

Reflections on the Peer to Peer Learning Process

By Warren Van Wicklin

This chapter provides reflections on the learning initiative from two perspectives: the learning initiative coordinator and the people participating in the eight projects of the learning initiative. The purpose of the chapter is to identify lessons, what worked well, what did not, and what changes are suggested for more effective learning initiatives in the future. The main source of information about the perspectives of the participants is their response to a questionnaire (Annex 1) while the main source on the perspective from the coordinator is a detailed, 15 page response to a set of questions. Between 1 and 5 team members from 7 of the 8 project teams responded to the questionnaire, with a total of 16 responses. Therefore the aggregation of quantitative responses is not representative of all the team members because the team with five respondents is overrepresented (the “Communication for Inclusion and Gender Sensitivity of PB” team) and one team is not represented at all. Interestingly, members of the same team had significantly different responses including the quantitative measures. No effort was made to contact people that left the teams so we do not know their perspective.

Rationales for Participating in the Learning Initiative

The main objective of the initiative was to build the capacity of team members on various aspects of participatory budgeting (PB). Although there are other pedagogical methods that could have been used, it was felt that peer to peer learning could perform better, particularly in identifying what works about PB, what does not, and why. Through peer to peer learning, team members could learn from fellow practitioners’ first hand success stories as well as failures.

No specific questions were meant to be addressed by the initiative. Instead, the initiative was meant to enable team members to share innovations and lessons, and learn from the experience of their peers on their chosen PB topic. Ultimately this should lead to enhanced capacity among peer learners to practice PB. Peer to peer learning was viewed as an opportunity to openly discuss issues, explain to each other their viewpoints, and engage in cooperative learning by working in teams on selected PB topics.

The 16 respondents stated that their highest priority for participating in the learning initiative was exchanging and sharing knowledge, experience and best practices (15 respondents) followed by learning (9), collaboration on partnerships and networks (7), spurring action (5) and developing new relationships (4). They wanted to learn how to: overcome constraints to practicing PB (7), develop tools for PB (6), do PB (4), identify optimal conditions for implementing PB (4), and effectively monitor and evaluate PB (4).

Project and Team Formation in Durban

The people designing the process for selecting project topics and teams felt very strongly that the persons implementing the projects should decide what projects to work on and choose topics that are relevant to them. More respondents thought the process was very demand driven (4) or fairly demand driven (6) than not very demand driven (2) or neutral (1). No one said it was not demand driven. It might have been seen as demand driven because of the reasons participants gave for choosing their topic or team. Most of the respondents said they selected the topic because it either related to their work (9) or they thought it was an important topic or need for PB (5). Quite often this was combined with a desire to share one’s experience with others.

Respondents had a range of opinions about the process in Durban for selecting project topics and team members although respondents were generally more positive than negative. They stated that the project teams formed in Durban were very useful (5), fairly useful (4), neutral (5) or not very useful (2). No one said it was not useful. The distribution of responses on whether the learning initiative had a positive impact on their organization's effectiveness was almost identical: slightly more said strongly agree (4) or mostly agree (3) than neutral (5) or slightly disagree (1). No one said strongly disagree.

The lower scores are mainly due to teams that were disappointed that team members dropped out, often without explanation, or that they did not have participation from other countries, especially in Latin America. These subjects are examined in more detail in a later section. For example, the "PB Guidelines" team had members from only 2 countries (Brazil and Mozambique, and in the case of Mozambique, only Maputo) participate in the project. The team on "Communication for Inclusion and Gender Sensitivity of PB" was from only one country. On the other hand, the teams that did have participants from several countries were generally much more positive about the experience. Members of the same team often had different perspectives on how useful they found the project teams, so attitudes cannot be attributed only to the team, but also the individual.

There were many positive comments as well, a sample of which are listed below.

The project teams served as a contact point in establishing mutually beneficial relationships with many local and grassroots civil society organizations (CSOs).

The approach was very useful because it brought together people requiring expertise.

It ensured that people joined teams they were genuinely interested in and had the potential of maximizing the exchange of knowledge and experience.

It created a platform to improve capacities within each participant's organization.

Each of the teams has unique lessons about PB.

A roughly similar distribution of respondents thought the model for team formation and writing of preliminary proposals in Durban South Africa is something they would use in the future (11 said yes, 4 said no). People with positive experiences explained why they might use the model again. The Durban workshop had real outputs: people formed teams, crystallized ideas, and wrote proposals which informed their understanding of PB. Their teams kept in touch to reflect on their proposals. This was good for learning and sharing proposals. Given the time constraints, this was probably the quickest way in which the proposals could be put together.

A respondent noted that the learning initiative is not only about what to receive, but what to give. The model allowed individuals to choose a team for both receiving and giving. In developing the preliminary proposal, every participant was involved and fully contributed to the proposal. This made it easier after the Durban conference to develop the final proposal despite the distance. At the time of the preliminary proposal, everyone agreed on what to present and how to present it on behalf of the team. Despite delays in securing project funding, the model for team formation created a sense of belonging that unified team members as project owners without losing focus.

Similarly, those with negative experiences were not likely to use it as a model. One of the most strongly voiced complaints was the unequal workload where some team members did most of the work and were unhappy that other team members did not do their share. They said that few members participated actively in the project design, implementation and discussions. They did not think that their team worked properly. They attributed it to a lack of adequate planning and funding among the team members, but it might have been due to the individuals concerned. One team member admitted that the lack of commitment of some team members baffled him. In the future, it might be necessary to get participants to

commit to the project upfront. Even some of those with negative experiences still thought that while the process did not work well for their team, it had potential.

Implementing the Peer to Peer Learning Process

The teams responded very positively to the peer learning partnership. For many team members, this was the first time they participated in an activity like this. There were communication and language barriers but the teams were encouraged to come up with solutions to address these difficulties. Peer learning and knowledge sharing took place on how different countries do things, what obstacles they face, and how these obstacles are overcome.

One aspect that almost killed the enthusiasm of some team members and proved to be a headache for the promoters of the initiative was the delay in securing funding for some projects. In some cases, the language barrier resulted in a communication breakdown and slowed down effective participation of some team members. CIGU played an important role in facilitating communication between team members.

While teams may have had unsatisfying experiences with some team members, all 15 respondents said that a cross-continent peer to peer initiative on PB is useful. The reasons coalesced around sharing experiences, learning, and that Latin America (and Brazil in particular) has more experience which is useful for Africa which is at an earlier stage on PB. Several respondents from both Latin America and Africa emphasized that the learning and benefits are two way. Cross-continent experiences give participants an opportunity to learn from each other in how to deal with various situations, thereby enabling them to assess what works best in different circumstances. It also enables them to learn how others have overcome challenges that they may be facing, while they also share what worked well.

In general the initiative worked as envisaged. The main exception is that some teams from Africa were not paired with counterpart institutions from Latin America. This can be largely explained by the methodology that was used in Durban. The idea of the market place was to match the demanders of specific PB knowledge topics from Africa to their potential knowledge suppliers from Latin America. Although there was clear demand for mentoring in the area of capacity building for budget demystification, there were no suppliers from Latin America. The organizers tried to find interested institutions and individuals from Latin America after Durban in order to pair them up with the African teams but they could not find any willing institutions. Peer to peer learning objectives were not lost because very beneficial learning and exchanges still took place among African team members. The high quality of the outputs from these teams demonstrates this.

Of those respondents that had team members from both continents, most saw a wide variety of benefits to linking African and Latin American practitioners and researchers. Since both continents contain mostly developing countries, they have a lot in common. Latin Americans also benefit from working with Africans as they have an opportunity to put into practice what they learned and also get to learn from challenges they may not have faced in their own continent.

All 15 respondents saw Latin American experience as relevant for Africa because it presents models, learning and best practices that African communities, PB practitioners and researchers can adapt to their own local contexts to improve public governance and accountability. PB is a universal concept and the lessons from the project can be applied anywhere. For example, the general lesson from the project is that when people participate in project planning and design, they will cooperate during implementation.

Problems with Team Member Participation

As previously mentioned, one of the biggest frustrations for the teams was members whose participation slowed down or ceased altogether: 12 of the 15 respondents said this was a problem for their team. Most of the participants who ended up dropping out had minimal knowledge of the subject matter and found that it had no direct link to their day to day work. For example, the Zimbabwe participant who dropped out of the “Capacity Building for Budget Demystification” team is an ecologist. So even if the issue of capacity building for budget demystification interested her at the Durban PB seminar, she could not directly apply the knowledge she would acquire from continued participation in the project. The Uganda participant might have dropped out because of his busy schedule once he became the chairperson of the Local Government Finance Commission of Uganda. Expensive or no access to the internet could have been a problem. Other reasons include differences in perceptions on the issues, being too busy to dedicate time to the study, weak or overloaded team coordination, lack of prompt information-sharing, problems with communication tools, trust and confidentiality issues, and unnecessary and prolonged slowing down of critical decisions.

Sometimes the problems with team members were not lack of interest or capacity, but attitude problems. The fact that some of these problems worsened after contract signing and the initial payment unfortunately gives the impression that maybe there was a monetary interest involved. There was a shortage of professionalism in some interactions. For example, one respondent said there was:

a lot of domineering and emotional outbursts pushing for some things that were unrealistic
insinuating in a rather unprofessional way that nobody else would do any better
some teleconference calls that were at odd and inconvenient hours such as midnight, several days
in a single week, disrupting privacy, and so on
the tone of most conversations left a lot to be desired
members would issue intimidating statements, shout and threaten to the extent that most of the
teleconferences were not useful

Communication Tools

In the majority of cases, teams worked closely together. The main modes of communication among the team members and with the initiative’s promoters and coordinators were e-mail, video conferences (VC) and telecommunications. The use of a web page to provide technical assistance to project team members and the use of blogs to facilitate communication were put in place by MDPESA, but these arrangements were not very popular with team members. Some teams found face-to-face interaction critical to their progress. Respondents rated four methods as having the greatest impact: video conferencing (12), face to face interactions (10), blogs and e-discussion (10) and structured learning events (8). Teleconferences (3) and informal conversations (2) came in far behind.

Respondents had a wide range of perspectives about how communication practices and technologies can improve the effectiveness of peer learning initiatives like this one. Face to face meetings was the most desired mode, but impractical in most cases because of the expense. People liked being copied on email so everyone was kept in the loop and could benefit from shared communication. Some liked video clips on the internet and podcasts although few used them. Others argued for more use of blogs, e-discussions and VCs. Structured learning events with proactive interventions facilitated learning and sharing.

Lessons about the Learning Process

From a coordinator’s perspective, working on different aspects of PB with so many people from two continents with diverse cultural backgrounds and different levels of knowledge about PB required a lot of patience and continuous nurturing of team spirit to maintain team cohesion. Communication and conflict

resolution skills were very important prerequisites for effective coordination. The use of email, telephones and VCs contributed to successfully coordinating the initiative. Another important lesson is that while the coordinator needs to be the chief referee, a good project team leader also facilitates timely implementation and quality of outputs. Like the coordinator, the project team leader must be a good communicator with the ability to properly assign tasks and responsibilities to each team member and effectively follow-up on the deliverables. Finally, timely feedback through comments and suggestions on draft outputs by the teams also helps to keep them focused on project implementation. The respondents also cited many of these same lessons.

Team work is critical for success, especially in understanding the bigger picture of what can be gained or lost from a learning initiative. These initiatives require collaboration, communication, tolerance and willingness to accommodate others' opinions—no matter how palatable or unpalatable—for the common good of the learning initiative. Team spirit and commitment is essential to achieve team objectives. With strong leadership, members can be kept active and interested in the project.

Respondents felt it was not just team work, but overall coordination that was critical. It is hard to coordinate at a distance, but it succeeded in the end. The initiative improved knowledge about working with donor organizations and understanding collaborative project management and implementation.

Sharing was another theme that was frequently cited. Every organization has something to offer and something to gain. This synergy of expertise drove the project. It was possible to identify PB practitioners and share experiences. It made it possible in a short time to link people with different backgrounds to work on a common agenda and foster team work.

One of the most important lessons from designing the peer to peer learning initiative is that the design process needs to be dynamic, so some flexibility needs to be built into the process. In the initial stages of formulating the project objectives and topics, teams tended to be overly ambitious. Teams thought they could complete their projects much more quickly than they did. It often took a year. However, with the passage of time and proper coaching, teams managed to narrow down and focus their project proposal. This was partly achieved through the systematic fine tuning of each project team's terms of reference. The methodologies also needed flexibility. The World Bank should accept these changes and take into consideration the different situations in different countries.

Another important lesson is that while using the market approach has the advantage of creating diverse project teams, it sometimes creates communication problems if team members speak different languages.

What Worked Well

One of the major strengths of the initiative was on-the-job learning which allowed participants to apply the knowledge they acquired even before the project was completed. The whole implementation process is action-oriented. The main accomplishments were learning, sharing of information and team work via the internet. The main strength was the participatory nature of the whole process. Most team members collaborated very well. Team leaders and facilitators did a fine job. The MDPESA/World Bank team displayed a high level of professionalism in managing project processes.

The teams provided prompt feedback when they were sent comments and suggestions. In most cases, these were thoroughly addressed which contributed significantly to the high quality of the outputs. The videoconferences displayed a high degree of professionalism from the teams presenting their key findings. The fact that VCs could connect more than fifteen centers and bring together more than 40 people to participate in these meetings was highly fulfilling.

What Did Not Work Well

During the Durban conference, the World Bank and MDP said that within one month projects would be selected for funding. Though additional information on the project was submitted, it took the World Bank a very long time to respond. Because of the delay, there was a high level of anxiety among team members regarding the project. A number of team members sent mails to inquire about the project. The project was supposed to have started in June 2008 and finished in December 2008 but started in August 2008 and had not finished by September 2009. The long silence and back and forth emails from the funding institutions reduced the enthusiasm of some members compared to when the group left Durban. Access to donor organizations was unstructured and restricted.

Communication modes like email, telephone calls and blogging are not good substitutes for face to face interaction where even body language can convey very important messages. The blogs and e-discussion did not work well. Participants were not using these. Communication breakdowns were frequent among teams and with the World Bank. The collaboration through cyberspace did not work well, as teams lost a substantial number of members during concept development and project implementation. This was due to internet access being slow and expensive as well as high telecommunication costs.

Before the assignment of tasks, there tended to be a lack of clarity on roles. The sharing of responsibilities was not done thoroughly enough at the planning stage in Durban. As a result, some team members ended up being overloaded while others did not have much, if anything, to do. The initiative lacked strategies or mechanisms that would provide early proposals with midcourse corrections and new contracts.

There were a lot of practical problems among teams. Getting members with different backgrounds to move at same pace was challenging. Team members had busy schedules. Some leaders were not playing their role as coordinators. Fund disbursement was stingy and there were major delays in distributing project funds to the team and among team members. Many grassroots organizations could not access adequate technical support. The initiative did not create mechanisms to specially acknowledge individual participants or organizations that made extra contributions to team tasks.

Recommendations

One respondent suggested a shift from sole reliance on the market approach to the use of regional clusters to select project teams. Generating teams along regional clusters and then pairing them with selected teams from Latin America would create a better learning environment given the fact that most African team members coming from the same region tend to share similar problems, cultural backgrounds and regional affinity. In particular, coordination at the team level will tend to be much easier since the much needed trust to make such initiatives work will not be difficult to establish and the distribution of resources to implement the initiatives will also not generate much conflict.

These kinds of initiatives need to generate immediate tangible benefits for team members, particularly since they are designed to contribute to immediate problem solving in the workplace. If quick returns are achieved, team members are more likely to promote the idea to a larger audience and try to raise additional resources to scale up the initiative. Team members should be practitioners whose desire for new knowledge through peer to peer learning cannot be doubted. As potential change agents, they will carry on with this kind of learning even without the substantial resources this kind of initiative requires.

Make clear from the beginning what to expect from each other. Be clear about the relationship between donors and the World Bank, technical management and coordinators. Project teams need a clear understanding of the objectives, methodology, expected products and the difficulties likely to be faced.

Members of each team should be given time to select their topic. Organizations should be able to select partner organizations. This can be done by structured pairing. The learning initiative could have been improved if people had more time in Durban to become acquainted with one another, assign tasks to one another and to ensure commitment to the project. A little more time (say a full day of working together as teams) would have enabled the teams to set deadlines and ensure proper follow up by team leaders and assistants. Ensure that every project team has a Latin American partner for learning and sharing. There should be at least one more face to face meeting of team members to foster a sense of belonging and to shore up member support.

Flexibility and the payment process were areas of concern. Recommendations included:

- Be flexible about schedules, deadlines, changes in methodology, and so on.

- People need to have enough time and less pressure as everyone has other commitments.

- Any change in the timetable should be preceded by consultation.

- Be less bureaucratic in procedures for contracts with the World Bank.

- Concentrate on developing friendship and partnerships.

- Tranche funding should be disbursed directly to supporting organization bank accounts instead of through the representing organization which signed the contract with the World Bank.

- The funding institution should establish a direct relationship with all team members and disburse the funds directly to each one. This will reduce unnecessary delays in the fund transfers.

What People Enjoyed Most about Participating in this Initiative

Although the implementation process dragged on for a long time, the teams remained committed and succeeded in delivering high quality outputs. The high degree of professionalism and dedication to the initiative by some of the team leaders and their team members was very rewarding. Monetary rewards became secondary in importance for the teams as they implemented their respective projects.

Several respondents noted that professional, excellent, diligent and sober coordination (and mediation where necessary) by the coordinators from the World Bank and MDP played a vital role in the success of this initiative.

The peer to peer initiative was exciting. The methodology for generating proposals was engaging and did produce useful proposals. People enjoyed the team work and contributing to the success of team projects. They enjoyed learning, sharing knowledge and building capacity. People are passionate about this work.