closer relations with outside interests, which may take the sting out of much external criticism, but at the same time it means that the evaluation function has to be responsive to the issues that concern these outside bodies. Following a report by the Dutch Auditor General, all ministries in The Netherlands have been instructed that their evaluation function must be 'well embedded' in the organisation, both for accountability and for lesson-learning.

The status of evaluation in an agency, and the resources made available for it, tend to fluctuate rather alarmingly, and not always in the same direction in every agency. The status of the function may be going up in one country whilst it is going down in another. Its status has certainly been rising recently in Sida, EDI, IFC, and UNDP (with substantial recent increases in the budget and staff). It seems to be more or less stable in the DfID, The Netherlands, GTZ and KfW, except that in The Netherlands a recent evaluation (Operations Review Unit, 1995) showed that the project-level evaluations, which are carried out by the operational departments, were poorly done and the Minister has therefore decided that they should be virtually abandoned, and should only be done in exceptional circumstances. In BMZ the evaluation function seems to have been stable in size but has perhaps lost some influence.

The European Commission had a period of several years of rapid expansion, but, as mentioned above, during the case study the news came through that it is to be drastically cut in size, apparently as part of the process of cost-cutting. In the WHO the situation is not very clear in that the central evaluation

function is small and the self-evaluation function is probably static or declining, but there has been a big increase in evaluations funded from extra-budgetary funds. Occasionally the change in status seems to have been due to internal reorganisations (e.g. UNDP and EDI), but more often it is due to outside pressure, e.g. from the Member States in the case of the multilateral organisations and the European Commission.

Sometimes it doesn't seem to be related to any logical or rational argument but is simply due to expediency. Some years ago, for instance, a newly arrived Director of the EDI (not the present one) decided to down-grade the evaluation function because he needed the post more urgently elsewhere; and this is not an isolated example. There have been cases where the evaluation function has been combined with another function merely to create a workload appropriate for the person who has been appointed Head of the Unit. Any small free-standing unit is always vulnerable to this kind of thing.

Increased Local Autonomy

Yet another factor affecting the way the evaluation function works in an aid agency is the degree to which decentralisation has taken place. All aid agencies have been pursuing decentralisation policies, some, like the DfID, more vigorously than others (like BMZ which has not moved far down this road), and they have been experiencing the effect of this, which is a reduction in the influence of the staff, and the units (such as the Evaluation Unit), still located at Head Office. As decentralisation has been accompanied by a process of increasing local autonomy in the administration of aid, and the adoption of participatory techniques, so the need (and indeed the opportunity) for vertical information flows from the top downwards, and from the bottom upwards, have diminished.

If the main objective of people-centred projects is to find out what the beneficiaries themselves want, and to implement projects with the beneficiaries in the driving seat, then the relevance of experience gained elsewhere seems less. Moreover the practice of sending out missions from headquarters to evaluate these projects must surely be drastically reviewed and in future much of the evaluation will need to be conducted by local consultants working in a participatory way alongside the beneficiaries. Part of the emphasis in evaluation work may have to shift from evaluation during the project's life to impact evaluation some time after it has been completed, to establish whether the participatory approach has been successful, and what can be learned to improve it next time round.

5.2 Explaining organisational learning

In this section we move from the design of an evaluation function to how it contributes to organisational learning. This has two aspects: (a) the knowledge that emanates from the evaluation function: how it is acquired, distributed, and stored, and (b) how that knowledge is used to improve the performance of the aid agency, i.e. how organisational learning leads to organisational change. The process of acquiring, distributing and storing knowledge in any organisation will be influenced by three factors: the way the organisation is structured; the internal processes it has evolved and by means of which it carries out its functions; and the cultural climate in which its members have to work - is it conducive to learning or not? These will be discussed in turn.

The impact that evaluation reports have on an organisation's ability to learn will depend in the first instance on the internal structure of the organisation. To illustrate: if the organisation is small scale, tightly structured, and operates locally, the chances of organisational learning are high. But if the organisation is large in scale, has a complicated structure, and operates in a global arena, the chances of organisational learning taking place are far less. The wider the learning arena, the greater are likely to be the problems of acquiring knowledge, distributing it, interpreting and analysing it, and storing it.

In recent years the trend towards decentralisation, and the changes in organisational structures that have taken place as a result, have brought about important changes in the way knowledge is acquired and distributed in aid organisations - from vertical flows to horizontal. Today a substantial degree of autonomy is given to project managers in the field, and considerable financial flexibility, so that they no longer have to refer to headquarters for decisions - they decide most things themselves. Previously the technical and professional advisers would often travel out to advise on projects and programmes in the field, but with decentralisation that is often no longer feasible and the experts have to be positioned

either in the developing countries themselves or at regional offices. As the process approach comes increasingly into use there is less dependence than there used to be on the sharing of experience gained elsewhere in the developing world.

All aid agencies have evolved processes that assist organisational learning, such as periodic reporting, monitoring, project completion reporting, debriefing of experts on return from overseas assignments, and so on. These are all vehicles for organisational learning, but one of the most important is the Logical Framework. This switches the focus of aid management from the provision of inputs and outputs towards the achievement of objectives, and it also introduces the idea of indicators of progress.

It is vitally important, for organisational learning, that the experience gained as a result of evaluation work should be brought to bear in new project or programme planning activities at the earliest possible moment, yet often this doesn't happen. The best way of achieving this kind of feedback is to ensure that a representative of the evaluation unit participates in the process. However there are other ways of achieving the same end. One method is for the evaluation unit to find out what new aid activities are coming along and to send a note to the staff concerned reminding them that there are relevant evaluation reports that they should read as soon as possible. Another technique is to insist that when project submissions are being prepared the project document should not only state that relevant evaluation reports have been studied but actually indicate how they had an impact on the new project or programme. However the effectiveness of formal systems of this kind should not be overemphasised: some of the agencies visited for the case study reported that they were not really very effective in practice and that face-to-face interaction between evaluators and operational staff is far more effective. Another useful method is to set up arrangements whereby a representative of the evaluation unit has to be formally consulted at an early stage in the formulation of the project

The evaluation function can help the organisation to learn by acting as a bridge between monitoring, which is geared to the immediate needs of project management, and the need of policy makers to have a broader insight into what is happening in the organisation. Thus it can synthesise the results of monitoring in a systematic way, using rating systems and analysing the factors making for the successful implementation of projects. Most of the aid agencies in the case study were rapidly moving in this direction, and in doing so they were making the flow of evaluation knowledge more contemporaneous and client oriented.

Evaluators also have an important role through their participation in the strategy and policy-making processes of the agency. In this way they are able to inject the distilled results of all their evaluation experience. However to do this efficiently they should, at the minimum, be aware of all the evaluation work going on in their own organisation, and often this is not the case. Evaluations are frequently conducted by other departments than the Evaluation Unit, and these often neglect to inform the latter. As a rule procedures have been introduced to try to ensure that the evaluation function is kept informed of these other evaluation activities, but in many cases they are not being implemented, although Sida has instituted a system whereby an annual Evaluation Plan is prepared covering also the evaluation activities of operational departments.

Training is a major means for the dissemination of knowledge, but ideas regarding the role of training are rapidly changing. The new concepts are symbolised by the new titles now being given to what were once called Training Units. In the World Bank it is now called the "Learning and Leadership Centre", whilst in UNDP it is called the "Learning Resources Centre". The idea is that teacher-and-taught methods of learning are outmoded: people learn mostly from interaction with each other, so the best learning mode puts people together in an open environment and stimulates self-learning.

The trend towards participatory methods of aid implementation and evaluation, has probably been the most significant learning experience for aid agency staff in the last five years. The techniques are still in the experimental stage, and some agencies have felt the need to systematise this learning process as much as possible. One of the great advantages of participatory evaluation is that it may help to fill the blind-spot in nearly every evaluation function, namely the impact of development aid on the poor.

The term "organisational learning" implies learning that takes place only within the organisation, yet that would be a wrong interpretation in the case of any development agency. The arena in which development aid takes place must include the recipients of the aid, so if there is to be organisational

learning it must also embrace the recipients. But so far as the evaluation function is concerned there has been little progress since the DAC Expert Group, in the late 1980s, pointed out that this was a major deficiency.

Lastly we come to the evaluation process itself. There are a number of ways in which the process can be improved to enhance the learning of the organisation. The operational staff should be brought thoroughly into the picture as to what the objectives of the evaluation process are. Care should be taken when selecting topics for evaluation to ensure that the operational departments' opinions have been sought, and that the eventual programme meets their needs. Some Evaluation Units submit their annual programme of evaluations to a senior committee for vetting, partly to ensure that they are meeting current needs, and partly to give the policy makers a formal opportunity of submitting their own proposals. Client orientation can be a key to subsequent organisational learning. The evaluation function itself should not be immune from evaluation, and in fact most Evaluation Units have carried out (or commissioned outside consultants to do so) evaluations of various aspects of their own evaluation activities, whilst the DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation has given a valuable lead in this direction through its evaluations of selected aspects of the evaluation function.

Evaluation units should report regularly on their activities, usually in an Annual Report, and these often comment on the methodologies and techniques used in the evaluations, as well as on the reliability of the results. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the need for more impact evaluation. One of the mysteries regarding evaluation is that although everyone acknowledges the need for more impact evaluations there has been little movement in that direction. Evaluators need to ensure that issues of vital concern to policy makers are covered systematically in every evaluation: these included sustainability, gender, environment, maintenance and appropriate technology. Learning is more likely to take place when there is a hunger for knowledge, and evaluators need to have sensitive antennae to pick up these signals well in advance. To maximise the learning process there should be some kind of steering committee, including representatives from other departments in the agency, so that there is ownership of the evaluation from the very beginning. For example the Netherlands appoints a Reference Group, (including outsiders, which is rather unusual), and this Group keeps very tight oversight of every phase of the evaluation. An innovative feature of the Dutch system is that there is a counterpart Reference Group in the developing country for each evaluation carried out by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department.

Feedback is crucially important for organisational learning, but it is probably the least effective part of the operation in many agencies. There are four aspects to feedback (leaving aside for the moment the question of how to ensure that knowledge leads to action), as follows: the process of "packaging" the knowledge gained from the evaluation so that it can be better utilised; and the processes of distributing, analysing and storing the results. As regards the packaging of the knowledge gained from the evaluation, this is a vital prerequisite of organisational learning. Very few staff members will read the complete evaluation reports because they simply don't have time: they will generally have to make do with a quick review of the executive summary, and a more careful study of the conclusions and recommendations. The latter are crucial components of every evaluation because they put the findings in a nutshell, and they focus attention on what should be done about them. A few evaluation reports focus mostly on lessons learned, without including any recommendations, but such reports are unlikely to lead to much practical outcome.

Some agencies still confine their evaluation feedback simply to sending out copies of their evaluation reports in the hope that those who need to take note of the findings will do so without any further prodding, but many others have evolved follow-up procedures to try to ensure that action is taken: these will be described later. Many agencies have cut down on the distribution of the full reports (sending them only to the directly interested parties) and instead they send short (usually one-page) summaries (e.g. EVSUMs, EVINFOs, PRECISs etc) widely round the office and outside. The advantage of this (apart from the saving of paper and the burden on hard-pressed staff) is that these sheets can be readily filed in a specially produced ring binder under the relevant sector heading and so they build into a useful memory bank of evaluation findings.

Turning to the analysis of evaluation results, many agencies have adopted the practice of producing broad syntheses and summaries of their evaluation findings, either overall (as Germany does), or by sectors or themes as many other agencies do. This is partly for internal use, but also to meet the needs of the public. Most evaluation functions make a practice of producing an Annual Report on their evaluation

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activities , some of which also include evaluation findings on selected issues, e.g. the Sida Annual Reports, and those of UNDP. Others produce special analyses of selected topics from time to time, and these can be very effective as their timing can be related to the topicality of the issue, and because they can also take account of evaluation findings emanating from other agencies and also academic writings.

There are probably more stakeholders in a typical development operation than in any other comparable activity one could think of. This means that it would be totally wrong to think of feedback only, or even mainly, as relating to the donor organisation itself, yet this seems often to be the case. Organisational learning also covers how the organisation interacts with all its stakeholders in a two-way process, and so their needs for feedback must also be met. The first and most obvious way in which this might be achieved is through allowing all the stakeholders to see the evaluation reports themselves, or at least the summaries. Virtually every aid agency, except Germany, now allows the public to have access to its evaluation reports. The main problem in meeting the needs of the media is that evaluation reports are usually couched in rather dry language and would not appeal to a general readership. It has been suggested that evaluation Units should invite consultants to write more popular articles based on their findings for publication in the media.

Finally, there is the need to ensure that the results of all the evaluation work being carried out somehow enters into the corporate memory, so that the same mistakes will not be repeated again and again. First it should perhaps be stressed at this point that the most effective corporate memory does not lie in formal memory bank systems but in the heads of the people who make up the organisation. That is why the professional advisers are so important. They are the people who spend their whole lives working in the development field, usually in the one specialism, and often spending most of their time overseas. They, above all, constitute the walking/talking memory of the organisation. The substantial increases in the number of such specialists in recent years is a good augury for organisational learning and organisational memory.

Perhaps this is the moment to stress that informal methods of feedback are probably at least as important as more formal methods. Indeed in some small and tightly-knit aid agencies there is probably far less need for formal systems of feedback. People meet every day in the staff restaurant or in the corridors, and whenever someone has gone overseas most people will soon share what has been learned. Large organisations might well consider trying to maximise the opportunities for informal feedback as much as possible, as face-to-face interaction is always far more effective than any memory banks can be.

However, that said, there is still a need in most aid agencies for some kind of formalisation of the corporate memory. Virtually all agencies have now developed Management Information Systems (MIS), but unfortunately these generally contain only very basic information about projects and programmes (titles, sums disbursed, sector classification etc), and very little progress has yet been made in getting qualitative information onto them that might help improve performance. Considering that these MIS arrangements have been in existence for almost a decade it is disappointing that so little progress has been made in adapting them for information that could really enhance organisational learning.

5.3 Application of evaluation findings

If learning implies change, it is surely reasonable to expect the evaluation function to lead to some kind of action or change. Yet crossing this bridge from organisational learning to organisational change seems to be extremely difficult, and the apparent lack of success has led to some disillusionment with the evaluation function itself. Is this simply the result of an over-optimistic idea of what evaluations by themselves can achieve? Is it anyway the evaluators' task to see that learning leads to action?

The evaluation function has a vested interest in trying to ensure that its evaluation reports lead to some kind of action, but to what extent should it assume responsibility for that? It has to tread very warily in this field. It will not do for it to try to become the conscience of the office. Moreover it is not in a position to see every issue in the round. Its findings are only part of the picture. If action is called for, as a result of the evaluation, it will have to be carefully weighed against many other factors, and the ramifications will go far beyond the competence of the evaluation function itself. So how far down this road should the evaluation function go? The answer would seem to be, not very far, but further than at present.

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Apart from its participation in on-going policy discussions, the evaluation function has more chance of stimulating action in response to evaluation reports if there are mechanisms in the organisation to ensure that the evaluation reports are formally discussed, and decisions taken with regard to the recommendations they contain. So far as the lessons at the project level are concerned (referred to in the literature as Single-Loop Learning) there is generally no problem. The evaluation reports will be read by the administrators and professional experts directly responsible for the projects or programmes, and by the other stakeholders with direct responsibility, and it is reasonable to assume that they will take them into account in future actions. The real problem doesn't lie at the project level, but at the programme, sector or policy level, and it is here that formal feedback mechanisms are required.

Many aid agencies don't have any feedback mechanisms at the policy level at all. Those that do include the DfID, the European Commission, UNDP and The Netherlands. In the DfID the Evaluation Department discusses the recommendations contained in every evaluation report with the members of staff most directly concerned and it then produces a cover note which summarises the results of the evaluation, the recommendations, and the reactions of DfID staff, and sets out the department's own recommendations for action. When the evaluation report goes to the Projects and Evaluation Committee (which approves the larger projects in the British aid programme) it is accompanied by this cover note, and in fact the Committee devotes most of the time available to debating whether to accept or reject the recommendations. Unless it is dealing with a very broad policy issue, it does not itself decide what should be done, as only the operational department itself can see the full picture and has the responsibility for action, so it makes recommendations which are then followed up by the responsible department. Every six months the Secretary to the Committee reports on what action has been taken.

The generally disappointing results in terms of action as a result of evaluation findings, may be due mainly to the kind of reward systems in place, i.e. systems that do not reward staff for improving the quality of their work but rather penalise them for any delay in spending the aid funds. The difficulty is that in many aid agencies the aid funds may be lost altogether if they are not spent within a given period. In these circumstances improving the quality of the aid process has to take second priority to ensuring that the available aid funds are disbursed.

There are often other pressing constraints that outweigh any consideration of improving quality. For instance there may be strong political pressure for a certain aid programme to be approved as quickly as possible, and any delay incurred will not be welcome. There is little doubt that one of the most crucial factors for the successful introduction of a quality-improvement-through-learning policy is strong support from the very top, such as Mr Wolfensen has given at the Bank. If the staff really believe that their own career prospects will be enhanced if they demonstrate that they have learning ability, and can act on that learning, then there is a chance that the policy will work. Carol Weiss, giving the plenary address to the American Evaluation Association Conference in 1987, spelled out 5 reasons why evaluations often seem to have little direct impact on policy making as follows:

1. Policy decisions are usually the outcome of the interactions of many people, not just a few,

2. Evaluations alone are seldom convincing or conclusive enough to supply the one correct answer,

3. Often decisions are not based only on rational processes,

4. The decision-takers don't always know what kind of information they need to know - let alone being able to use it effectively when they get it,

5. People are often happy with the status quo and don't want to change. (Weiss, 1987)

Another reason why evaluators have to be realistic about the chances that their evaluation reports can change the world is that the world itself has been changing. It is a far more complicated place than it used to be. Whereas only a decade or so ago the development problems were deemed to be largely technical in nature and relatively straightforward, today they are seen to be of a completely different character. Instead of problems in building roads or schools, or strengthening government institutions, the problems today tend to be holistic in kind, and to involve highly cultural and community-specific issues, such as empowering rural communities; preventing environmental degradation; good governance; human rights; entrepreneurship, health promotion, and so on.

All these are intractable problems. Evaluators often discuss among themselves whether the sort of lessons now emanating from their evaluations, particularly those based on participatory methods, are so culturally and socially site-specific that it would be dangerous to use them in making cross-cultural generalisations. Some believe that evaluators have become over-cautious in this respect, but others are still acutely aware of the differences even between one community and its neighbour. All would probably agree that the evaluator has to adopt a humble posture - it is as much a learning process for him or her as it is for everyone else. It is not so much a process of growing in knowledge as of growing in wisdom, and that presents an altogether greater challenge.

5.4 Conclusions

To sum up, the situation regarding how an evaluation function is designed and implemented looks decidedly messy, and there is a great variety. A recent review by the UNDP of the evaluation functions in the UN Family revealed a similar mosaic pattern, ranging from almost complete integration to almost complete independence. Robert Picciotto, in his concluding remarks at the World Bank 1944 Conference, summed it up well when he said : 'The charitable way to illustrate the state of our art is to liken it to the 'Let a thousand flowers bloom' movement' (World Bank, 1994, Page 255). There seem to be as many variations as there are aid agencies.

The fact is that there is no clear right or wrong way in how an evaluation function should be organised. It will depend on many factors but above all on how the organisation perceives the role of evaluation, viz. whether it is mainly for accountability or for lesson-learning. The role of evaluation as a factor in organisational learning is therefore limited because it doesn't have the sort of assured status and role that for instance Internal Audit has. It still has to struggle to make its voice heard, and to ensure that its reports are heeded.

There are some people who feel that the evaluation profession should be more restrictive and aim to establish minimum standards of quality, and in this context it is significant that one of the major debates when the new UK Evaluation Society was formed was whether it should go down the same road as many other professions and establish standards and entry qualifications for the profession, or whether it should remain open to all. The conclusion was that the evaluation profession is still at the experimental stage, and that it is too early to attempt to codify how it should evolve.

In this context it is unfortunate that there is still so little research into these matters because this could help to clarify which of the existing practices seem to be most successful and which are not. The work by Stokke mentioned earlier was a good beginning, but it needs to be followed up by more systematic research into the effectiveness of different kinds of design and implementation of the evaluation function.

If there is any consensus at all, it would probably be along the following lines: the evaluation function should be as independent as possible of other responsibilities; it should be capable of yielding both useful lessons to improve performance whilst at the same time providing at least a minimum level of accountability; and it should be regarded as an essential component of effective aid management and not just an optional extra. The evaluation function should not be tossed about like a football at every reorganisation or fresh reform. It is time to treat it as one of the basic requirements of any aid agency's organisational structure, just as personnel management is, and to give it the resources and status it needs to do the job.

6.1 The limits of organisational learning

Let us now turn to a closer review of organisational learning. In doing so we have three case studies that provide support for our conclusions, we have a fairly massive amount of theoretical expositions on organisational learning, and we have lessons from other organisations on how to improve systems of knowledge management. In the light of these sources, it is quite clear that policy-making bodies in the development community need to take the quest for learning seriously.

In all phases of knowledge processing, from the acquisition of knowledge, towards interpretation and distribution, and to the creation of organisational memories, we found considerable scope for improvement. The case studies show that the weakest link in the chain of knowledge management is putting new knowledge to use, and that in turn depends on the way knowledge is interpreted and distributed within the organisation, as well as on the functioning of organisational memories.

In speaking of organisational learning, we have first considered individual learning. If the knowledge structures of individual human beings do not change, we simply cannot speak of learning in any meaningful way. But changes at the level of individuals are not enough, knowledge has to be disseminated as we move from the individual to organisational learning. Though people debate the existence of organisational learning, whether or not it has to be manifested in changing practice, we have chosen to follow a conservative line. Unless we find evidence of changed behaviour, we are reluctant to say that learning has occurred. At times, we note that there has been an increase in knowledge, that aid agencies have a better understanding of a phenomenon. But if they continue to act as if this knowledge did not exist, we cannot find that it is meaningful to speak of learning.

An assessment of whether learning is adequate or not, must relate to some purpose. If we are not clear about the mandate and purpose of development cooperation, it is hardly possible to analyse whether there is a learning problem or not. In terms of policy making, any attempt to improve learning must be motivated by, and directed for, an intended purpose. So why is there a need for learning in development cooperation, and why do the aid agencies need to pay increasing attention to learning? Is it learning to become more effective, as implied in the Cassen report? Or is it learning to become more efficient organisations, which often motivates the learning efforts in the corporate world? Or do we pursue learning to address development issues in the Third World? Or do we seek learning to create a better world both in industrialised and developing countries?

None of these reasons can be excluded. Development cooperation needs efficiency, as well as most other organisations. There is always an opportunity cost to an activity, and - all things considered - an efficient organisation is better than one which is not efficient. Development cooperation needs to be effective as well, people in the development community need to do the right things, not only to do things right. But development cooperation has a wider mandate. The policies set by Boards and Parliaments usually define the capacity to address development issues as the organisational purpose. The multilateral organisations, in particular the specialised agencies of the UN system, have the betterment of the world at large as their task.

We have noted previously that there is a balance to be trod between learning for purposes of efficiency and learning for purposes of development at large. The case studies demonstrate that structures and processes that may improve the efficiency of technical cooperation, for example, may have an adverse effect on learning about gender and development. We have assumed that there are differences in importance in these learning objectives. Learning in order to address development issues in the Third World is of overriding importance, while learning to become more effective and more efficient are of less importance. It does not mean that those aspects of learning are unimportant, naturally the agencies have

to learn to increase efficiency and effectiveness - but not at the cost of learning to address development issues generally. (We have not treated the activities of the multilateral organisations in respect of development in the industrialised countries, so, even if that purpose is of utmost importance in motivating organisational learning for them, we present no information in this study).

There are different purposes of learning, and the existing system meets those purposes to different degrees. It would appear, at least on the basis of our case studies, that the development community, and the aid agencies in general, are more proficient at learning to improve efficiency. The development of an evaluation function illustrates the point, as does the development of procedures and practices, codified in various manuals, in technical cooperation. It is less common to find learning that enhances effectiveness, even though that also occurs. Some of the changes in technical cooperation illustrate the point, as the shift from traditional modes of expert - counterpart relationships, to other modes of cooperation. But as the case study of girls' education shows, it is far more difficult to learn to address development issues in a broader sense.

It would thus appear that the development community has better learning systems for purposes of less importance, and poorer learning systems for purposes of more importance. There is an inverse relationship between the purpose of learning and the present status of learning. This is an area where the policy-making levels in the development community have to work to redress the balance. There is a risk that aid agencies get better and better at implementing projects and programmes that are of decreasing relevance.

We have come to the conclusion that learning in development cooperation is far from optimal. So what? Would it have been possible to arrive at any other conclusion? We are not the first to point to the need for better learning systems. Given what we have said about the purpose of learning in development cooperation, there will always be a need for more learning. It is a never ending quest.

The development community has generated new knowledge in many critical areas, and the aid agencies have changed in terms of policies and practice. There is certainly widespread evidence of organisational learning. But it is not enough. However, we must remember that it can never be enough. Perhaps it is better to leave the rather theoretical questions on the assessment of learning and instead concentrate on the "middle ground", that is, how can we suggest practical steps to improve learning?

Development agencies are not easy places in which to work. They demand constant engagement and simultaneous work on small and large pressing tasks. Goffman talks about "total institutions" (1961) in reference to organisations that impose attention and physical control over individuals (e.g., convents, hospitals, prisons, the army). Development agencies are not quite that absorbing, but they resemble what Coser (1974) has called "greedy institutions": organisations that demand commitment and total loyalty, where the work is "never done."

The nature of the organisation, and the nature of the task combine to make development cooperation an extremely challenging arena, where the requirements for learning will always be high. This must be kept in mind; a fair and balanced view of the learning problem must be based on an understanding that the job will never be done, and there is no imaginable point in time where we could conclude that "now it's fine, the quest for learning can be relaxed".

There might be a tendency to overemphasise the learning problem, however real it is. All can witness how progress and development is unevenly spread around the globe. Absolute and relative levels of poverty are increasing, the global environment deteriorates, abuse of children and inequity between the sexes are prevalent, and health for all remains a lofty vision. In frustration, it may be tempting to turn inwards and seek failures in organisational systems, causes of development problems that are environmental and systemic, rather than organisational. Learning is not a panacea that will resolve the problems of the development community.

6.2 Towards improved learning

First of all, we would like to point to some overriding issues that concern organisational learning. The literature on learning has much to say about structures, processes and cultures that affect learning. The

question of competence bases has to be addressed, et cetera. But there are some paradigmatic shifts in perspective that are necessary at first, without addressing these we stand a very real chance of learning to do more and more things better, while not quite doing the right things.

Development cooperation functions through networks

The reader is probably aware that we use the word organisation somewhat ambiguously. At times we speak of learning in development cooperation, at other times about learning in the aid agencies. Obviously the two are not quite the same. Learning, takes place in interaction with external networks most of the time. In particular the case study of girls' education shows that the most important sources of new knowledge are found outside the aid agencies themselves. Programme officers learn through interaction with NGOs, community representatives, researchers, and representatives from other aid agencies. To the extent that learning is less than optimal, it is largely because these networks are thwarted.

In addition, the learning of the aid agencies affects and concerns other actors. Performance and practice occurs in cooperation with the host countries of development cooperation, as well as with other organisations that get involved. If the aid agencies are to move from merely generating new knowledge to using that knowledge in practice, they have to interact with the external environment. It is obvious and needs hardly be said, but at times we - and others - are tempted to speak of organisational learning as an internal affair. It is not. The proper organisational arena to look at is the networks of project and programme implementation. It is here that individual learning occurs, which can be transmitted into organisational knowledge structures (still theoretical) and transformed into practical action.

The task managers interact with some or - at times - all, of the actors in that arena, and with some others within the organisation. If the programme as an organisational entity is to improve its performance through learning, then it requires all to learn. It is not enough that people in the aid agency learn. Hence, we need to consider the network as the organisational unit of first and foremost importance in learning. Structures, processes and cultures within the aid agency must be conducive to learning in the network arena. Even if we identify how learning can be improved within an agency, we have to ask ourselves whether these measures facilitate or impede learning in the network arena, and we must ask whether there are measures that can be taken to improve learning in the network arena that may be more conducive to overall performance than internal organisational learning would be.

Power and participation.

The relationship between the organisations engaged in development cooperation is often characterised by unequal power. This has several consequences for learning. There is at times a tendency to believe that access to funds confers wisdom, knowhow and skills, and hence less need to engage in mutual learning. Crozier (1997) argues that knowledge in itself can be an obstacle to learning. In confrontation with partners from developing countries, people in the aid agencies often see themselves as highly competent. They have access to databases, books and journals, take part in training and exchange knowledge with consultants and researchers. Compared to their negotiating partners in the host country, they will - often correctly - perceive themselves as better informed and more skilled.

But people who know more will often be reluctant to learn from those they perceive as knowing less. Why should they? Because their knowledge is still not fully relevant for the task at hand! Because there is an emphasis on explicit and technical skills in the interaction in the programme context, whereas tacit knowledge is not recognised! Certainly because the further implementation of the programme depends on the commitment and ownership of the host country partners, and if they have not been engaged, if their knowledge is not utilised, they are likely to withdraw from participation more or less fully.

All three case studies demonstrate that the exercise of power may affect learning negatively in the context of a programme. Aid agencies may design technical assistance inputs that are not desired by the host country, but they are accepted because other goods would be withheld. The aid agencies fail to take account of the local knowledge and in the final analysis it is likely that the project will be found to have failed because of a lack of "ownership".

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But ownership is not only a question of government commitment; it is equally much a question of wider participation, for example from communities and women-based NGOs. The case study on girls' education notes that the host country government may itself be part of an oppressive structure working to the disadvantage of women. It is thus essential to engage other stakeholder groups in programme design. But some degree of partnership with the government is still necessary - and possible with appropriate participatory processes against the background of international resolutions.

Participation is a key word in all development efforts. It is a precondition for effective and meaningful cooperation in all respects. It is not only a condition for learning. But learning which does not occur in partnership is not likely to lead to any meaningful change in practice, and hence there is no real organisational learning as we have defined it here. Power is unavoidable, and the partners in cooperation bring different aspects of power to the negotiating table. There is a need to constantly monitor the way power is used, and to consider when it becomes an obstacle to learning.

But the exercise of power is also a way of enforcing change. The case study of technical cooperation demonstrated that it was the board members from developing countries in particular, and in the final analysis the General Assembly of the UN, who decided that UNDP should adopt the national execution mode of technical assistance delivery. It is the most drastic organisational change in this field, and it must be classified as an important stride in learning. But it was forced on the organisation, against the will of many inside as well as powerful agents in the professional environment. Without the strong exercise of power the changes would never have been implemented.

Similarly, it would seem that few agencies would have made much progress in evaluation if there had not been strong external pressure to develop this function. It is the power of the National Audit Boards, Ministries of Finance, Parliaments and possibly other stakeholder groups that have prompted the agencies to learn and develop their practices in the field of evaluation.

6.3 Structural aspects of learning.

External pressure for change

Experience shows that external pressure is a major driving force for learning and change. We can presume that all actors in development cooperation, institutions as well as individuals, are motivated by a concern for human betterment - for development. But we must also recognise that all actors have vested interests, of one form or another. Luckily, the vested interests vary widely between actors and institutions, but the development objectives are basically the same. Hence, the different actors often oppose the vested interests of each other, but pursue the same explicit objectives. The self-organising properties of the system are therefore relatively strong.

Many of the most important instances of organisational learning; that is, instances where organisations have changed in response to knowledge about effects and knowledge about effective procedures and new instruments, have been championed from the outside. The actors that have brought change to organisations were outside the changing organisation, but still members of the development community. Developing countries have been able to introduce change in the multilateral system in particular, changes that have no parallel in bilateral organisations.

In the bilateral organisations as well, major initiatives for strategic change have emanated from the concerned participation of politicians, the academic community and civil society organisations; environmentalist groups, the feminist movement, industrial groups, and others. Many aid agencies were founded on the belief that they would contain the best national expertise on development cooperation. Perhaps that was true in the 1960s, but it no longer is. People today travel and many have working experience abroad, not least on aid projects. Expertise in development issues is diffused throughout society. The challenge is to bring this knowledge to bear on practical cooperation, and to find ways to elaborate governance systems to make external pressure for change more effective.

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Development of professional networks.

Professional networks played prominent parts in knowledge sharing in all our case studies, but they have their ups and downs. Professional networks on gender issues were being dismantled. The professional network for technical cooperation is an inter-agency network, but there are no internal networks. In evaluation, Sida has a network of evaluation coordinators, and there are extensive networks for interagency collaboration. The networks are important, but they need to be sustained and developed.

Professional networks are particularly important because they can transform individuals' tacit knowledge to shared knowledge. In many other organisational systems people networks were at the heart of knowledge management systems. These knowledge networks were associations of people who shared a common interest, discipline or concern. Their boundaries were permeable, with some members participating extensively, others infrequently or temporarily.

But some degree of formalism is usually necessary to codify practice. Key knowledge networks tend to be chartered by the organisation and staffed with a coordinator. For organising and disseminating explicit information, such as best practices, tools and procedures, they often use information technology. But many of these networks also organise forums to define and brainstorm problems, assess the validity of data, develop new ideas, evaluate their merits, and share the tacit knowledge of their members. The main purpose is to encourage people to give advice and share ideas. The people who are appointed to these positions must of course be among the best available in the organisation, with enthusiasm and dedication to the task.

Distant levels of decision-making

There is a wave of reorganisation going through the aid agencies. At the time of our visits, several were being drastically restructured. We cannot really conclude that learning is more common where the decision making is decentralised. But as most of the learning occurs in contact with stakeholder groups on projects and programmes, the chances that this learning will be translated into action is naturally higher if the decision is taken close to the source of the experience. The distribution of knowledge is weak, hence, the information needed to take the best decision exists mostly in the immediate vicinity of the project. Centralised decision-making is less well-informed. In addition, it excludes the partners and endangers participation and ownership.

The lack of connections between policy and practice

Yet another structural consideration that relates to decentralisation is the distance between policy formulation and practice. A flatter organisational hierarchy reduces that distance. Important policy initiatives within our case studies have emanated at board level, or in Parliament, outside the agency. The distance between the policy level and implementation is high, and the implementation process appears to have been rather slow. But in several agencies the distance between policy formulation and operational levels is higher than necessary.

Rigid organisational boundaries

Rigid structures and segmentation between departments are obstacles to learning. The different technical cooperation programmes in the Swedish bilateral assistance were separated organisationally and geographically for many years, and intense competition fostered a strong rivalry. The learning between the two wings was very limited, few professional networks developed and arrogant approaches on all sides prohibited mutual learning.

Traditional definitions of core competences

Core competences tend to develop along the lines of the basic organisational building blocks. Hence sectoral and geographical principles in the division of labour create patterns of learning that focus on

sectors and countries or regions. Health, education or industry become areas of professional specialisation. But cross-cutting issues, as for example technical cooperation or gender, do not generate the same structural support. The agencies need to establish parallel structures that can serve as focal points for learning; that is, more temporary structures for subjects and issues that do not fall within the traditional organisational boundaries. In addition, if it is possible to open these networks to participation by external agents, learning would be higher.

Our case studies show that there have been some moves to create interagency related professional networks in technical cooperation, and there is a network for the evaluation units as well. But there are no similar networks on gender issues, and there appears to be a reluctance to build such networks internally. Several agencies report that their formalised structures for gender programmes have been dissolved. Though there is a general belief that more work now occurs in multi-disciplinary networks, our cases studies seem to imply that there is a trend away from such networks - contrary to all knowledge on structures that promote learning.

Peripheral position of specific learning functions

Many organisational units have a special role in learning, as for example an evaluation unit, internal audit, training, or even libraries. When these units are placed outside the core structure and far from line functions, their usefulness and relevance decline. In particular evaluation units need access to decision-making instances, if the findings from evaluation work are to have an impact.

The more organisational memory functions are integrated into the line units, and the more they are decentralised, the higher are the levels of learning in the organisation. Information technology may bring such functions directly to the work place of the programme officers, but so far it seems to be only the World Bank which has made any significant strides in knowledge management systems.

6.4 Process related obstacles to learning.

Experience as the source of new knowledge

Repeated studies show that people in development cooperation, and indeed in many other professional organisations, see experience as their most important source of life-long learning. But what is it that makes personal experience such a rich source of learning, and what are the steps in the process?

First, experience comes from being involved, from participating in planning, supervision, implementation and evaluation. Hence, the aid agencies need to engage in roles that provide people with these job opportunities. It is a difficult issue. In the past, there has been an emphasis on roles that are withdrawn from the scene of action. The agencies should engage in strategic control. There are many good reasons for such a role configuration, but it does not put people into a position where they can learn. Hence, if the organisation has to engage in roles that do not provide learning experience, it must actively search for other means through which its personnel can get that encounter with experience.

Second, experience generates the raw material for learning, but people need time to elaborate on the actual significance of their experiences. Time is necessary to write up notes for information sharing. The lesson here is that managers within the organisation must allocate time and other resources for active learning. This reflects the overall administrative capacity in relation to the operational program. Has staff a workload that in practice defeats every attempt to learn, including the possibility of setting aside sufficient time for reflection on the experiences of day to day work?

Third, the application of new ideas and new knowledge of necessity emerges on the networks of action, on projects and programme arenas. Organisational learning presuppose a high degree of interaction with other actors on these networks to achieve new results. The first and third step in learning by experience must of necessity occur in cooperation with numerous external actors, it is only the second step which is mainly internal to the organisation. We must again emphasise the open system nature of learning.

Coordination as a means of improving learning

There have been several studies of coordination in the development community in recent years. Most of them are undertaken for the purpose of administrative rationalisation. But many of the changes that are occurring because of the need for coordination actually have important, and largely positive consequences for learning.

First, coordination between donors strengthens their mutual sharing of knowledge, witness for example the OECD/DAC network on technical cooperation. At the country level, there are even more practical examples of how the agencies pick up and use information from each other. Organisations learn through mimicry as well, and the instruments of coordination produce excellent opportunities for mimicry.

Secondly, in many instances, coordination, via for example joint sector negotiations, gives the host countries an increasing say over programme content. The power imbalance is to some extent rectified, and that also has positive consequences for learning. Often the host country is charged with general policy outlines, and negotiation meetings are often preceded by sector policy statements that are now of a far superior quality to the situation 3 to 5 years back.

Third, the coordination also takes the form of joint programmes, for example via co-financing arrangements. It does not necesarily follow that these generate better learning, as the case study of girls' education indicated, but the possibilities should arise out of the closer contacts between donors, and the scope they have to learn from each others' experience elsewhere. The bilateral organisations would, for example, get access to the knowledge management systems of the multilateral agencies.

Where there is real progress in co-financing and other instruments of coordination, these should lead to very powerful administrative rationalisation, that may also create room for the time and money needed to pursue learning.

Uncertain statements of objectives

The case study of girls' education shows that when people are uncertain of objectives, mandates and missions, the learning becomes weak. There are several mechanisms at work here. When the objectives are uncertain, it is difficult to know whether a task has been successfully completed, hence there is no way of knowing what conclusions to draw concerning performance or what lessons should be drawn, for better or for worse. This was mentioned in all the case studies, but in particular in respect of technical cooperation has the lack of indicators of success has hampered learning.

Absence of group tasks

Learning is also inhibited because many of the organisations do not formulate tasks that require group responses. It is basically only the World Bank which organises task teams. In most other agencies the programme officers are alone with their responsibilities, though the actual implication of this is mitigated by their external contacts. The network character of projects and programmes means that they interact with a number of people in the environment.

Separation of tasks over time

Yet another process related factor that impedes learning is the functional division of tasks in programme planning, supervision and implementation, and evaluation. In particular, people who are charged with project design and appraisal, but who are seldom engaged in implementation and evaluation, have limited chances of learning from their own experience, as they never see the results of their work. It is mainly the World Bank which applies this division of labour, among the agencies we followed at operational level in the case studies; but it is a significant obstacle to learning in that organisation.

Blueprint approaches to cooperation

Although it is fashionable to deride blueprint modes of project planning, the practice itself is common enough. In a rough estimate, we would guess that almost all evaluations that comment on the performance of a project, conclude that it has not been flexible enough to respond to new challenges, unforeseen events, or changes in the assumptions behind the project. That means that the planning stage has often been blueprinted. The blueprint approach may not be an obstacle to generating knowledge per se, but it certainly implies that it is more difficult to apply that knowledge, it is almost excluded by definition. The process approach, on the other hand, may facilitate the application of learning, but if objectives are not clearly stated it is harder to set performance targets and hence also more difficult to generate data that may serve as indicators of performance.

Managing the borderline

Leadership is essential. Top management has to support changes to build a learning organisation. It has to make sure that sufficient resources are allocated for learning, and that the balance between learning instruments is correctly maintained. The learning organisation balances between destructive turbulence and stifling order. Keeping it between these two extremes is the supreme managerial task.

Management of learning itself illustrates the point. We have mentioned above that successful learning efforts usually emanate from the bottom-up, and at the same time from-the-top-down. If leadership can develop policy from internal experiences it can codify internal lessons in a bottom-up approach and establish policies that are well anchored in the organisation, and on that basis exercise leadership in the external arena. The opposite occurs when policy development emanates from outside the organisation, from donors or others, and when the role of management is rather one of trying to sell the policy to staff members. The most important managerial tasks are found at the borders of the organisation.

The call for a balance is also reflected in the need for both mobility and continuity among staff members. People with long service terms are important repositories of internal memory, not only of operational activities but also of organisational politics, stories and other aspects of organisational life. It is important to maintain continuity, but it is also important to get new blood. Organisations learn through experience, but some experiences are better to buy than to make. Many specific skills can hardly be generated through staff training. If there is a need for expertise in biochemical water treatment, it is necessary to recruit an expert, or employ a consultant in the field. Age and gender are sources of experience in themselves, and there is a need for a balance - and it may be necessary to tip the scales against continuity in order to achieve new insights.

We have spoken of the balance between exploitation of old knowledge and exploration of new. Again, here is a balance to tread. The development community does not hesitate to generate new ideas at the theoretical stage. There is ample evidence of intellectual curiosity in the number and nature of policy studies, staff research, commissioned research et cetera. This is certainly an aspect of exploration. But the ideas are not put to practice. The projects and programmes are far more characterised by exploitation of old ways. Management also needs to redress the balance between explorative practice and explorative theory.

6.5 Cultural aspects of learning

Incentives for learning.

There are few incentives to perform well in most development agencies, and hence even fewer incentives for an individual to systematically enhance his or her competences. Although personnel may be recognised informally as having produced a good project, or to have completed the exit from a bad one, there are no clear consequences linked to the individuals' annual performance review. In fact, in several agencies, this procedure does not exist.

Monetary rewards or similar encouragements are almost inconceivable, and would probably not harmonise with other cultural values in aid agencies. Recognition by peer groups is rare, considering that programme

officers work much with networks outside their own organisation. Few within their own agency would know the project well enough to be in a position to offer meaningful recognition.

Holistic approaches to learning

There is virtually nothing in an organisation, or outside it for that matter, that does not have consequences for learning. The definition of an organisational mandate immediately sets limits, or creates specific difficulties, in respect of learning as it has consequences for the type of competences required and the nature of organisational knowledge structures. We have shown how structural issues such as the division of labour, the practice of team work et cetera have an impact on learning. Training, possibilities to take sabbaticals, early retirement programmes, staff recruitment policies, evaluation - all have an impact on learning.

Consequently, when top management considers learning - whether in development cooperation or elsewhere - they need to consider learning against the background of all management instruments. It makes the subject of learning difficult, but it also creates the opportunities for rapid progress.

Considering the problem in its totality does not mean that one has to work on all aspects of it at the same time. It is important to establish priorities and find the right variables to address. Even relatively small changes in working processes can have a major impact on learning. It may even be that subtle cultural shifts in incentive systems can achieve more than very expensive computer based knowledge management systems. Managing learning is the art of finding the right buttons to push, and to use leverage effects to change the organisations.

But there is also the danger of getting trapped in too simple solutions. In some organisations, learning is more or less confined to staff upgrading through in-house courses. Today, many organisations define learning mainly in terms of information technology for databases, filing systems, Intranet, mail systems, or the like. Learning contains many other things, and in development cooperation in particular one needs to search for those solutions that have a direct bearing on how people interact on professional networks that are mainly located outside the boundaries of the agencies.

Cynicism

The objectives of development cooperation are lofty and idealistic. In practice, programme officers at all levels also face commercial pressures to push projects, extend contracts and emphasise some sectors of assistance rather than others. There are instances of corruption and fraud, and though many benefit from aid, few effects trickle down to those really in need. A certain world-weariness sets in, which can be mistaken for - and actually presented as - realism. Whichever way, it is an attitude which is not conducive to learning. Rather it is part of a wider set of attitudes which includes suspicion of theoretical knowledge and a mistrust of external stakeholders' objectives and interests.

Narrow-minded professionalism

Development is a holistic concept, and many of the crucial challenges to the development community require broad based understanding of complex global processes. The aid agencies need to bring highly professional competence to the project setting, but they also need to do so with an understanding of the limits to technical professionalism. The focus of specialisation varies. Where some organisations notably have a strong focus on financial ability and economic analysis, others may have a different focus. As mentioned above, the composition of the competence base within the organisation is in most cases a strong impediment to the acquisition and use of new ideas.

Bureaucratic neatness

Most project implementation is a long series of crises, where practitioners move from one emergency to another, patching things together, devising suboptimal solutions, and trying to make ends meet. None of this could be divined from project plans, cooperation agreements, progress and monitoring reports, or

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evaluations. On paper everything looks neat and tidy. Everybody knows it is not, but a lot of time is spent on producing that appearance.

This quest for a semblance of control puts learning at risk. There is a danger of mistaking real structures and procedures to have causal consequences that they do not have. A project could be criticised for not having a stringent work plan, when site constructions were delayed. But the real cause may not have been the lack of a plan, but a mistaken offer in a bargaining process which caused the engineers to back off. Hence, the problem would not have been the lack of a plan, but the lack of implementation skills. There are many examples where true causes are hidden by factors attributable to bureaucratic neatness.

Ambiguity and suspended judgment

Development cooperation creates many uncertain situations. The physical distances alone often mean that communication between the actors becomes scarce and unreliable, even with access to Internet. Cross-cultural communication always entails uncertainties about which messages are sent and how they are received. The employees in aid agencies are supposed to be well skilled in the art of cross cultural communication, but there is certainly a residual of the unknown left. In such situations it is necessary to be able to suspend judgment, to wait out other actors, and to let a situation unfold of its own force.

Often, aid agency personnel have spending targets to meet, time plans to keep, and other reporting requirements. They have no chance to suspend judgment, they need rapid conclusions. As a substitute there are numerous manuals on almost everything, but there is not much evidence that manuals, handbooks, guidelines et cetera are used in proportion to the number in existence. But their role may be dysfunctional, their mere presence may prevent people from tackling a situation in all its complexity. There are aspects of a situation that are never captured in a handbook, and programme officers need a supporting culture that encourages them to think through the situation, use their networks, and develop a course of action.

Leadership

In many of the agencies, there are no strong traditions of leadership. To the extent that people speak of leadership, it is the top executive who is considered. The presence of good leadership capacity at middle management stages is not referred to so often. But leadership at lower levels has an important role to fulfil, perhaps in the form of mentorship, dialogue partnership, and as someone with more experience to discuss things with. Leadership tends to be equated with top management, but in fact few will ever interact with the chief executive. Good leadership has to build on team leaders in different parts of the organisation, and the overriding challenge is to make almost everybody leaders, at some time, on some team.

6.7 Concluding remarks

In this section we have concluded that there is a learning problem in the aid agencies, though we have to modify that picture by adding that the task of the aid agencies is such that the job is never done. There will always be a need to learn more.

The first policy aspect relates to four specific issues; networks, participation, action and the resource base. Organisational learning in development cooperation is a network activity, where organisational boundaries are of little relevance. Learning has to occur in participation with the host countries of projects and programmes, and in particular there is a need to pay attention to the implementation of new knowledge.

There are many structural, process and cultural factors that impede learning during present circumstances. Some are prevalent in our case studies, and we bring out a few examples here. In the next chapter we turn to the emerging factors that are supportive of learning and that need to be reinforced.

Many forces coincide to change the nature of development cooperation at present. An increasing number of research reports criticise much of the performance of aid agencies, but there are also examples of how successful development cooperation can have important contributions to make. A new picture of the

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diversity of cooperation, and the call for situation specific solutions to development issues emerges, with organisational implications.

At the same time budget cuts necessitate organisational change. Although most change is motivated by reasons of effectiveness, it is quite clear that there are also cost-cutting reasons for reform. Sometimes they coincide, but not always. There is also an increasing understanding in the development community that institution building and participation are essential, and several agencies do change in response.

Perhaps the most significant difference is the emergence of an administrative and political apparatus in the developing countries, and a structure of NGOs and a civil society, that is staring to interact with the channels of official development assistance. The scene of cooperation is today very different from what it was in the 1960s and '70s, when the partners in developing countries were far weaker as institutions, with less knowledge of the negative side effects of aid, and less bargaining capacity in relation to donors.

So, the present is a time of large-scale change. There are no reasons to believe that a period of stability waits around the corner. Rapid learning and adaptation through changes in practice are necessary - by all actors in the development community, and the aid agencies in particular. Many initiatives for change are underway, and in this chapter we have identified changes that have a direct impact on learning, and which in the long-run contribute to making the aid agencies in particular, but other actors in the development community as well, better at learning.

Best practices are emerging in many fields, but should generally be treated rather carefully. The sources for the definition of best practice are rather weak; best practice tends to be that which is supported by the most fashionable management handbooks, or what powerful institutions have done. Best practice may at times also be the most expensive practice, the most massive investment in information technology et cetera. But only time can tell which factors in the long run make the most difference in performance. These words of caution are not meant to deter from experimentation, but are a call to carefully monitor experience as one goes along.

This study has treated learning as a general phenomenon in the development community. Our focus has been on the aid agencies, some bilateral and some multilateral. But we have not scrutinised any of them in their entirety as learning organisations, and hence our recommendations cannot be addressed to any specific agency. Also learning affects people at all levels in the organisations, and there are different steps to be taken - even though the measures to improve learning are also overlapping. One of the deans of organisational learning, Karl Weick, has said that the concept "organisational learning" itself is an oxymoron; to learn is to disorganise and increase variety, but to organise is to reduce and forget variety. To organise for organisational learning consequently entails disorganisation, making things more complex and less stable than they are at present.

In the following we will present five recommendations each to people with different functions in an aid agency. We have chosen to direct ourselves to; (1) board members, who act to ensure that the overall activities of the agency are in correspondence with its mandate and mission; (2) the director, in his or her capacity as the chief executive officer of the organisation; (3) heads of sections or departments; that is, persons with middle management responsibilities; and (4) the individual desk officer, as the person who has basic responsibilities for his or her own learning. The discussion in the preceding chapters shows that there are a multitude of things that can and should be done to promote learning at all levels. Here we limit ourselves to pointing to a few immediate areas of concern, or a few things that can be done, but each of which should address a prevalent obstacle to learning.

To the board members

Verify that the organisation has a policy for organisational learning and make sure that this sets the objective for learning in a way that is consistent with the overall mandate of the agency.

Ask for a competence profile of the organisation, and analyse this in comparison to the mandate. Does the organisation have the right mixture of competences, or how could these be developed? Ask management for feedback to the board in the form of an action plan for acquisition of skills, and follow up on the implementation of this plan.

Make sure that the board is supplied with information on the magnitude of organisational learning. Use quantitative indicators. Pursue the question if funds spent on learning activities are adequate, and if the balance between learning activities is appropriate for the overall task.

Request that progress on organisational learning is reported back to the board at least twice every year, and make sure that this feedback relates to practical changes taking place as a result of learning.

Take control of the evaluation function, and make sure that it gets its mandate from the board, is funded by the board, and reports to the board.

To the executive director

Review the organisational structure and take steps to reduce the number of hierarchical levels (there is a scope for this in all agencies we have visited). We realise that this is a very general statement - to the point of being useless. But our study also demonstrated persistent weaknesses in organisational structure, and these need to be analysed and addressed. All aid agencies are still fundamentally organised as traditional bureaucracies, and many people realise that there are structural obstacles to improved learning. But the nature of the problem varies between one agency and the other.

Review the basis for the division of labour between departments and develop matrix structures that foster team work. In most agencies, team work is an exception. But there are also examples of successful team work, and there are good reasons to belief that the chief executive can play a major role in changing the pattern of basic work organisation.

Take explicit command of the learning process. Establish a team to be responsible for progress on learning (and chair the meetings of the team). Appoint the best people to work on the task. Recognise the four steps in the learning process (acquisition, analysis, distribution and memory) and allocate funds explicitly to them. Monitor the use of funds, and ascertain an overall balance between the four steps.

Review the personnel function and develop indicators on the desirable rates of personnel turnover, internal and external. Develop key data on other aspects of personnel management, as for example gender and age, professional background, sources of experience. Use aggregate data for planning purposes and follow-up on these data.

Introduce explicit recognition of contributions to organisational learning when people are promoted into senior positions in the organisations, and make these assessments public.

To heads of sections and departments

Encourage your subordinates to take sabbaticals, or to seek experiences outside of the organisation's boundaries.

Never let the short-term task stand in the way of long-run learning opportunities. When subordinates present papers or else report back on issues, check the "novelty" factor explicitly and encourage new perspectives.

Organise weekly seminars on topics of learning interest. Seek out the odd and extraordinary, do not keep to the traditionally well-known and useful subjects - or the same old people to make presentations.

When new ideas are elaborated or explored, make sure that people from outside agencies, such as the partners in the Third World, the academic community, or NGOs are invited to take part.

Shift the posts within the department, make sure that people rotate between jobs and seek out opportunities for team work. Do not keep the structures rigid, but invite complexity and diversity at all levels in the section.

To the programme officer/task manager

When a task is completed, make sure that you set aside time to reflect on your experience. Try to make explicit if you learnt anything, and if you did not, make sure you recognise this. If you did learn something, note it down, test if others already know, otherwise share your insights.

Identify your own best way of learning, be it practical, theoretical, informal or formal, or any other mode - or combination of modes.

Develop a learning plan, set targets for a year ahead, identify what you want to learn and how you want to do it. Present it to the section head, and then follow up on progress during the year.

In your daily work, try to seek out pieces of conventional wisdom. Reflect on whether they are really true. Consider what it would take to disprove them.

Make sure that you set aside at least 10% of your working time for learning purposes.

Strategic balance

Top management attention to learning is essential The chief executive must assume a visible role as a champion of organisational learning. Rhetoric is not enough, it must be followed by money and other resources, particularly enthusiastic and motivated people. Learning, more than any other function, is a balancing art. Learning is affected by almost every aspect of organisational design, and learning occurs at the boundary between too much order and too much turbulence in the organisational system. Thus management has to pay attention to the balance between, for example:

Continuity and change among personnel. Make sure that there are adequate sources of new experience, and new ways of interpreting old experience. Monitor changes in internal and external turnover. Develop targets, such as for example having an annual external personnel turnover of 5%. Keep records of progress.

Exploitation of old knowledge and exploration of new. Develop budgets for knowledge management. Assess cost-effectiveness and introduce markets for selected aspects of knowledge. Use assessments of competence bases to identify areas of exploration new knowledge.

Top-down leadership and bottom-up initiatives. Top leadership is not only a motor of change, but may also be a target of learning. Develop systems to solicit ideas and knowledge from all levels of the organisation. Be prepared to react to initiatives from below. Keep budgets flexible so that resources can be made available to respond to learning ideas.

Technical specialisation and cross-cutting issues. Even though a balance must be maintained, the emphasis at present on standard technical competences must be supplemented by major efforts at knowledge acquisition in the field of meta-competences.

Stable boundaries versus flexible teamwork. People need recognisable structures and patterns in organisations, but the task may require flexibility and rapid adjustment. Emphasise flexibility and use other means to help employees cope with a messy organisational structure.

Informal versus formal processes. Informal processes in learning are important and must be supported, but they often leave it up to chance whether learning takes place or not. The informal processes are not adequate, but must be supplemented with stringent follow-up, targets and indicators of performance.

The difficult thing is how the balance should be struck in any particular case. Here there are differences between the agencies, and we have not found any generally valid pattern. Our research leads us to think that if anything, there is an imbalance towards the left hand side of each of the dichotomies mentioned above.

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