



NETWORKING FOR LEARNING: THE PELICAN INITIATIVE

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The Pelican Initiative has been up and running since January 2005. An online network, it brings together a growing community of over 370 development practitioners, evaluation specialists, researchers and policy makers from all parts of the world to explore issues, share experiences, ideas and all kinds of information related to learning and communication for development.

ISSUE 8
August 2007

WHAT IS THE PELICAN INITIATIVE?

In December 2002, the Exchange programme and the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) set up a joint initiative to organise multi-stakeholder discussions on evidence-based learning and communication for development.¹

The central question driving this initiative was: how can we learn more from what we do? When the International Development Research Centre, Bellanet and the East Africa Regional Office of UNICEF joined in this effort, the Pelican Initiative, a Platform for Evidence-based Learning & Communications for Social Change, was started. The initiative's name was inspired by an old statue located on the roof of the office of the ECDPM in Maastricht, the Netherlands, which clearly resembles this bird.

Pelican can be accessed at www.dgroups.org/groups/pelican

WHAT IS PELICAN ABOUT?

Evidence-based learning from monitoring and evaluation (M&E), along with participatory communication for social change, has an impact on different levels of society. From this perspective, the organisations that started the network proposed to focus its exchanges on learning at three

interconnected levels:

(1) *Evidence and learning for policy change*: how is learning internalized in development policy and programming? Under what conditions does it contribute to policy change and how can this be strengthened? What role does evidence play, if at all? How can accountability be shifted from focusing primarily on accountability to funding agencies to accountability to the social change process? What type of evidence is needed for that? How is it best communicated?

(2) *In organizations and among partners*: development processes result from actions and interactions by a set of diverse stakeholders. For change to occur, facilitation of collective as well as individual learning is needed. Does an emphasis on collective learning encourage organizations to adapt? How can organizational learning be communicated and managed? Under what conditions is evidence shared and integrated into internal learning loops?

(3) *In society at large by socializing findings*: this perspective focuses on a type of learning that leads to change in a society at large, beyond those directly involved in the evaluation process. What is the potential for social mobilization around evidence by involving a large number of actors in its interpretation and communication? What is the role of the evidence brought forward by different stakeholders?

Change in one of these fields will likely influence and inspire change at another level. Promoting change in these three fields is part of an effort to improve the learning function of monitoring and evaluation. The discussions of the Pelican Initiative to date have however shown that such differentiation in three different types of learning is merely indicative of the complexities faced in practice. As the following quote from a member explains, a large development organisation will often resemble a complete and complex society:

‘We feel that one of the best ways to improve the effectiveness and relevance of learning within organisations is by investing in the capability to adapt or translate this learning to the many different ‘languages’ that are spoken within an organisation.’ (Pelican Member, UK)

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NETWORK AND ITS FACILITATION

When the network was started, an initial list of people who had expressed interest in being involved in such an initiative was compiled. Following the technical set-up of a ‘Dgroup’², these people were contacted. The first discussions started in March 2005 with some 76 members.

Reflecting the networking approach of the Dgroup, a few factors have contributed to the network's effectiveness:

- The discussions were facilitated in a relatively structured approach, based on general topics for discussion, which would come out of a short document. Therefore, there was a relatively consistent structure and flow in the email exchanges;
- These documents, contributed by members of the initiative or written in collaboration with the facilitation team, concerned short and concrete case studies. Given the diversity among the network's members, they were written with a minimum of 'jargon';
- The discussions around the general topics which either emerged from these case studies or were suggested on the basis of earlier discussions, usually lasted between one or two months;
- The discussion around these topics was facilitated by one member of the network, who also provided technical support to members on how to send messages and add documents to the website;
- Besides the messages sent to the network in direct relation to these topics, other messages were circulated with different purposes, such as the announcement of relevant events (workshops or other online activities), the dissemination of documents, and occasionally job opportunities. Facilitation support was also provided to the latter group of messages, and combined announcements of publications were circulated on an irregular basis.

One important element of the evolution of the network was the decision not to use many opportunities for publicly 'advertising' the initiative. Instead of using such an approach, the different discussion topics themselves generated a lot of informal networking, which enabled a more gradual growth of the network.

PARTICIPATION

In online networks such as Pelican, assessments often include a look at which ratio of the members of the network is actually participating in the email discussions. Many times, such assessments do not take note of the important informal networking which takes place outside the group. For instance, members who are inspired by an email that is sent to Pelican

and forward it to colleagues, or members who enter bilateral discussions that can evolve into joint activities.

Such an evaluation of the exact scope and importance of this kind of informal networking could lead to important findings on the use and usefulness of online networking in direct relation to the practices of the different groups of stakeholders in development cooperation that participate. Until this is more systematically explored, we can count on being incidentally informed by 'lurking' members of their use of the network's exchanges: 'I have keenly been following the debates. I spend more time in the field with farmers and browse when in town or office.' (Pelican Member, Kenya)

ISSUES DISCUSSED

The issues discussed in the Pelican Network since March 2005 can be grouped in the following seven categories:

1. Learning from policy change and evaluation;
2. Communication for social change;
3. Multi-actor interaction;
4. Accountability and/or learning?
5. Organisational learning;
6. Learning and trust;
7. Approaches to monitoring and evaluation.

As was mentioned above, exchanges within the network have been relatively structured. Each discussion topic is always discussed for a certain period of time, after which it is finalized and makes place for a new one. At the start of each new discussion, the facilitator will always suggest a few questions to the group that could be useful to stimulate some thinking on what kinds of ideas and experiences could be shared on this topic.

Here are a few examples of questions that guided the network's interactions during the different topics:

- Is a diverse group of stakeholders a prerequisite for genuine learning, or can a diverse group also reduce learning potential?
- What could be some windows of opportunity to harmonize accountability and learning in monitoring, evaluation and reporting?
- Do you find that participatory video making has certain advantages over other means of communication when it comes to influencing policy formulation and decision-making? Do these benefits outweigh the costs?
- Why are facilitated multi-actor learning processes so rarely replicated by the involved actors?

The above list of seven categories clearly shows that only one aspect of the network's exchanges has concerned the description of, and experiences with, using particular approaches for purposes of monitoring, evaluation, and communication for development.³ The majority of the exchanges that took place focused instead on the conditions under which these approaches were used, and thus tried to make practical sense of the principles behind these approaches.

The following table brings together a selection of the main conclusions from the different debates of the network to date per some of the above seven categories:

Table 1. Main conclusions for the seven categories of issues

Communication for Social Change	Communication approaches that focus on behaviour change are less effective than those that focus on increasing options
	Making sense of empowerment requires a focus on changing relationships and understanding stories of change
Multi-Actor Interaction	A need for quick solutions and results shouldn't interfere with empowering processes within Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSP)
	Understand interdependencies between actors: powerful stakeholders will ignore the interests and competencies of other actors when they feel they can afford it
	Importance of 'preparing' actors for participation in MSP – confidence can be increased through increasing awareness of participatory approaches
Accountability and/or Learning?	Shared accountability means specific accountability for shared outcomes
	The 'claim-making capacity' of various stakeholders needs to be increased for strengthening accountability relations and transparency
	Accountability problems arise when organizations work independently of beneficiaries' views and voices.
	The purpose of accountability should always be clear in order to be meaningful as a process
Organizational	A 'diffusion' logic is often wrongfully assumed, but individual change does not automatically lead to organizational change
	Flexibility in reporting styles and approaches increases

Learning< TD>	organizational information sharing
	New learning may not always be compatible with what was learned before
Learning and Trust	A facilitator's legitimacy is socially constructed between her/him and the group
	An interest-driven environment facilitates the building of trust: success should be visible to all

THE CHALLENGES

The Pelican network brings together a wide range of actors to discuss an equally wide range of issues. It is therefore interesting to highlight some of the 'facilitation challenges' posed by such an interdisciplinary network:

- *People share, but do not always compare* : it is a challenge to motivate members to go beyond sharing interesting experiences or publications that are directly related to their organisation and work, and to contrast these experiences with those that were shared by others;
- *Organisational learning is a difficult issue to discuss in an online network*: members find it less sensitive to talk about the work of their organisation, compared to talking about how their organisation works;
- *Planning in a voluntary context*: given that a network is the most flexible form of social organisation, time planning needs to be very flexible, and members who committed to sharing certain documents or contributing case studies will always give priority to their institutional deadlines first;
- *Stakeholder-diversity and topic differentiation can demotivate learners*: Although a diverse group of actors is important to take the discussion beyond the 'groupthink' level, members were sometimes disappointed when a discussion which they considered as very interesting made place for another topic which they considered less useful;
- *Quality of exchange can be an obstacle*: messages that are sent to Pelican are often relatively long and comprehensive, mostly written by people who use English as their first language at work. As a result, some members may feel that they have insufficient time, ideas or mastering of the language to participate at the same level. On the other hand, when very brief and accessible messages go out, other members may also be less motivated to interact, as it can make them feel that the network is more a 'help-desk' than a place to collectively share and reflect on ideas and experiences.

The use of Internet in development cooperation is clearly changing quickly, with recent innovations such as RSS feeds and social

bookmarking increasingly becoming part of the information workers' palette, and audio and video streams finding their place in more flexible uses of websites. However, a large part of people working in developing countries still rely mostly on email to manage their work and stay informed of what others are doing. In that context, the Pelican Initiative, among a multitude of learning networks that are important in exchanges between practitioners across the globe, will likely keep on having a productive role in the development cooperation sector in the next few years to come.

Further reading

European Centre for Development Policy Management

<http://www.ecdpm.org> (go to Communication and Innovation and then to Activities/Projects for more information about the Pelican Initiative)

Publications that were made to share some of the main points from the Pelican discussions with a wider audience

Making evaluation results count: Internalising evidence by learning

<http://www.ecdpm.org/pmb16>

Networking for learning: the human face of knowledge management?

<http://www.ecdpm.org/pmb18>

Responding to change: learning to adapt in development cooperation

<http://www.ecdpm.org/pmb19>

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¹ The Exchange programme was hosted by Healthlink Worldwide and ran from 2000 to 2005. The experience, lessons and linkages of Exchange have been incorporated into a new communication, networking and learning programme at Healthlink Worldwide.

² Dgroups, short for 'Discussion Groups', is an initiative of Bellanet, DFID, Hivos, ICA,

ICCO, IICD, OneWorld, UNAIDS, and the World Bank. The initiative currently supports 1,989 different groups, which connect 71,263 members.

3 Some examples of approaches exchanged through the network are Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems (RAAKS), Outcome Mapping, Most Significant Change, the Systematisation Approach, IIED Power Tools, Participatory Market Chain Approach (PMCA), and the Horizontal Evaluation approach.



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2007-08-06

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FLORENGHEL(AT)GMAIL.COM
ISSN 1654-7985