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What have we learned about learning? Unpacking the relationship between knowledge and organisational change in development agencies

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What Have We Learned About Learning?

Unpacking the Relationship Between Knowledge and Organisational Change in Development Agencies

Pablo Yanguas

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Abstract

Development cooperation has spent decades wrangling over the merits, evidence, and implications of what we may term “the learning hypothesis”: the idea that increased knowledge by development organisations must logically lead to increased effectiveness in the performance of their development activities. Organisations of all stripes have built research and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) departments, adopted a multitude of knowledge management systems and tools, and tinkered with different ways to structure their organograms to stimulate knowledge sharing and learning. The topic of organisational learning is particularly significant as the global development community grapples with increasingly complex problems and the aspiration of evidence-based policymaking.

This paper presents an analytical framework for interrogating “the learning hypothesis”, breaking it down into causal steps: knowledge causes learning, learning causes organisational change, change causes effectiveness. The framework focuses on the first two sub-hypotheses, mapping out the conceptual space around them by outlining potential relationships between different types of knowledge – tacit and explicit, internal and external – and between different types of learning – operational and strategic. This map provides a foundation for three key research questions: What impact has the rising knowledge agenda had on development organisations? Which factors appear to enable or inhibit organisational learning? What is the relationship between operational and strategic learning and organisational change?

A review of available evaluations and studies, including two cases from former UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank, reveals that there is insufficient evidence to support the causal claim that knowledge leads to learning and thereby to organisational change in development agencies. Sources point to tacit learning prevailing while explicit knowledge management systems flounder, and external advocacy agendas appear more compelling than internal research and evaluation products. It is not entirely clear how, or indeed, whether operational and strategic learning intersect, with delivery-level lessons hardly aggregating into structural or policy shifts. Organisational change – even that aimed at enhancing learning – is rarely based on lessons learned from practice.

More research is necessary to fully unpack the learning hypothesis, but what limited evidence is available disproves rather than confirms its central claim. This has significant implications for the future of learning in development agencies as advocated by thought leaders, researchers, and reformers. In particular, the latter should consider an evidence-based reassessment of the function and value-for-money of research and M&E in development practice, and a more critical examination of the politics of external advocacy efforts around innovative aid approaches like thinking and working politically, adaptive management, or results-based management.

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Seville, January 2021

Pablo Yanguas

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Abbreviations

CLA	collaborating, learning, and adapting
DFID	former UK Department for International Development
ICAI	Independent Commission on Aid Impact (United Kingdom)
IEG	Independent Evaluation Group (World Bank)
IT	information technology
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
NGO	non-governmental organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute (United Kingdom)
OECD DAC	Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDIA	problem-driven iterative adaptation
PEA	political economy analysis
RBM	results-based management
TWP	thinking and working politically
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1 Introduction

Development cooperation has spent decades wrangling over the merits, evidence, and implications of what we may term “the learning hypothesis”: the idea that increased knowledge by development organisations must logically lead to increased effectiveness in the performance of their development activities. The hypothetical pathway runs through learning and organisational change: with knowledge about what works, a development organisation can adjust its practices to ensure resources and approaches are deployed towards better delivery of desired outcomes. This can mean adjusting programme designs during implementation; prioritising within a broader portfolio of activities; or developing new modalities of support.

The topic of organisational learning is particularly significant as the global development community grapples with increasingly complex problems and the aspiration of evidence-based policymaking. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is predicated on a rigorous results-based management logic by which governments will use evidence to develop strategies for greater performance. Donor agencies are under pressure to demonstrate impact and ensure that taxpayer funds are not wasted in non-performing interventions. Amongst practitioners, the last decade has seen a proliferation of “innovative” approaches to aid – such as “thinking and working politically” or “adaptive management” – that put learning at the centre of the development enterprise. The stars are in alignment: for better or worse, the learning hypothesis will be put to the test in the coming decade.

As intuitive as the hypothesis may be to practitioners and observers, it has proven remarkably difficult to gather valid and reliable evidence, carry out rigorous analysis, and generate significant findings on whether the learning-effectiveness causal relationship holds, that is, whether knowledge leads to learning, which leads to change, which leads to impact. The literature on this topic, such as it is, draws liberally from a hodgepodge of concepts and agendas from management science, organisational theory, and development studies, gravitating towards terms like “knowledge sharing”, “knowledge management”, “monitoring and evaluation”, “organisational learning”, or “the learning organisation”. It does not differentiate sufficiently between description and prescription, between assessment and aspiration (Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007, p. 9). Moreover, it tends to lack quantitative analyses and explicit counterfactuals (USAID [United States Agency for International Development], 2020, p. 13). Overall, there is a dearth of evidence on whether – and under what conditions – learning does indeed lead to effectiveness, but an overabundance of recommendations on how to make it happen.

This paper is not a systematic review of the literature – there have been others in the past (Hovland, 2004; Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007; Ferguson, Mchombu, & Cummings, 2008; ICAI [Independent Commission on Aid Impact], 2019; USAID, 2020), and the gains from yet another review effort would be marginal. Instead, the paper presents an analytical framework for interrogating “the learning hypothesis” going forward, using available evidence to illustrate key concepts and causal relationships. The different sections interrogate the relationship between knowledge and learning; which factors enable or inhibit learning in development agencies; and what relationship may exist between learning and organisational change. Answers to these questions are developed from a review of primary and secondary sources as well as academic and grey literature, supplemented with insights gained by the author from previous research, participant observation, and direct practitioner experience.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents key concepts and integrates them into an analytical map for interrogating the causal claims and assumptions underpinning the hypothesis that knowledge leads to change. Section 3 reviews the rise of knowledge as an agenda in development, presents evidence on its impact in organisational practice, and introduces the case of the former UK Department for International Development as a more detailed illustration of the missing link between knowledge and learning. Section 4 provides an overview of factors affecting learning, organised into three levels of analysis: psychological, organisational, and field. Section 5 unpacks the relationship between learning and organisational change, in the operational and strategic sense, using the case of the World Bank to illustrate how change for learning can take precedence over learning for change. Section 6 derives implications for the future of the learning agenda for researchers, advocates, and policymakers. Finally, Section 7 summarises the main findings and offers some concluding thoughts.

2 Analytical framework: knowledge, learning and change

The topic of organisational learning in development encompasses many terms and buzzwords signifying concepts that are assumed to interact with each other through various causal relationships. This section presents an analytical map for navigating such complexity by highlighting key conceptual distinctions and laying out clearly and explicitly the hypothesised causal links between knowledge, learning and change.

2.1 Knowledge needs in development agencies

In the ideal-type development organisation, knowledge is intrinsic to performance. Development interventions begin with a problem that needs to be tackled, which requires knowledge about the problem itself, its impact on beneficiaries, its likely causes, and the broader institutional and socioeconomic context. Partnerships require knowledge about who the stakeholders are, how they relate to one another, their commitment to change, their capacity to absorb aid and carry out tasks, their time horizons. The design of cooperation initiatives is predicated on the knowledge of a range of possible methodologies and delivery approaches. Implementation generates knowledge on the assumptions made by an intervention, the validity of its approach, its effects both intended and unintended. All these forms of knowledge are necessary because of the complexity and uncertainty inherent in many development problems (Honig, 2018; Yanguas, 2018).

Not all development organisations have the same knowledge needs. This paper focuses primarily on bilateral and multilateral development agencies – donors – that have headquarters and country offices and fund development co-operation programmes and projects. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), philanthropic foundations, global initiatives, and so on, will have different needs for knowledge, matched to their own mandates, capabilities, and scope of action. Even amongst donors there is variation: some have fully staffed country offices, whereas others rely on partners for country engagement; some have organisational autonomy, whereas others exist as units of larger foreign affairs and trade ministries; some implement their own programmes, others contract them out to private implementers, and yet others only work through partnership with recipient governments.

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Knowledge for development performance can take various forms. A frequent conceptual distinction is made between explicit knowledge that is codified into organisational repositories and guidance, and tacit knowledge that is accrued by individuals through experience and interaction with one another. There is often a tension between explicit and tacit knowledge, as the desire to codify experiences often results in a loss of complexity and granularity, whereas the desire to encourage tacit knowledge creation increases the difficulty of tracking, compiling, and synthesising whatever knowledge emerges (King & McGrath, 2003).

A second conceptual distinction can be made between knowledge that the organisation generates internally, and that which it acquires from external sources. Internal knowledge enables internal feedback mechanisms and performance management, for instance by interrogating whether interventions and policies achieve their intended goals. Some of the knowledge generated internally will be tacit, consisting of the range of experiences, beliefs, and expectations of staff; other times it will be explicit, through the commissioning of research and evaluations. External knowledge – whether tacit or explicit – can serve as a useful supplement and check to internal knowledge, but it is harder to align with organisational structures and processes, especially when the external and internal conflict.

A third conceptual distinction is possible between policy knowledge, which covers the technical understanding of a particular issues or methodology, and field knowledge, which covers experiential understanding of a particular operational context, including institutional features, power relations, or dominant norms. As one moves from field offices to headquarters, one or the other take precedence. Reconciling the two can be difficult. Policy-centric units and departments tend to compile best practices and issue general recommendations; this will be the case, particularly, when policy embodies values (for example, gender equality or the free market) that are part of an organisation's vision or mandate. Country-based offices and missions, on the other hand, develop a more nuanced understanding of what is possible in any given context, and can generate knowledge on partners, framing of issues, and windows of opportunity for development cooperation.

Though the distinction between policy and field knowledge is important, the analytical framework presented below focuses on the tacit-explicit and internal-external dyads.

2.2 Organisational learning: operational and strategic

For the purposes of this paper, organisational learning in development agencies is defined as the process by which development organisations use knowledge to change their systems, processes, and strategies for achieving their goals, in particular (but not exclusively) more effective developmental performance. This definition is at the very least consistent with officially stated objectives: “The ultimate goal of learning systems is not to meet an external good practice standard, but to make departments more agile and effective in the management of their aid portfolio” (ICAI, 2019, p. 5).

It is important to note that learning is not the only outcome that knowledge serves in development organisations – indeed, it may not even be the main one. Knowledge is also generated for the purposes of accountability to funders, leaders, and stakeholders, primarily through reporting and communication. This is a purpose that has “a natural tendency to

conflict” with performance-oriented learning (OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], 2014b, p. 9). Another prominent use of knowledge in foreign aid is legitimisation, whether this entails advancing particular reform agendas, building an external identity or reputation, or influencing other development organisations (King & McGrath, 2003).

Assuming that knowledge is indeed meant for learning, the question remains of what that learning is for. Organisational impact appears as the *prima-facie* goal of learning in development agencies. However, the first-order question of whether learning leads to more impact brings up a second-order question about what counts as impact. Development outcomes can be difficult to measure, much less to attribute to particular interventions: institutional change takes a long time, unfolds in non-linear dynamics, and results from complex causal configurations. This has led to a tendency in development to focus on results that are easily measurable, though not necessarily transformative or sustainable (Natsios, 2010; Yanguas, 2018). Given prevailing challenges around impact assessment, it is more realistic to take a step back from impact, and instead focus on organisational changes adopted with the goal of achieving greater impact.

One problem with the definition of organisational learning introduced above is that systems, processes, and strategies exist at different levels of an organisation. At the highest level, learning can lead to a change in the organisation’s goals or business plan; at the lowest level, it can lead to a change in the approach for a particular intervention. In development cooperation, this could mean the difference between which issues, partnerships, and modalities to pursue (grants, in-house implementation, contracted implementation, and so on) and what concrete delivery approaches to follow in doing so.

Theorists of management and organisation identified this problem early on and settled on a distinction between two types of learning. Cyert and March (1963) distinguished between learning as a short-term feedback process altering behaviour under existing rules, and a long-term feedback process altering the rules themselves. Argyris and Schön (1978) developed a similar distinction between single-loop learning, intended to identify and correct errors within stated policy guidelines, and double-loop learning, intended to think critically about policy frameworks. Argyris (1992) lamented that one of the chief obstacles to learning is the focus of most organisations on the single loop, to the detriment of the double loop. This is consistent with patterns of bureaucratic inertia.

In development organisations, the distinction between lower- and higher-level learning processes can be mapped onto the distinction between the implementation of operations and the strategic management of the organisation. Practitioners and teams working on activities are seldom able to change their design, but can influence the process of implementation; conversely, staff situated in headquarter units can shape policies but have limited influence over what happens in the field (Janus, 2020, p. 65). The relative position of these two types of actors and tasks maps onto two distinct forms of organisational learning: operational learning and strategic learning.

Operational learning encompasses the processes by which knowledge influences the delivery cycle – prioritisation, scoping, design, contracting, implementation, monitoring, evaluation – of individual projects, programmes, or activities. Operational learning unfolds within the permission space generated by an approved funding package with concrete

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objectives, and it can take the form of feedback loops that recur annually, quarterly, or even on an everyday basis. Operational learning allows development organisations to refine and adjust interventions to ensure more effective performance against expected results.

Strategic learning, in turn, encompasses the processes by which knowledge influences the objectives, structures and processes that will govern the design and implementation of activities. It unfolds at the level of the organisation itself, and it can take the form of a gradual endogenous process in which marginal changes accumulate over time, or that of a punctuated equilibrium in which shocks – external or internal – trigger a revision of the existing paradigm. Strategic learning allows development organisations to realign their structures, processes, or practices to ensure a more effective pursuit of organisational goals.

It would be tempting to assume that operational and strategic learning feed into or reinforce one another, whether that entails the micro-learning from operations leading to a macro-shift in policy or the other way around. However, the concepts presented here do not assume such interaction. It is possible, and indeed likely, that operational learning triggers changes to delivery approaches underneath an unchanging organisational paradigm. Likewise, it is possible and indeed likely that organisational learning triggers changes to formal policies and hierarchies without having much of an impact on delivery tasks. The spectrum of possible interactions between the two is a question to be researched.

2.3 An analytical map for navigating knowledge, learning and change

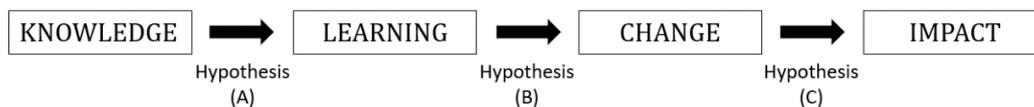
The learning hypothesis can be summarised in a simplified causal statement: in development agencies, increased knowledge leads to increased impact. However, the conceptual distinctions outlined above caution us against assuming such simple causality. There is a big “black box” between knowledge and impact: a box comprising organisational learning and change, which themselves result from complex interactions between lower-level factors. At its most basic, the initial hypothesis can be split into three (see Figure 1):

A) Knowledge leads to organisational learning;

B) Learning leads to organisational change;

C) Change leads to organisational impact.

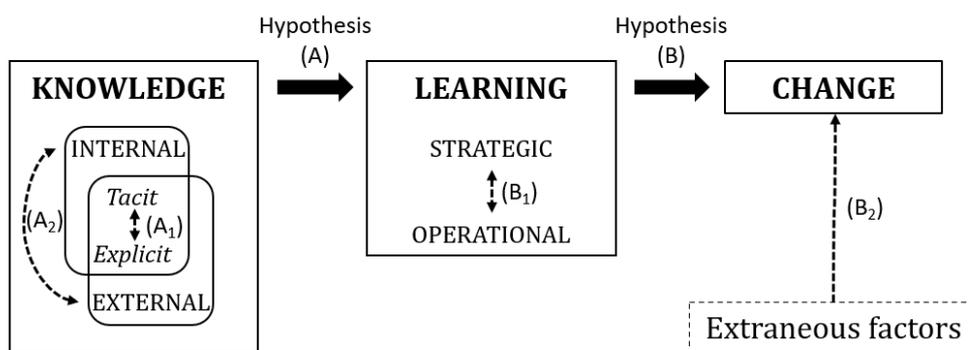
This paper focuses on hypotheses A) and B); as already mentioned, the task of demonstrating impact is a thorny one that requires more rigorous interrogation.

Figure 1: The three learning hypotheses

Source: Author

This breakdown of the learning hypothesis into several causal steps will look familiar to anyone with a working knowledge of monitoring and evaluation or of the various approaches to adaptation in development (introduced in Section 4 below). The difference is that those approaches tend to focus on project-level impact, not the organisational one. In addition, instead of a unidirectional causal chain, M&E and adaptive models tend to represent the links in the chain as a cycle or feedback loop, such that impact generates new knowledge. But the causal claims are similar.

It is possible to further unpack this basic framework by incorporating the conceptual distinctions presented above, particularly as they relate to types of knowledge and types of learning, as well as any assumed or hypothesised interactions between them. This adds some complexity to what otherwise appears as an elegant causal statement. But it also brings concepts closer to the day-to-day practices of development agencies. New potential causal relationships are introduced between different types and sources of knowledge, and between different types of learning (see Figure 2). In particular, we can zero in on the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge (A_1); between internal and external knowledge (A_2); and between operational and strategic learning, particularly as it relates to organisational change (B_1). We can also begin to consider extraneous factors, non-learning-related determinants of change (B_2), especially those arising from the contentious politics of development, within agencies and particularly outside of them (Yanguas, 2018).

Figure 2: Analytical map of organisational learning

Source: Author

The resulting analytical map lays out the complex causal chain underneath the deceptively intuitive learning hypothesis. It helps us isolate research questions to guide the task of evidence review:

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- What impact has the rising knowledge agenda had on development organisations? (Section 3)
- Which factors appear to enable or inhibit organisational learning? (Section 4)
- What is the relationship between operational and strategic learning and organisational change? (Section 5)

In more practical terms, the framework allows us to examine the validity of the assumptions made by various learning agendas – research, M&E, various innovative approaches to aid – regarding their contribution to organisational change in development agencies.

3 The rise and impact of knowledge in development

Knowledge has come to occupy a prominent place in global development debates. Researchers are asked to explain increasingly complex problems, funders are expected to publish what they fund, and managers are directed to document their every choice and result. It is often assumed that such demands for knowledge lead to better development practice. This section interrogates that assumption.

3.1 Rise of the “knowledge industry”

The field of development has a long history of tension between two functions: a lending or funding role, which is dominated by headquarter units; and a delivery or implementation role, which is dominated by field missions and programmes. The lending function has traditionally dominated, imposing on practitioners an overriding need to demonstrate the value of investments. While this outlook serves an important accountability and legitimation role, it does not necessarily yield development impacts on the ground, especially when faced with complex contexts and problems (Andrews, 2013; Honig, 2018).

In response to the apparent failure of directive approaches to aid, practitioners and observers closer to delivery have repeatedly tried to advocate an alternative approach to development, one that is more accepting of risk, responsive to context, trusting of partners, and open to experimentation. Korten (1980) argued that development projects with limited knowledge operating under changing conditions could not rely on a “blueprint approach”; instead, he called for a “learning process approach”. This would require regular monitoring and evaluation of longer-term programmes informed by beneficiary knowledge (Therkildsen, 1988). The logical conclusion of this interpretation led to framing development projects as social experiments, which would need to be governed by the logic of iteration instead of the logic of planning (Rondinelli, 1993). Janus (2020) terms this the first generation of the results and adaptation debate, which did not end in a decisive victory for either side.

Knowledge became a central element of the organisational field of development in the 1990s. The spread of cheaper and more powerful IT (information technology) resources promised new possibilities for knowledge management. The corporate sector began to attach a certain appeal to the notion of the “knowledge firm”. And the end of the Cold War forced development agencies to reconsider their role and identity in a changing world.

Against this backdrop, the World Bank became a trailblazer when in 1996 President James Wolfensohn rebranded it as the “Knowledge Bank”, a framing that would be expanded and legitimised in the “World Development Report 1998/1999: Knowledge for Development” (World Bank, 1998). Over the following years the idea of “knowledge-based aid” would become more prominent in donor organisations, giving rise to a panoply of approaches and tools for knowledge sharing and knowledge management (McGrath & King, 2004).

In the mid-2000s, the nascent aid effectiveness agenda coordinated by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD DAC) enshrined results monitoring as one of the key partnership principles of the Paris agenda, under which donors committed to “managing and implementing aid in a way that focuses on the desired results and uses information to improve decision-making” (OECD, 2008, p. 7). Shortly thereafter, austerity measures resulting from the 2008 financial crisis brought into question the continued legitimacy of foreign aid as a public investment in donor countries. The defensive reaction by the field was to adopt stricter transparency and accountability requirements for all aid spending, with a particular emphasis on value-for-money (Yanguas, 2018, p. 51), which was followed by a counter-push for more adaptation and learning (Janus, 2020, p. 61; Gulrajani, 2011).

For some observers, between the 1990s and present day, development has evolved into a veritable “knowledge industry” (Ferguson et al., 2008, p. 38). Indeed, by the mid-2010s most donors had adopted some form of knowledge management or learning strategy. These incorporated a wide variety of tools and practices: corporate IT platforms, training curricula, mentoring programmes, communities of practice, knowledge networks, help desks, resource centres, knowledge fairs, knowledge brokers, learning logs, and so on. Some placed a greater emphasis on knowledge management, others on evaluations or research, and yet others on learning, both internal and external. In sum, the learning hypothesis appeared to have been accepted as fact.

3.2 Evidence of the use of knowledge

Most development agencies have processes by which knowledge is generated, stored, shared, and fed back into operations – processes that include familiar functions such as research and analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and knowledge management. Research and M&E are internal sources of explicit knowledge that a development organisation can learn from: about contexts and trajectories, about methodologies and strategies, about assumptions and patterns of impact. But the creation of such knowledge does not automatically entail its dissemination to relevant parts of the organisation – that is where knowledge management processes come in, archiving relevant knowledge and making it available on demand.

Despite the proliferation of knowledge management and learning strategies across development agencies, there is very little evidence of what impact they may have had on organisational effectiveness. As one reviewer writes, “The question of how international development cooperation can make sense of past experiences in order to improve future performance has yet to be answered” (Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007, p. 6). There are few studies and publications on the relationship between learning approaches and organisational performance, an evidence gap that has not become smaller despite the passage of time

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(Hovland, 2004, p. 7; USAID, 2020, p. 33). Some authors suggest this stems from “limited overall understanding of what constitutes ‘impact’ from a knowledge management perspective” (Ferguson et al., 2008, p. 38). Or it may just be that the metrics for successful learning are underdeveloped (UNDP [United Nations Development Programme], 2014, p. 7). In any case, “the informal nature of much learning and knowledge sharing places severe limitations on the ability of monitoring and evaluation to adequately measure activities” (King & McGrath, 2003, p. 12).

What limited evidence *does* exist must be gleaned from learning strategies themselves, external evaluations, and DAC peer reviews. As a general rule, there appears to be a pattern of agencies using evidence primarily for accountability and not learning from performance (OECD, 2014b, p. 9). M&E systems produce a wealth of data and information, but often do not provide “opportunities for learning and adaptation” (USAID, 2020, p. 19). It is unclear the extent to which recommendations from evaluations “are accepted and used to inform policies and programmes” (EC [European Commission], 2014, p. 16). These evaluations sometimes lack “relevance and impact” (OECD, 2019, p. 5), and may “fall short of their purpose to transform knowledge from experience into improved practices” (Carlsson, Eriksson-Baaz, Fallenius, & Lövgren, 1999, p. 18).

There is little assessment of evidence needs and demand for knowledge in development agencies (King & McGrath, 2003; UNDP, 2014, p. 8). DAC organisations “report a lack of institutional demand for results information for decision-making and learning”, and surveys reveal that learning is not cited as a priority for strategic management (OECD, 2014b, p. 10, 39). And even when knowledge management tools function as intended, it is not often clear how learning feeds up to management to ensure that knowledge is used for decision-making (OECD, 2014a, p. 89). Despite successive waves of knowledge management reforms, staff still tend to rely “on their own individual networks of professional contacts for knowledge sharing” (McGrath & King, 2004, p. 172).

Development agencies have invested significant resources in knowledge generation processes. Aid grants support numerous researchers in think tanks and academic institutions, who every year release countless reports, working papers, journal articles, and books addressing development problems. Monitoring and evaluation units and contractors scrutinise every aspect of project implementation, generating reports, ratings, and scorecards, full of impact assessments and recommendations. Nevertheless, like the proverbial tree that does not make any noise because no one is there to listen to it fall, knowledge as generated and disseminated by these processes might not have an impact because many – if not most – of these reports, papers, and books go unread by the practitioners who design and implement operations.

There appears to be a primacy of the tacit over the explicit. That seems to be the case even in organisations that have made significant investments and undergone institutional transformations in the name of generating explicit knowledge, like the former UK Department for International Development (DFID, now merged into a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office).

3.3 Knowledge without learning at DFID

DFID is an interesting case because it was subject to significant accountability pressures and developed numerous internal processes for generating knowledge. Externally, the post-financial crisis government of Britain undertook a significant reform of DFID procedures towards greater focus on results and value-for-money and established an external watchdog, the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI), to monitor the organisation's impact. Internally, DFID adopted a large and diverse menu of knowledge sharing and management tools, including technical advisory cadres, corporate knowledge management platforms, learning champions, "what works" programmes, "best buys" papers, a "Better Delivery" team, a "Knowledge 4 Development" helpdesk, and resource hubs (OECD, 2020). It also dedicated around 3 per cent of its budget to research, with a Research and Evidence Division that funded research programmes both across the United Kingdom and globally.

In 2014, an ICAI evaluation on "How DFID learns" found that DFID generated considerable amounts of information, but that it was "less good at using it and building in experience so as to turn learning into action" (ICAI, 2014, p. 1). The organisation did not track the impact of its evaluations and did not assess the impact of learning on programme choices, theories of change, or delivery mechanisms. Much of its knowledge production had been in fact outsourced as part of the contracting model, with operational learning generated by partners and contractors seldom being assimilated by DFID itself. Staff were found to learn well as individuals, but they did so from personal experience and from each other, not from organisational research and M&E.

These findings were consistent with an earlier review carried out by the RAPID programme on DFID learning from research and evaluation (Jones & Mendizabal, 2010). It found that DFID-funded research was perceived to be for external consumption and not directly relevant to operations. Staff did not have much time to engage with resource centres, which were plagued by the variable quality of evidence products. Evaluations were not perceived as accessible or practical, and M&E was seen as "a paper exercise rather than an active learning and management tool" (Jones & Mendizabal, 2010, p. 18). In general, knowledge dissemination took place through advisory cadres and professional networks where trust between individuals facilitated learning. But this kind of interpersonal learning was not done systematically, and it clashed against an overall culture that did not privilege personal or organisational learning and had difficulties learning from failure (in the words of one informant, "all our pilots seem to be successful!"). This made staff less capable of processing big questions or conflicting evidence, and more prone to suffer from confirmation bias.

4 Determinants of learning in development agencies

In order to understand why knowledge fails to translate into change, we need to review the range of enabling and inhibiting factors that may stimulate or stymie learning. As a synthesis effort, they are presented here according to three levels of analysis: psychological, organisational, and field factors. Although these levels bleed into one another, naturally, they provide a useful categorisation for the potential causes of learning.

4.1 Psychological factors

Development organisations are inhabited by individuals, who bring with them knowledge about tasks, problems, or agendas – but also biases about how these may unfold. Task overload is a common complaint about development work, and it can easily translate into cognitive overload, which leads individuals to rely increasingly on heuristics and associational thinking – what Kahneman (2011) defines as System 1 thinking. In contrast with the costly inquisitive System 2 for interrogating, processing, and organising information, System 1 responds to hard questions by responding to easier questions. Cognitively, development staff in the field see their attention fragmented over managing a large number of interventions across different sectors (OECD, 2014a, p. 63). That means that, when asked whether a particular reform approach will work, a professional may use the availability heuristic to quickly remember if a similar approach has been rated as successful elsewhere; or she may resort to the affect heuristic, favouring the approach that resonates the most with a philosophy or the people she holds dear. The “World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior” devoted an entire chapter to “The biases of development professionals” (World Bank, 2015).

Even when there is enough time and cognitive budget to engage in System 2 thinking, a professional may be swayed by social psychological dynamics, like groupthink and prejudice, that preclude the consideration of new ideas which run counter to an influential leader or a deep-seated identity. This may be particularly salient in organisations staffed by people with homogeneous socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. In order to engage in learning, individuals need a psychological “safety net” as well as trust in their colleagues (USAID, 2020, p. 29). This links psychological factors to more organisational-level determinants, like incentives and cultures, as will be discussed below. Development agencies that delegate authority, allocate time and resources to learning, and reward experimentation (as do some private sector firms) may encourage a self-reinforcing group dynamic of knowledge creation and dissemination.

In organisational contexts less welcoming of System 2 thinking, there will still be proactive learning, but it is more likely to be carried out by outliers, innovators and “mavericks” (Yanguas, 2018, p. 177). Challenging the status quo is easier for those who can find room for manoeuvre between conformity and defiance, “seasoned professionals who are able to innovate, and work to manage high levels of risk, while complying with important formal processes of reporting and safeguarding” (Bain, Booth, & Wild, 2016, p. 8). However, these outliers tend to be isolated iconoclasts, who can experience burnout if they continue to encounter barriers to their initiatives, potentially leading to their exit from an organisation.

4.2 Organisational structures, incentives, and cultures

Bureaucracies are structured in formal hierarchies of authority delegation and technical division of labour. Over time, they develop routines and procedures as well as supporting identities and norms that reinforce the organisational structure. Because their very legitimacy before leaders and the public depends on sticking to mandates, structures and processes, bureaucracies can be slow to respond to change (Scott, 2007). In development organisations, learning can be inhibited by structures, incentives and cultures.

The structure of a development agency can create barriers to the processes of learning feedback between operations and learning tasks. For one thing, knowledge is often split between information technology, human resources, communications, and evaluation departments, which undermines coordination (McGrath & King, 2004). Learning arising from such “outsiders” can be perceived as an interference or mission creep by staff working on policy or delivery activities; in some agencies, “results frameworks are often seen as additional requirements and not an instrument for learning and management” (OECD, 2014b, p. 39). Indeed, “the knowledge and learning function may be seen as competing internally with other approaches whose functions are geared towards different priorities” (Ramalingam, 2005, p. 30). Knowledge can also hold low operational relevance due to lack of familiarity by researchers and evaluators with the trade-offs involved in delivery work, or due to delayed findings missing actionable windows for learning and change. The disconnect between results and knowledge sharing and planning, budgeting, and the programme cycle weakens the use of evidence for decision-making (OECD, 2014b, p. 10; UNDP, 2014, p. 6). Beyond knowledge-centred units, the bureaucratic boundaries between departments, cadres, and professions can effectively hinder the dissemination of learning approaches (Yanguas & Hulme, 2015).

Development organisations also struggle with incentives, particularly when staff are rewarded for the volume of lending or rate of successful interventions, and not for learning from failure. The lack of clear incentives is often cited as a likely cause of limited engagement with learning and innovation (King & McGrath, 2003, p. 5; OECD, 2014a, p. 65; UNDP, 2014, p. 7). This is particularly the case when “staff widely believe that disbursement, not knowledge sharing, is the route to promotion” (McGrath & King, 2004, p. 175). When operating under such rules, innovation can still happen but “at considerable personal risk to the career officers undertaking it” (Natsios, 2010, p. 35). “Part of the challenge lies in convincing staff that knowledge sharing means smarter work rather than more work” (King & McGrath, 2003, p. 15).

Structures and incentives are often intertwined with less tangible issues of organisational culture. “In a learning organization there is a need to continue to encourage a culture of free and full communication about what does and does not work” (ICAI, 2019, p. 7). The flipside of this claim is that learning is virtually impossible in an organisation where failures are seen as career-ending mistakes. Korten (1980) outlined three possible responses to an error by a development organisation: a self-deceiving response in which the error is hidden from leaders and everything continues according to plan; a defeated response in which the error is talked about, but leadership becomes immobilised; and a learning response in which the error is discussed candidly, corrective action taken, and leadership can draw on it for lessons learned. The prevailing expectations and norms in an organisation will constrain which responses are available. This challenge is compounded in those organisations that are “overly risk averse” (Natsios, 2010, p. 35) or favour private knowledge sharing that makes explicit lesson learning “against the culture” (UNDP, 2014, p. 7).

4.3 Field dynamics and networks

A final category of potential determinants of learning in development agencies relates to field dynamics (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). The organisational field of development cooperation comprises all the different organisations that orient themselves towards

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development objectives, sometimes working together in horizontal relationships (as donors do when they interact at the OECD DAC), others in vertical relationships (as funders and implementers do). The international development field is multi-layered and variegated, comprising all manner of organisations – bilaterals, multilaterals, international and local NGOs, funds, think tanks, private firms – and crisscrossed by networks at all levels – those that gather internationally to agree on high-level principles, the professional communities of practice that refine agendas and methods, and the personal networks of local contacts that enable information exchange at the delivery level.

Organisations within the same field learn from one another, either through the proactive efforts by epistemic communities sharing evidence and policy recommendations (Haas 1992), or through the reactive adoption of innovations from perceived good performers through isomorphic mimicry (DiMaggio & Powell, 1984). Therefore, the ability of development agencies to learn can also be enabled by external factors, particularly the strength of networks that can confirm and reinforce internal lessons, or the presence of policy programmes that legitimate new ways of working. That was the case with the current wave of “innovative” approaches to development that emerged in the early 2010s: problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA), thinking and working politically (TWP), and adaptive management.

PDIA emerged in the late 2000s from the work of scholars at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government who documented the failure of development reforms characterised by the adoption of formal institutional trappings without foundations in local context (Andrews, 2013; Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrews, 2013). Their response was problem-driven iterative adaptation, an approach for building local solutions based on local capabilities (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). The approach resonated strongly with concerns raised around the thoughtless promotion of so-called best practices in developing countries, particularly through the good governance agenda (Grindle, 2004). The call for “best fit, not best practice” found in PDIA its first fully fleshed-out methodology. Over the years, the initial methodology expanded into case studies, practitioner toolkits, and well-attended training modules.

Around the same time, a UK-centred community of practice that had worked extensively with DFID on political economy analysis consolidated around thinking and working politically – an approach emphasising analysis, sensitivity to context, and flexibility in adaptation (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Rocha Menocal, 2014). Though more of an ethos than a particular method, the TWP community has been successful in connecting thought leaders with sympathetic practitioners inside donor agencies. It has also been buttressed by academic work funded by donors like DFID on the politics of development. Elements of PDIA and TWP coalesced in the short-lived “doing development differently” agenda, which later crystallised into a more targeted adaptive management community of practice, mostly UK-centred, which called on donors to support more locally-led, adaptive and learning-centred interventions (Wild, Booth, Cummings, Foresti, & Wales, 2015; Valters, Cummings, & Nixon, 2016; Hernandez, Ramalingan, & Wild, 2019).

These external learning agendas have made inroads into most development agencies, and have in some cases triggered processes of organisational change.

5 The politics of learning and organisational change

Learning approaches have emerged, disseminated, and in some cases even become institutionalised on the backs of policy entrepreneurs coordinating with like-minded challengers to advance solutions during windows of opportunity (Kingdon, 1995). This makes learning yet another battlefield for contentious development politics, a tug-of-war between challengers and status-quo incumbents within organisations (Yanguas, 2018). Making the political dimension of aid agendas explicit helps us understand why the learning hypothesis has grown through generations of advocacy, and why its relationship with organisational change is not a straightforward one.

5.1 Operational learning and the politics of problem-solving

Learning approaches to aid and development (also known as process, adaptive, or smart approaches) explicitly call on development organisations – and donors in particular – to embrace the complexity and uncertainty inherent in development problems, and to respond by adopting more flexible, risk-accepting, context-sensitive, locally-led, and evidence-based methodologies of delivery. In the aggregate, they constitute the latest and perhaps most forceful expression of the learning hypothesis at the operational level. However, “understanding of how complex programs are managed and steered – or which rules and principles actually guide implementation – is still limited”, partly because “this information seems to be tacit knowledge to a certain degree, difficult to share and discuss widely” (Kirsch, Siehl, & Stockmayer, 2017, p. 24). There have been attempts at compiling experiences, mostly by singling out successful outliers that demonstrate what different approaches can do (see, for instance, Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Fritz, Levy, & Ort, 2014; Kirsch et al., 2017; Laws & Marquette 2018). But the evidence base remains fragmented and inchoate.

Problem-driven iterative adaptation is a set of guidelines for tackling difficult problems, offering tools for problem construction and deconstruction, analysis of the change space and entry points, and design of “small bets” with rapid feedback loops. As a toolkit, PDIA is deployed within the boundaries of a particular intervention or reform project. This situates PDIA quite clearly as a methodology for operational learning – it helps development actors find the best way to solve concrete problems. As an approach, it is agnostic as to the precise modality of development cooperation. After all, the approach emerged from the authors’ experience working with Southern governments in public financial management reforms – it was not intended to be an aid tool, but a development tool. PDIA makes few demands of organisations, other than a willingness to participate by key stakeholders. However, it outlines a process that takes time to unfold, and may not deliver perceived “quick wins”. In the World Bank-led public finance management initiative in Mozambique where Andrews trialled the PDIA approach, this led to scepticism and opposition from within the Bank and other donors (Andrews, 2018, p. 6).

Thinking and working politically is more difficult to contextualise than PDIA, partly because it encompasses tools for working more effectively within operations, but also calls for development organisations to devolve greater authority to local partners. As an evolution of earlier political economy approaches, TWP is clearly a tool for operational learning, seeking to ensure that activities are able to navigate the politics of reform (for instance,

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Hudson, Marquette, & Waldock, 2016). The main mechanism for embedding TWP in operations has been training on political economy analysis (PEA) for donor staff, which has been only a qualified success. In the United Kingdom, for instance, a module imparted by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and The Policy Practice, a network for political economy analysis, has reached hundreds of advisers over the years. However, the team behind it has struggled to find entry points in the programme cycle for embedding politically smart approaches into programming (Booth, Harris, & Wild, 2016). There is some evidence that the use of PEA methodologies and TWP guidance has led individual development practitioners to design more learning-oriented programmes (Laws & Marquette, 2018), but when such individuals depart from their units one can expect a regression to blueprint-type approaches (Yanguas & Hulme, 2015).

Adaptive management represents the merging of PDIA-type methods with TWP-style context sensitivity. In that sense, it is an approach clearly targeted at the delivery level, perhaps a more holistic and integrated approach to operational learning than PDIA and TWP taken separately. Proponents of the approach call for greater flexibility in results frameworks and more co-productive partnerships. However, the practice of adaptive management has been forced to evolve in donor contexts dominated by the same old modalities, under the same old reporting requirements. This means that “designing, contracting and implementing programmes which work in adaptive ways is time consuming and challenging – often involving swimming against the tide of conventional practice” (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016, p. 2). Other challenges involve putting together a technical team comfortable with experimentation, developing bespoke tools for systematic learning, and reconciling flexibility with accountability to funders (Yanguas & Castle, 2019). There appears to be a growing level of interest in adaptive programming by development agencies in countries like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia, the United States, and New Zealand. However, readiness to adopt the language of adaptation seldom arises from internal learning processes, instead responding to perceived trends in the organisational field and particularly to influencing by thought leaders.

The impact of approaches focused on operational learning on organisational change suffers from four limitations. First, their impact is felt in individual programmes that are often disconnected from one another. Intrinsicly, the tools and methods used do not lend themselves to easy replication in different contexts. Second, in a political economy environment characterised by scarce resources, implementers competing with one another for contracts and grants often have an incentive to hoard the knowledge required for successful operational adaptation. Third, many of the operationally relevant lessons generated by adaptive and politically smart programmes are not fit for public consumption, at least from the standpoint of governmental agencies: details on how difficult it is to achieve change on the ground, for example, may invite external calls to cut aid budgets, or may risk diplomatic embarrassment. Fourth, and most importantly, even when lessons are documented through internal reporting – and they often are – the M&E and knowledge management systems inside development agencies seldom feed them back to practitioners in a systematic and operationally relevant manner, as discussed above.

There is growing evidence that operational learning approaches are a good fit – even a necessary precondition – for tackling complex development problems. But the politics of acknowledging that “problems” exists in the first place limits the dissemination of practices beyond project teams. Perhaps that is why the principal advocates of adaptive and

politically-smart approaches remain outside development implementation – in think tanks and academia – or share only selectively the practical work they do. There is a tension between the desire to advocate and the need to learn, which is often resolved in favour of the former.

5.2 Strategic learning and the politics of change management

The learning agenda has led to several high-profile reform and advocacy efforts at the strategic level of development agencies. Instead of relying on the bottom-up aggregation of lessons and practice changes from operations, these approaches have sought to transform development agencies by influencing organisational policies and requirements from the top down.

The need for strategic learning features prominently in the advocacy and evidence presented by adaptive approaches. Some proponents of thinking and working politically have explicitly called on development agencies to relinquish some of their control over delivery (for example, Booth & Unsworth, 2014), which would have implications in terms of risk acceptance, funding modalities, and even staff profiles. In the Philippines, USAID provided “arm’s length” funding to The Asia Foundation for supporting “development entrepreneurs” and “coalitions for change” on issues of land rights and health subsidies. In this case, The Asia Foundation “served importantly to protect the team from undue donor compliance demands, while also relieving the donor from managing a large number of small grants and contracts” (Booth, 2014, p. ix). This led to tangible impact on the ground. However, the same study noted that there had long been a tension in USAID between loosely specified grant support and pre-programmed projects.

Results-based management (RBM) as adopted by Sida has clear implications for both operational and strategic learning. At the delivery level, RBM focuses on the pursuit of outcomes throughout the entire programme management cycle, using continuous monitoring and risk management to enable timely action by managers (Örtengren, 2016). However, the approach has broader organisational implications. A collaborative and participatory approach to design and implementation requires extensive and hands-on engagement with potential partners, instead of the more transactional relationships one usually finds in grants or implementation contracts. Moreover, it requires an organisational culture that makes staff both comfortable with and capable of analysing large amounts of contextual and delivery information and translating it into implementation guidelines as well as lessons for others within the organisation. In that sense, RBM is predicated on strategic learning.

Collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) is a set of practices aimed at improving development effectiveness by ensuring that programmes are coordinated with others, grounded in evidence, and iteratively adapted during implementation. It emerged as an explicitly knowledge-centred agenda in USAID, a holistic approach that built on prior efforts at knowledge management and organisational learning (Young, 2019). In 2016, CLA became a required component of field programmes, though missions retained flexibility of use. This makes CLA an interesting hybrid between strategic and operational learning, or alternatively a purposive effort at linking the two. CLA seeks to create a better environment for adaptation and collaboration in USAID by using knowledge management, which

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programmes can then use to shape their delivery approaches in particular interventions. Much like RBM, this approach appears to bridge the divide between operational and strategic learning.

There are limits to what strategic learning efforts can achieve. In Nigeria, the World Bank country office became for a few years a pilot for a new way of doing things in the agency: commissioning political economy analyses to reassess its portfolio, establishing a governance filter for new interventions, and generating knowledge throughout implementation with a dedicated learning programme. However, all of this was done in spite of existing organisational structures, not because of them: “workarounds were needed, parallel systems of reporting or delivery were often used, and a certain amount of luck was often involved too” (Bain et al., 2016, p. 8). This was possible because the process was funded by a trust fund outside the Bank’s budget, like many other politically-smart initiatives at the time – an approach that yielded isolated innovations but failed to aggregate them into organisational change (Yanguas, 2018, p. 166-167).

In the early 2010s, a small team within DFID carried out an “end-to-end review” motivated by generalised staff dissatisfaction with the agency focusing on aid management instead of development. The result was a transition towards a new set of “Smart Rules for Better Delivery” that sought to streamline internal policies and requirements in order to encourage more adaptive programming. The reformers behind the Smart Rules envisioned them “empowering staff to use professional judgment, generating open dialogue on lesson learning and failure, and running towards problems, in the knowledge that poor performing programmes never self-correct” (Wingfield & Vowles, 2014). However, from the perspective of someone who has been working on DFID programme implementation in the years since, the impact of the Smart Rules is hard to determine, or at the very least continues to be overshadowed by value-for-money and managerial requirements imposed by the post-financial crisis British government in 2010 (Yanguas, 2018, p. 54) – this despite the fact that the Independent Commission on Aid Impact, established as part of the new 2010 accountability regime, gradually became an outspoken advocate for greater learning and adaptation in DFID operations.

As in the case of operational approaches, it is not entirely clear whether these change management approaches arise from learning or whether they respond to advocacy by thought leaders. The politics of change management in development agencies are shaped by a wide spectrum of extraneous factors that have little relation to development knowledge: government philosophies, political legitimisation efforts, media outcry, and even personal agendas. When originating outside, change processes may have little to do with learning. When originating inside, they come across the same organisational learning barriers that hamper internal learning processes. The World Bank illustrates these tensions perhaps better than any other development agency.

5.3 Learning for change versus changing to learn in the World Bank

The World Bank has undergone two reorganisations in the last twenty-five years, both of which were more focused on knowledge and more impactful on organisational structures than DFID’s end-to-end review. The current model of Global Practices arose partly from a desire to encourage formal and informal learning exchanges within and outside the Bank,

which would then lead to the more effective provision of integrated technical solutions to client countries. The new structure was adopted precisely at a time when the Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) was carrying out an evaluation of learning across the organisation and in programmes (IEG, 2014; 2015).

The main finding of the IEG was that, in terms of learning, “the culture and systems of the Bank, the incentives it offers employees, and the signals from managers are not as effective as they could be” (IEG, 2014, p. vii). The lending pressure (also called “approval culture”) effectively crowded out learning, “discouraging the innovation and adaptiveness called for by effective lending” (IEG, 2014, p. ix). Staff were constrained by limited time, limited budgets, and professional incentives that prioritised recognition for large disbursements. They made little use of evidence generated outside the Bank, and even the range of internal documentation consulted tended to be narrow. Handover of projects between team leaders was a recurrent source of learning discontinuity. And staff did not feel encouraged to acknowledge problems in project implementation. Much as in DFID, interpersonal exchanges – mediated by internal networks and teams – were found to be the most important source of learning and sharing, which happened informally and led to a gradual accumulation of tacit knowledge.

That matrix organisational model that the IEG reviewed, introduced in 1997, had a parallel structure of client-focused regional departments and technical departments federated into networks. De facto, the World Bank operated as six regional banks, which made knowledge sharing difficult across regions. In 2012, a change management process was launched, culminating in a 2013 strategy and the rollout of a new matrix system in 2014. The new structure reformed sector networks into Global Practices responsible for delivering technical work within their respective issue areas (health, governance, agriculture, and so on), under which more targeted Global Solutions Groups were expected to compile global and country knowledge for operations. Global Theme groups were also established for major cross-cutting areas (such as climate change, gender and, interestingly, knowledge management).

A 2019 IEG evaluation on knowledge flow and collaboration under the new model found that many of the original promises of the change process had not come to fruition. The new structures tended to “inhibit collaboration and cause inefficiency, fragmentation, and internal competition” between practices (IEG, 2019, p. xi). With each Global Practice managing knowledge autonomously, an uneven pattern of learning emerged: some got better at applying lessons learned and using innovative practices to support operations, like help desks or safe-space meetings, while others lagged. Regarding the Global Solutions Groups, a majority of country management staff interviewed by the IEG “were either not aware of [their] existence or questioned their relevance” (IEG, 2019, p. 21). Most importantly, the reorganisation – much like previous iterations – had not touched either culture or incentives, and despite the reforms the World Bank still prioritised lending over knowledge. At the end of the day, personal networks remained the preeminent mechanism for accessing evidence and lessons.

The World Bank's case illustrates how difficult it is to aggregate operational learning into strategic learning, and how tenuous the causal link is between change management processes and learning in general.

6 Implications for the future of learning in development agencies

The findings of this review should stimulate a more honest debate about the role of knowledge in development agencies, a conversation that should include researchers, M&E practitioners, policy advocates and organisational leaders. Four potential topics for further inquiry are presented here, all of them involving challenges to current practice.

Addressing evidence gaps about the role of learning in development

The learning hypothesis has outpaced its own evidence base. This is due in no small part to the persuasive powers of advocates and proponents, as well as the instinctive appeal of the agenda. But it also highlights a fundamental paradox: knowledge and learning approaches are being adopted throughout the organisational fields of development despite the lack of sufficient evidence on their effectiveness. More recent learning approaches exhibit some self-awareness about this paradox: for instance, proponents of TWP and adaptive management have both argued for the need to build a sound base of evidence (Dasandi, Marquette, & Robinson, 2016; Laws & Marquette, 2018; Hernandez et al., 2019). The evidence gap stems at least in part from the fact that learning approaches rely heavily on counterfactual reasoning: the success of adaptation must be measured relative to what could have happened in the absence of flexibility and iteration. However, such counterfactuals are rarely explicitly formulated, and they lack the comforting veneer of rigour that quantitative metrics provide.

It is likely that the impact of these approaches will be as hard to measure and synthesise as that of knowledge management and M&E before them; perhaps even harder, due to the perverse political economy surrounding them. However, that should not stop development agencies and research institutions from investing resources into more systematic evaluation. Policy-minded academics have demonstrated that datasets can be developed, and inferences drawn, if only one knows where to ask (Andrews, 2013; Honig, 2018). Instead of additional knowledge about development, perhaps agencies could devote a greater proportion of research funding to knowledge about their own organisational impact.

Revisiting the function of research and M&E in light of the primacy of tacit knowledge

On the question of whether tacit or explicit knowledge play a greater role in learning in development agencies, the available evidence decidedly points towards the former. Organisations learn chiefly through the accumulated experiences of individual staff members, who then transfer insights and lessons through personal and professional networks. This informal knowledge sharing system occasionally taps into explicit products from research and M&E departments, but by and large runs in parallel to them. This could be because research and M&E do not produce knowledge that is operationally relevant, or because they occupy bureaucratic structures that are siloed from the rest of the organisation.

The relatively small contribution of research and evaluation to learning in development agencies demands that we critically interrogate the *raison d'être* for such organisational units and investments. M&E, for instance, plays an undeniably crucial role in external accountability, continuing to legitimise development agencies in front of funders, taxpayers, and politicians. But the issue of efficiency and diminishing marginal returns is inescapable: assuming that M&E is intended mostly for external audiences, how much of it do we

actually need? Alternatively, if we want M&E to also serve practitioners within the organisation, what kinds of systems and processes can be adopted to contribute to existing learning practices? Ongoing debates around managing for results would benefit from a more evidence-based approach about the impact of knowledge management and evaluation on operational and strategic learning. New standards and best practices need to be based on evidence.

Interrogating the paradox of external agendas in organisational change

The learning hypothesis has come to occupy a central role in development discourse despite considerable organisational barriers to operational and strategic learning. Extra-organisational factors and trends in the broader field, and particularly professional networks and communities of practice, appear to be driving change processes seeking to embed the current generation of learning approaches into development practice. In the first instance, this is a reminder of the need to approach the study of development organisations in the context of the “patchwork of nested and overlapping fields” they occupy (Yanguas, 2018, p. 183), where challengers mobilise reform efforts against incumbents by appropriating organisational units (whether it is the World Bank’s Nigeria country office or a think tank like the Overseas Development Institute), brokering alliances between like-minded actors (as the TWP community of practice continues to do), or seeking validation by attaching themselves to legitimate entities (like Harvard University). More research is needed to fully document the breadth and depth of these efforts, how sustainable they are, and what tangible changes they lead to.

Another interesting aspect about external agendas is that they may very well fall prone to the same isomorphic mimicry trap that the proponents of PDIA decry (Pritchett et al., 2013). An increasing number of development programmes are billing themselves as “adaptive” without actually engaging in systematic learning and adaptation. Instead, the semantic bar has been lowered to encompass good designs that respond to context, or competent programme management practices around revising work plans and targets. This kind of mimicry attests to the normative appeal of the learning hypothesis but is also evidence of the lack of substantive internalisation in development agencies – absent clear concepts, rigorous quality assurance, and staff capability, it can be hard for practitioners to be able to discriminate between learning as discourse or performance, on the one hand, and learning as practice, on the other. Advocates, thought leaders, and reformers should devote more attention to the question of internalising the learning agenda.

Overcoming the barriers between learning and change

Approaches like TWP or adaptive management are welcome challenges to the status quo and helpful reminders of the need to bring cooperation closer to the delivery context than to the accounting ledger. Careers have been built around the expertise needed to manage programmes in an adaptive fashion, and implementers compete with one another to show funders who can be the most flexible, politically smart, and learning-oriented. However, the adoption of new methods for operational learning has so far failed to translate into broader processes of change. Individual efforts are seldom documented, and practitioners are often forced to start from scratch time and time again, improvising their way up from foundational principles. More importantly, a significant portion of the adaptive gospel is perfectly compatible with existing bureaucratic structures, processes, cultures, and even incentives.

Ambitious organisational approaches like RBM in Sida and CLA in USAID have become the true test cases for learning leading to change in cooperation bureaucracies. But they will usher in new paradigms only if they have answers to the deep-seated challenges to learning documented in this paper, like a self-deceiving response to errors, the cognitive overload of practitioners, or the structural separation of knowledge generation from operations. For these approaches to succeed, they need to be incorporated into broader change management strategies that align methods with culture, incentives, and structures – the same alignment that knowledge management, M&E, research, and other learning processes are yet to achieve.

7 Conclusions

Development practitioners learn, but it is hard to say whether the organisations where they work also learn. Going back to the analytical map presented in Section 2, there is insufficient evidence to support the causal claim that knowledge leads to learning (hypothesis A) and thereby to organisational change in development agencies (hypothesis B). Tacit learning prevails, while explicit knowledge management systems flounder (causal problem A₁). External agendas appear more compelling than internal research and evaluation (causal problem A₂). It is not entirely clear how or, indeed, *whether* operational and strategic learning intersect (causal problem B₁). Organisational change – even that aimed at enhancing learning – is rarely based on lessons learned from delivery (causal problem B₂). More research is necessary to fully unpack the learning hypothesis, but what limited evidence is available disproves rather than confirms its central claim.

Over the past two decades development agencies have built research and M&E departments, adopted a multitude of knowledge management systems and tools, and tinkered with different ways to structure their organograms to stimulate knowledge sharing and learning. At the end of the day, however, individual practitioners tend to learn from personal experience and rely on personal contact networks – inside but also beyond their organisation – to acquire relevant knowledge and share their lessons. This forces development agencies to reflect on the role and value-added of knowledge generation, particularly research and M&E. It also forces agenda-setting initiatives like the various OECD DAC working groups to consider the feasibility of their proposed aid effectiveness reforms, particularly those predicated on strategic learning. And it forces proponents of innovative approaches to come to terms with the challenges of internalising agendas and embedding them in more holistic change management processes. All of these may be difficult tasks, but given the considerable resources already invested in knowledge creation and dissemination, a modicum of adaptation should not be a tall order.

Perhaps ironically, support for learning-based decision-making has not been held back by the lack of an evidence base of its own. Indeed, the learning hypothesis of development is very much alive. It finds expression in the realisation of complexity in development, in the fixation on managing for results, in the aspirations of innovative approaches, in the very identity of many development organisations that have made knowledge their overriding priority. This makes a critical interrogation of the hypothesis even more relevant and timely. In the absence of valid and reliable evidence, learning strategies are as blind as the organisations they intend to illuminate.

What have we learned about learning?

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