

EIP Learning Note

Measures of mutuality and trust-based learning between peers

How do we monitor the quality of P2P partnerships for institutional strengthening?

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Introduction

If practitioners find it useful with facilitated exchange among peers on public sector reform or social change in their country, municipality or for their constituency group, do we really need to rigorously track how such peer-based learning support institutional development? The question was raised in different forms while putting together the EIP Discussion Paper ‘Lessons Harvesting for Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning from Peer-to-Peer Engagement’ that informs the EIP series of Learning Events and brief Learning Notes (the Stocktaking Report).

Assessing how practitioners put learning to use in their institutions is difficult -- particularly P2P learning which relies on human interaction, trustful relationships and individual exchange. Monitoring how such learning contributes to wider impact in systems that rely on multiple internal and external actors and contextual factors is even harder. But that is also why Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) in peer-to-peer (P2P) engagement can add value – not as an ‘add on’ to retrospectively demonstrate impact or relevance – but to help navigate, inform and negotiate how actor-driven change happen within and across organizational and societal systems.

Building on an initial stock-taking of MEL experiences among Effective Institution Platform (EIP) Advisory Group members, who actively support P2P learning exchanges in their day-to-day work, the EIP is developing a series of learning events and accompanying Learning Notes to discuss and explore the major themes emerging on effective ways of P2P learning.

The function of trust and mutuality in Peer-to-Peer learning

This Learning Note seeks to explore how to use monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) to promote mutual learning between peers by addressing power imbalances in the partnership, encourage two-way flow of information and learning, and create a sense of joint purpose between participating institutions.

[Relevant Lessons in Harvesting Report:](#)

- **Trust between peers who share experiences regularly, over time, complements cognitive learning with emotional (affective) learning – potentially leading to a higher degree of internalization and ownership.** One of the advantages of P2P learning is that it complements ongoing reform or institutional change, tapping into both cognitive and affective learning. Several examples show how the emotional bond and emerging sense of solidarity between participating peers made new information, and the willingness to try new ways of working

more easily acceptable. MEL processes can establish and track measures that help to solidify the process of building trust and mutuality in joint problem-solving.

- **‘Mutuality in partnerships’ involves a two-way flow of information and learning between peers on a clearly defined agenda of mutual interest:** The level of clarity on the mutual interests and goals of participating entities was found to be closely related to the development of trust and understanding between P2P partners. Moreover, examples illustrated that, sometimes, what started out as primarily a transactional peer relationship with one-directional learning, eventually evolved into mutual learning between institutions. Yet these results are rarely captured, as most P2P learning engagements still focus mostly on the transfer of knowledge from a resource organization to a ‘recipient’ of new knowledge. Tracking how all partners learn and use these new insights can reinforce a sense of mutuality in P2P partnerships and break down power asymmetries that may otherwise negatively influence learning outcomes.

Core capabilities in focus:

- Capability to commit to and engage in the learning effort as institutions among all participating peers (beyond the individual level, and not just within ‘recipient’ institution)
- Capability to relate to context and attract others within and outside the ‘home’ institution, with degree of legitimacy added by the P2P partnership (e.g. *If another Ministry of Finance in the region has tried it, we can adapt lessons and try it too.*)

Examples from the Harvesting Report:

- **GPI’s dual MEL focus on monitoring/tracking the health of the partnership *as well as* what the partnership produces in terms of agreed results.** They use different tools and methodologies that allow them to see, over time, see how/whether there is a correlation between the two aspects of the P2P engagement (partnership health and concrete outcomes). In the report, they caution that a healthy P2P relationship, based on trust, does not necessarily produce the intended results, particularly if there is too much of an ‘echo chamber’ to infuse new learning, or if partners are unable to openly challenge each other on what may not work in their given organizational context. Conversely, you can have a predominantly transactional P2P relationship that – due to the specific or technical nature of the problem – still gets the job done in terms of results, but which may lose out on other aspects of engaging as peer institutions (over more other expert-driven TA inputs). This dual tracking is a way to align actors around common goals and objectives, and to nurture a deeper understanding and openness that is critical for building trust.
- **LOGIN Asia** noted that the emotional bond that comes with the direct engagement between partners helped the Municipality of Ulaanbaatar (MUB), Mongolia realize that they needed to widen their initially quite narrow technical demand of drawing up a training strategy for local officials. This realization came when visiting the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), The insight was that they needed to address their identified capacity gap more holistically in order to make it implementable, scalable and sustained – a fact that they had been advised on several occasions previously. LOGIN’s assessment is that the emotional connect during the P2P learning encounters enabled the MUB to internalize these takeaways. The BNEW-THP

(Bhutan-India) partnership also evolved and roles changed over time as the relationship developed.

- Being an **African-led and owned** initiative, an evaluation of CABRI noted in the participant feedback that: *“CABRI’s approach of capacity building in African countries is not a lecture, but a diagnostic and a participatory process.”* As such, there seems to have been a high degree of mutuality in the learning and exchange between participating Ministries of Finance.
- **Astana Civil Service Hub**, based in Kazakhstan, underscored the need to build up a relationship of trust between them as a knowledge hub facilitator and the peers in the network, and that these relationships pay off over time. One of the mechanisms that ASCH uses is regularly seeking feedback among participating countries via needs assessment surveys which are synthesized in baseline reports on priority areas for knowledge exchange and learning. Case studies are then compiled (funded by the Hub) and typically discussed in face-to-face workshops. The launch of a Virtual Alliance in connection with COVID-19 showed a high degree of reciprocity of peers also online, including the willingness to share experiences. For instance, Azerbaijan shared a case about their digital system to minimize the spread of the virus with the Kazakhstan government.

Additional sources and examples: *<additional suggestions welcome>*

- 1) GPI Story of Change Report focused on bidirectional (unanticipated) learning, and used examples to illustrate how the UK government partner institution also gained valuable insights that they may seek to use in their own organization/ways of working. This is despite the fact that the partnership was designed to be largely unidirectional with one ‘resource institution’ (UK government agency) and one learning ‘recipient institution’ (public authority in partner country).
 - *UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) change story: “I went to Rwanda to review their civil registration system. ONS were also spending large amounts of money to build a new system to deal with civil registration. After I went to Rwanda and looked at what they were building, for much less cost, I came back with a different perspective on how to develop the UK system.”* GPI, February 2020
- 2) Forthcoming study by the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Sweden, on trust and trust-based management in aid (the EIP Co-Chair Karin Metell-Cueva is a member of the reference group). *“The study discusses the question of how ideas on trust-based management may be applied to the development aid context by studying how intermediary organisations in the so-called aid chain mediate with the dilemmas of inequality, distance and complexity.”*
- 3) A report with lessons from a peer learning collaborative in the transparency and accountability field across peer civil society/research organizations (organized into ‘learning hubs’) underscores the importance of creating peer exchange on clearly defined issues/problems as a means to building trustful interactions and a sense of joint purpose:

“The design of the Collaborative purposively did not mandate a particular learning question or orientation, only a commitment to learning; it was assumed that the members would find common ground based on the fact that they were active in the transparency, accountability, and participation field and interested in learning. The emphasis on learning but without a

substantive focus made it overly ambitious to both design learning processes and create new knowledge within and across the hubs. The lack of a shared understanding of what was meant by “learning” (about what, and how) was a problem for crafting collaborative learning agendas.” Lipovsek V. & Hussmann K. *Supporting field-based learning for transparency and accountability initiatives: Lessons from the Learning Collaborative.* January 2020.

The same report points to the fact that despite having ‘co-created’ the initiatives as peer organizations and assigned one of the groups the facilitation role, peer exchange around joint action suffered from clear leadership in its governance and decision-making structures, compounded by weak facilitation. On the other hand, an innovative contribution was that the groups undertook peer-reviews of each others’ internal structures for organizational learning via structured organizational Learning Assessments. The fact that these learning assessments were not tied to funding or pre-determined performance criteria allowed for a more critical reflection, often leading to concrete improvements in their strategic plans and MEL practices, with real examples of mutuality in the way these assessments were conducted and findings jointly reflected on.

Key areas and questions to explore:

- 1) How do we use MEL to track lessons around **what makes trustful peer partnerships** – from how it is set up (emergent, facilitated or imposed), who funds it in what way (short- or long-term, at what level/to complement an existing initiative or as a stand-alone), the level of transparency and open communication between partners (on a number of dimensions, via regular self-assessments), as well as how to overcome inherent power asymmetries (particularly when partnering across different countries and contexts)?
- 2) How can we track the **quality of the partnership** in addition to tracking what the partnership contributes to, or produces in terms of concrete outputs and results?

How can we more **systematically track mutuality** (equal, and two-way flow) in P2P learning? How can this be built in from the outset as part of the MEL framework, using what approaches and tools?