

DRAFT EIP Learning Note (version 10 Feb 2021)

Learning through interconnected systems

From engaging individuals as peers to engaging institutions and systems – how to make the sum greater than its constituent parts

Introduction

This Learning Note seeks to explore under what circumstances connecting *organisational systems* via peer-to-peer (P2P) learning contributes to problem-solving and institutional change, and *how monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL)* can be used to track and support this process.

The topic is articulated around four guiding questions:

- (i) How can P2P partnerships go beyond the individual to enable organisational learning, and learning across networks of entities and organisations?
- (ii) What mechanisms exist to institutionalise and embed new skills and behaviour? How can institutional change and learning be sustained?
- (iii) How can we monitor capabilities across these different individual and organisational levels of operation, across different entities, and across the way in which these entities interlink?
- (iv) How can partners decide who tracks what in P2P learning initiatives (at what level of interaction) and who periodically compiles information for collective learning across actors?

Background

The *'Lessons Harvesting: Learning from P2P Engagements – Discussion Paper for a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework'*¹ produced by the Effective Institutions Platform (EIP), aims to answer how effective monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) of peer-to-peer (P2P) arrangements can identify and track how peer partnerships contribute to strengthened institutional capabilities and increased organisational effectiveness. Assessing how practitioners put learning to use in their institutions is difficult – particularly for P2P approaches which rely on human interaction, trustful relationships and individual exchange.

Monitoring how P2P learning contributes to wider impact in systems that rely on multiple internal and external actors and contextual factors is even harder, and yet that is where MEL in P2P engagement can add tremendous value, not as an 'add on' to retrospectively demonstrate impact or relevance, but

¹ Charlotte Ørnamark, *Lessons Harvesting: Learning from P2P Engagements – Discussion Paper for a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework* (Effective Institutions Platform: 2020), https://www.effectiveinstitutions.org/media/EIP_Lessons_Harvesting_Final_Version.pdf

to help navigate, inform and negotiate how change happens within and across organisational and societal systems. Indeed, successful P2P exchanges build on mutual trust and commitment in order to enable and institutionalise tacit knowledge transfer from the individual level to an organisational and systems level, working through managerial principles such as leadership, a sense of mission, effective management, delegation, communication, as well as learning and self-evaluation. A key aspect of the P2P approach therefore lies in ensuring that partners are well matched and that the groundwork for a relationship based on mutuality is well established.

The initial stock-taking of MEL experiences among EIP Advisory Group members yielded three attributes of effective P2P approaches: (i) the importance of building trust and mutuality, through affective and cognitive learning, (ii) the function of learning through interconnected systems and (iii) the need to adopt P2P approaches for the diffusion of local learning.

A series of learning events aims to reflect on these attributes and consider the role of MEL in monitoring and tracking these approaches. The forthcoming event on learning through interconnected systems is the second in the series. Each of these events will result in a learning note that can be used as a reference tool by EIP partners.

Enabling organisational learning: Connecting systems through P2P initiatives

In clear contrast to traditional technical capacity assistance programs, P2P learning approaches aim to accompany managers, staff, teams and organisations in their learning, institutional change and development journeys. The theory underwriting peer learning is that it is ‘potentially powerful in facilitating the transfer of tacit knowledge about the softer dimensions of change (like managing politics, inspiring teams, or building coalitions) between individuals – and beyond, to organisations, sectors and nations’.² Yet little is known or recorded in terms of how this learning diffusion happens. A key question is how can P2P learning approaches embed and sustain systems change at the individual, organisational, and network or systems level?

This learning event and note seek to shed light on this issue by identifying the tools and approaches commonly adopted in P2P methods to ensure that capabilities cascade from individuals to organisations and across entities or systems to achieve lasting change or impact. This event also seeks to understand how MEL can be applied to track and support this process, for a deeper appreciation of when and under what conditions such change happens.

How does institutional change and public sector reform happen?

Institutional or organisational capability is typically understood to derive from the interaction of an organisation’s inner workings (box 1 refers to this) and its ability to deliver on its mandate with its external operating and authorising environment. At the same time, building capabilities in an organisation, at different levels of an organisation, or across a network of entities is said to occur through a process of individual learning, and by enabling routines that produce institutional performance and change in problem-driven, iterative and adaptive ways.³ The ingredients of these

² Matt Andrews and Nick Manning, *A Guide to Peer-to-Peer Learning: How to make peer-to-peer support and learning effective in the public sector?* (Paris: Effective Institutions Platforms), p. 5.

³ Peter Thomas, ‘Building transformative capability through civil service reform’, *Sciendo*, 64:4 (2020), p. 76.

inner workings that institutions, staff and practitioners may seek to enable often include both the technical skills and competencies as well as the behavioural and tacit capabilities, which may be sourced from or seen in leadership and motivation, a shared sense of mission, effective management, delegation and internal communication, learning and self-evaluation (inner functions).⁴

Box 1: Inner workings of institutions^{5,6,7,8}

Leadership can help to create and expand change space by **building acceptance** (e.g. managing attention and meaning), **enhancing ability** (e.g. fostering new productive relationships) and **ensuring appropriate authority and accountability structures** (by empowering followers and delegating responsibility). Andrews et al. (2010), are also quick to point out that leadership only facilitates change when it is expressed through groups; and when the leadership unit goes beyond individuals to a ‘core group of senior technical staff and managers’ who can both ensure the ‘continuity of institutional performance’, and ‘maintain the institutional memory of their agencies’. Similarly, a **shared sense of mission and effective management practices** (e.g. adequate resources, autonomy, pay satisfaction, quality supervisor al.) are also seen as the ingredients for increased individual motivation; while **learning and self-evaluation** afford employees opportunities for participation, learning and change which, in turn can boost employee morale and motivation even when facing disappointing results.

Building individual and organisational capabilities is also influenced by exogenous or external factors, such as ‘historical pathways, political interests and incentives, social structures and norms.’⁹ Leonard argues that the ‘political economy surrounding an organisation ... mediated through its functions and endowment of other attributes are the motivating force behind the adoption of good management’ when accounting for why certain well-known managerial attributes are not ‘universally practiced’ despite their well-known effectiveness.¹⁰ Ultimately, it is the confluence of an organisation’s inner workings and external factors that affect institutional performance, which can in turn affect an organisation’s legitimacy in the eyes of its constituencies (citizens, political elites, partner entities).¹¹

⁴ Lorena Vinuela, Naazneen H. Barma and Elisabeth Huybens and, *Institutions Taking Root: Building State Capacity in Challenging Contexts* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2014).

⁵ Matt Andrews, Jesse McConnell and Alison Wescott, ‘Development as Leadership-Led Change – A report for the global leadership initiative and the World Bank Institute’ (2010), p 14.

⁶ Ibid, p 8.

⁷ Lorena Vinuela, Naazneen H. Barma and Elisabeth Huybens and, *Institutions Taking Root: Building State Capacity in Challenging Contexts* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2014), p. 20.

⁸ Ibid, p. 20.

⁹ Helen Tilley, Sierd Hadley, Cathal Long and Jeremy Clarke, *Sustaining public sector capability in developing countries* (2015), p. 5.

¹⁰ David K. Leonard, ‘Where are ‘Pockets’ of Effective Agencies Likely in Weak Governance States and Why? A Propositional Inventory’, 206, 2008, p. 25-26.

¹¹ Organisational legitimacy can be multi-faceted being normative, pragmatic (referred to above) or cognitive as developed by Derick W. Brinkerhoff, ‘Organisational legitimacy, capacity and capacity development’, No 58A (2005).

A key question, then, is whether and under what circumstances there is a role for P2P learning in enabling organisations to cultivate relationships, capability and legitimacy with external institutions (for example, by signaling competence, displaying results and adapting policies to informal institutions and cultural practices) so as to create a virtuous cycle of legitimacy and performance? How do we know when the foundations for an interconnected system of peer organisations or network are solid, and when are efforts simply draining time and resources away from other tasks (going from a purposefully aligned system to a chaotic one)? And if P2P partnerships can play a role in harnessing these external factors, how might the results become embedded and self-sustained across peer partners?

In the section that follows, this note will consider the MEL processes that can serve to assist P2P partners or providers to identify, unpack and track mechanisms of learning through interconnected systems, before concluding to reflect on the summary insights and resulting questions that may be worthwhile to explore further.

The role of P2P initiatives in building interconnected systems: Using MEL to track and foster capabilities

Traditional MEL practices and tools are often designed to focus on the outputs and immediate results of specific, stand-alone projects within a designated organisation. These results are then typically taken as a proxy for institutional capabilities and performance, despite the limited evidence that such practices are either institutionally or systematically embedded or sustainable.

Conversely, MEL of P2P learning focuses on the development of capabilities (anticipated and unanticipated) through P2P engagements, on both sides of the partnership: examining both the nature and health of the partnership itself as well as what it produces. A further distinction is usually made among individuals, organisations and systems with individuals building competency, organisations building capability¹² and systems building capacity.¹³

The focus on capabilities can give better emphasis to tracking how new insights and influences from peers are being continuously put into practice, used, and adapted (or disregarded) by different partners engaged in the P2P exchange, rather than just focusing on the end-results of the perceived 'learning organisation'.

¹² The term capability can be understood as 'the power or ability of an organisation to perform its mandate, and the development of capacity to be a process whereby the organisation or institution improves its ability to perform'. Helen Tilley, Sierd Hadley, Cathal Long and Jeremy Clarke, *Sustaining public sector capability in developing countries* (2015), p. 1.

¹³ Helen Tilley, Sierd Hadley, Cathal Long and Jeremy Clarke, *Sustaining public sector capability in developing countries* (2015), p. 3-4.

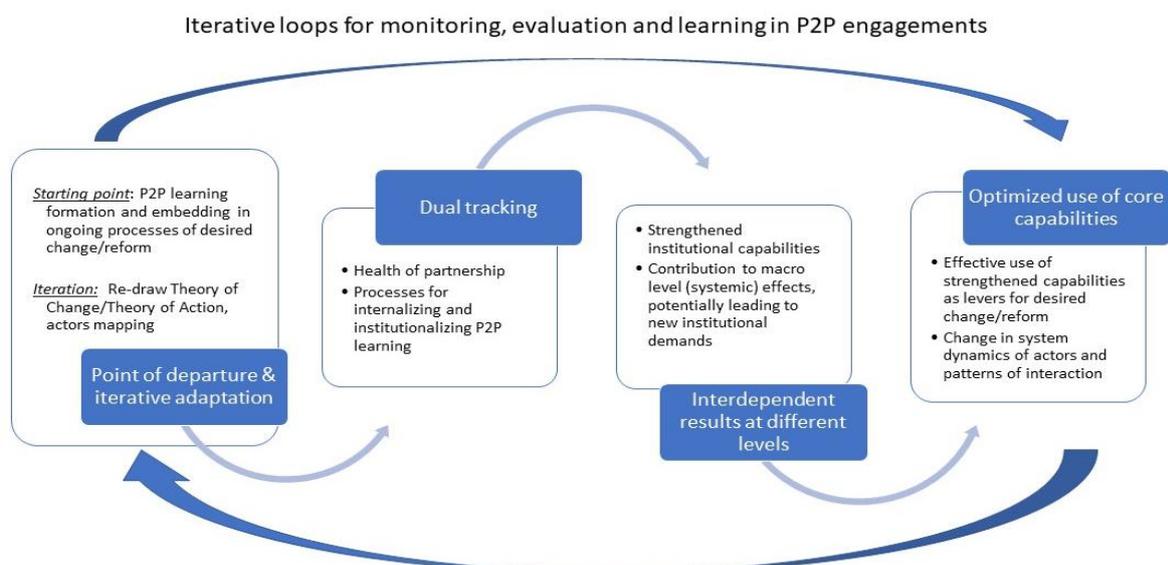
Key Insights: Using P2P to Enable Learning through Interconnected Systems

Lesson 1: Enabling P2P learning through interconnected systems requires a focus on both the inner workings and external links of an organisation. Institutional or organisational capability typically stems from the interaction of an organisation's inner workings and its ability to deliver on its mandate, along with its external operating and authorising environment. This in turn requires P2P learning approaches to contribute both to the inner workings of an organisation and its external links, in ways that may connect individual competencies with organisational capability and systems capacity.

Key questions related to lesson 1:

- How does a P2P approach complement other forms of technical assistance in enabling individual competencies, organisational capability and systems capacity – or learning across interconnected systems?
- To **what types of learning, and what types of problems** does a P2P learning approach best contribute?
- What makes the P2P modality (via inter-connected institutional systems) a powerful tool for building interconnected systems **that may not be possible in other forms of direct Technical Assistance?**
- How can practitioners take a systematic approach in defining the problem?

Lesson 2: Monitoring core capabilities at different levels of operation and how they interlink - applying a 'systems filter' to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). Applying a systems lens to MEL practices means that peer learning organisations track how they expand their institutional capabilities and how these capabilities are deployed to create a change in system dynamics (see figure below). That, in turn, means going beyond the individual learner to seeing how different levels interact and interlink so that the P2P process can be used as leverage for systemic change.



Key questions related to lesson 2:

- **How do P2P processes need to be tracked and lessons documented** to illustrate this from a systems perspective?
- What are some of the requirements of being able to meaningfully track the effects from P2P engagements and how this creates new patterns of behaviour (internally and externally) in institutions and among allies?
- How do we design and do MEL differently to be able to collate inputs from different partners along the way?

Lesson 3: Clearly decide who tracks what. Given that multiple actors are needed for more systemic shifts to take root, it is important to **clearly decide who tracks what in P2P learning initiatives (at what level of interaction)** and **who periodically compiles** information for collective learning across actors. One partner (typically the facilitator) can play a central role in gathering and synthesising monitoring information from across the partnership. However, involving others in the actual information gathering and analysis is important to reinforce a sense of joint purpose and distributed ownership across partners.

Key questions related to lesson 3:

- Does the format and type of facilitation of the P2P engagement influence what partners get out of it and how such effects are being monitored and fed back to P2P partners for learning?
- What are the appropriate and feasible roles and capacities for taking on MEL of P2P engagements for all partners involved (beyond the central facilitator)?
- What can be done (in terms of tools, approaches, mentoring) to make it easier for partners to be part of that ongoing MEL function?
- What kinds of investments (time as well as resources) are needed to fulfill this function?

Lesson 4: Pinpoint mechanisms for institutionalisation of new skills and behaviour. To identify how P2P engagements have contributed to changed organisational practice, it would be helpful to **pinpoint mechanisms for the institutionalisation** of new skills and behaviour. Facilitated learning self-assessments along with other types of ‘change story harvesting’ can illustrate these processes.

Key questions related to lesson 4:

- How can we track whether **old habits** have been replaced with **new ‘ways of doing’ or knowing** at the organisational level? The EIP MEL Lessons Harvesting report suggests seeking to tease out, systematically, whether old habits have been:
 - **replaced** after a process of ‘unlearning’ (with explicit explanation of what such ‘unlearning’ or letting go of old habits looks like),
 - **adapted** and merged with new skills or insights, or have new ideas been
 - **adopted** to fill a previously perceived void or gap?

- Are new patterns of knowing and doing being maintained and supported internally or is there a relapse to previous working habits?
- How have organisational capabilities, including though not limited to, leadership, a shared sense of vision or mission, delegation and internal communications been built through the peer learning process?
- And to what extent have these changes collectively driven the overall change process forward?
- Would this be a useful way to go about tracing mechanisms for institutionalisation? What other ways and aspects could it include? What would it take?

Existing examples and key points in Harvesting Report:

- GPI's monitoring system focuses on how **capabilities, motivation and opportunities among partners lead to behavioural change**, and how this affects the overall Theory of Change (ToC) for what the partnership seeks to achieve (in terms of actual outcomes). This is complemented by an actor-based change framework (ABC-F), mapping the system of actor groups associated with the agreed problem to solve. ToCs are iteratively reviewed and re-drawn based on partner inputs (Useful ToCs). The UToC and ABC-F then have a symbiotic relationship, so that change in one flows into the other.
- CABRI realized that they needed to use a dual approach to change: policy-level dialogues (opening up political space) as well as connecting those working at a more technical level across African Ministries of Finance.
- Likewise, CEG involved two participants from each sub-national county administration in their knowledge exchange: one from the implementation side, and also their supervisors working at a more political level of the county administration in the decentralisation process in Kenya.

Additional resources to explore:

- Mapping the system and its actors: Additional examples of working with actor-based approaches in practice by GPI
- MEL as 'system navigation'. See e.g. Dan Honig, 'Navigation by Judgment', Oxford University Press, 2018
- Michael Quin Patton: Developmental Evaluation: 'Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use' (2020), Principles-focused Evaluation (2018)
- Building State Capability: <https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/> <https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/>
- Helen Tilley, Sierd Hadley, Cathal Long and Jeremy Clarke, *Sustaining public sector capability in developing countries* (2015). <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/10178.pdf>
- Linda Argote, Ella Miron-Spektor, Organizational Learning: From Experience to Knowledge, *Organization Science* 22:5 2011). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41303106.pdf>
- Naazneen H. Barma, Elisabeth Huybens and Lorena Vinuela, *Institutions Taking Root: Building State Capacity in Challenging Contexts* (2014, World Bank). <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/978-1-4648-0269-0>