

Improving Learning for Greater Effectiveness in
Christian Non-Government Development Organizations

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Acronyms

ADP: Area Development Program

CDW: Community Development Worker

GO: Government Organization

IPM: Integrated Programming Model

LEAP: Learning through Evaluation with Accountability and Planning

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization (development organization for this paper)

NGDO: Non-Governmental Development Organization

ODA: Official Development Assistance

SSA: Sub-Saharan Africa

SMT: Senior Management Team

WV: World Vision

WVB: World Vision Burundi

Abstract

Becoming an effective agent of development in the challenging and complex context of the development NGO in Sub-Saharan Africa necessitates prioritizing learning and adaptation. But NGOs are often not characterized by such a strong learning culture and commitment; and Christian NGOs are no exception. Reforming both the commitment to learning and the structures that support it is a pressing challenge facing Christian NGOs committed to being effective agents of development. Such reform requires careful analysis of the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, special consideration of the complex broader socio-political structure of the NGO world, and systematic research into understanding organizational dynamics that facilitate learning. Data from this research contributes to building an integrated learning model. Applying this model through a case study of specific Christian NGO—World Vision Burundi—leads to both identifying factors that undermine learning and proposing a set of recommendations that will help this NGO become a more effective learning organization.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Development aid has been getting some getting some bad press lately. The publication of Dambisa Moyo's (2009) pithy book, *Dead Aid* has sparked much debate. Her controversial thesis is not that development aid should be better administrated or more effectively channeled; she argues that the whole industry and focus is wrong-headed. Not only does it fail to address the problem, but it IS the problem. Although her argument lacks rigor and careful research¹ her point is a haunting one: perhaps development initiatives do more harm than good in some if not many cases; perhaps all of the good will and billions of development dollars are the wrong remedy. These are questions that need to be asked, not so that we in the West can wash our hands of our responsibility for trying to make this world a better place for the poor (and feel more justified in doing so), but so that we can be more honest and critical of our efforts. Other studies are less reactionary and more scholarly at analyzing and charting a more effective course for development in the challenging region of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Joseph and Gillies 2009; Collier 2007).

The challenges that the development "industry" faces in SSA are formidable. Although few scholars would agree with Moyo's controversial thesis, all would agree that "aid must be reinvented if (Africa) is to be lifted out of its persistent poverty and stagnation" (Diamond 2009). For decades to come, Africa will offer the toughest test for foreign assistance (Derryck 2009: 49). A "perfect storm" of factors make navigating the situation particularly difficult: "periodic famine, endemic disease, persistent illiteracy, decaying infrastructure, and underperforming economies" (49). Added to (and often exacerbating) these factors are the persistence of conflict, woefully weak and even illegitimate government institutions, and endemic corruption. Rising to the challenge of "lifting" SSA out of this situation will be a collective effort.

¹See NORRAG's recent issue where several development scholars wade into the debate and provide some important counter-weight to many of her facile explanations. One key criticism is that it is irresponsible to put all aid into the same kettle and "boil up a strange kind of unitary soup" (Hoebink, 2009). Hoebink's conclusion is

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are significant contributors to this effort. In SSA alone, faith-based NGOs alone provide half of all health and education services (James 2009, 7).² Furthermore, NGOs, in contrast to Government Organizations (GOs), have been marked by flexibility, responsiveness, and innovation (1995: 149), and, as seen in the above statistic, have moved into the gap left by failed and weak government institutions (1995: 174). As government institutions are weak across the region, NGOs continue to play a “gap” role. A number of Northern, international, or transnational NGOs combine their efforts and often participate directly with a number of Southern NGOs in assistance delivery. Among these organizations are significant Christian NGOs, such as Christian Aid, Caritas, and World Vision; the latter, particularly its work in Burundi, will be the particular focus of this study.

The goal of this study is to address the broader issue of effectiveness and efficiency of aid delivered through Christian NGOs, but the focus is not “downstream” where aid is delivered to the beneficiaries, as important as that might be.³ Rather, the focus is “upstream” on the organization itself and how it can best position itself to deliver effective, “smart” aid.

A fundamental premise that undergirds this project is that delivering more effective, “smarter” aid requires a “smarter” organization, a learning organization. To deliver such aid will require addressing organizational learning “disabilities” and failures that have led to “less-than-intelligent” aid. It will also require developing an organizational architecture and ethos that favours learning. But most NGOs have been slow learners. Smillie (1995) puts in bluntly: “The inability to learn and remember is a widespread failing of the development community as a whole” (158). Such learning and adaptation are critical for any organization’s survival. For the development NGO, the stakes are even higher. The “bottom line” for the development NGO, as a values-based organization, is not maintaining profits or building assets; the bottom line is the alleviation of the adverse effects of poverty and the transformation of communities and even

²This varies from country to country, and doesn’t paint an accurate picture. NGOs channel, for example 28 % of all USAID funds; similar proportions of Swiss and Swedish ODA are also delivered through NGOs (Smillie 1997: 2). It is also important to note here that NGOs in this study are those organizations that exist in the nonprofit sector, although there is some overlap into the profit sector for some NGOs that make room for social enterprises, such as BRAC.

³Smillie (1995) mentions a number of broadly used instruments: logic framework analysis, management by objectives, strategic planning, etc. He comments that these instruments have had mixed results in the NGO world due to a complex number of factors such as the difficulty in identifying results (and the time needed to measure them effectively), multiple (and sometimes conflicting) layers of accountability, and the shifting environment where development occurs (150-158).

societies.⁴ For an NGO to be mired in inefficiency and ineffectiveness carries a human cost; breaking free from such ineffectiveness brings a human benefit. Organizational learning and adaptation contribute significantly to seeing this happen.

Organizational development theory for the past 20 years has identified the importance of learning to organizational development (Worley and Feyerherm 2003, 111). This vast literature on learning organizations and organizational learning, although often written for firms and businesses, provides a rich theoretical and practical template for evaluating learning in the nonprofit sector. A typical definition of organizational learning is offered by Fiol and Lyles (in Tsang, 1997): “Organizational learning means the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding”(78). This definition highlights two interdependent components of organizational learning, better thinking that results in improved actions. But applying learning to “organizations” may seem somewhat strange; conventional wisdom attributes learning to the individual and not the organization. The reality is that both individuals and the organizations to which they belong are integral players in the learning process. Learning is both individually and socially situated, “occurring through individuals’ participation in communities of practice” (Elkjaer 2001, 439). The challenge for organizations is to create such “communities of practice” through establishing an architecture and ethos that favors learning, and as a consequence, improves actions. For NGOs, a further variable is added to the learning challenge—that of adapting to and learning from the context—a complex human environment marked by overwhelming needs.

The staggering complexity of the context is one of the greater challenges NGOs face; this challenge makes prioritizing learning all the more important. Seeing development come to a given country or society is both a complex and mysterious process.⁵ A host of micro, meso, and

⁴Overarching mission statement of World Vision is to work “with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice” (World Vision International Website).

⁵There is a broad groundswell of criticism against “modernist” notions of “development.” This criticism identifies, not without some merit, its exclusive and uncritical link to economic growth, its failure to measure the ecological impact of such “development,” its embrace of western market-driven interests and forces, and its failure to deliver significant results after decades of rhetoric (see Rist 2007). Rist goes so far as to call it a Western “myth” of religious proportions. He provides a strong theoretical and historic argument against the prevailing paradigm. Nor is he alone in his criticism. Such movements as the World Social Forum are also a priori “opposed to neo-liberalism and a world dominated by capital” (World Socially Forum Website). Rist’s measured argument is still, not unlike the argument he criticizes, clearly ideologically driven; he does speak of a different model of society, but fails to give any sense of what that model would like; he only knows that it would NOT look like the current development paradigm. I choose to work with the current model and within the current system, although recognizing

macro factors influence a given economy or community; these forces and their interplay are difficult to measure. Seeing sustainable development come to a given community is also complicated, and a host of variables make such “transformation” both difficult to map and attain. Without a learning posture and commitment, NGOs can fall into the trap of simplifying these complex issues and offering simple or rote solutions to addressing them.

Another challenge to learning within the development context, and one of the most significant, is the complicated “political economy” of the development organizations themselves. “Political economy” refers to the nature of these organizations and their complex web of relationships. NGOs, for example, must align their work with at least three different spheres of stakeholders: the community they serve, the donor community, and the organization itself. The expectations of these three communities can be in conflict. How does the NGO, for example, adapt its aid delivery to the local community when the expectations of the donor community are at cross-purposes? The commitment to learning and adaptation easily becomes a casualty in an environment where strong donor pressure sets the development agenda.

A further challenge to learning within the NGO community is tied to the nature of the organization itself. Although not directly referring to NGOs, the following criticism is not without warrant: “Aid agencies are not benign social welfare maximizers, but self-interested agents with welfare maximizations as only one objective” (Drazen in Easterly 2008, 671). It is a temptation for any organization, NGOs included, to forget its “mission” and to fall into the trap of becoming a self-serving organization. A final challenge that can hinder NGOs from becoming strong learning organizations is the all-too-common activist paradigm that drives development NGOs. When “doing” is the driving value, learning and reflecting can become a lower priority, or even a luxury, “separate from and secondary to the ‘real world’” (Edwards 1997: 238); and in the development world of increasingly restricted budgets, there is little or no room “lower priorities” or “luxuries.”

Christian NGOs are not above these learning challenges; nor are they immune to learning disabilities. However, Christian NGOs bring a set of unique resources to the task; there is a strong “value added” that comes from the faith dimension. First of all (and ideally), they root their vision for development in the rich biblical holistic vision of personal and societal

many of its limits. I further add to my understanding a Christian perspective of development as holistic transformation (See Bragg 1987; see also Goudzwaard 2007 and the discussion in chapter III).

transformation which has a strong spiritual and ethical component. Secondly, they stand in the long tradition of reflective Christian activism that has both challenged the status quo and been a key catalyst for social change, at both the micro and the macro level. Finally, the faith component of the NGO provides spiritual, personal and relational resources for the members of the organization itself. These and other Christian resources and perspectives should provide both impetus and direction for rising to both the external and internal learning challenges that Christian NGOs face.

But has this been the case? My assumption is that Christian NGOs have for the most part failed to tap into these resources and, partly as a result, are often relegated to a development paradigm and structure that undermines broader effectiveness. Added to their failure to claim the high ground staked out by their own Christian tradition is their propensity to slip into the rut that claims too many NGOs: they are often as guilty as other NGOs of simplifying complex contextual and development issues, of becoming self-serving (or donor-serving) organizations, of failing to question firmly entrenched paradigms, and of replacing reflective learning and strategic intervention with frenetic activism. The challenge of becoming a strong learning organization that delivers more effective aid weighs just as heavily on the Christian NGO community as any other.

Part of picking up the learning gauntlet for Christian NGOs requires looking beyond the borders of their own institutions. There are models of NGOs that have, against the odds, become strong learning organizations that have been successful in understanding and adapting to their context and producing lasting results. Smillie and Hailey (2001 and Smillie 2009) have profiled the remarkable adaptability and success of several Asian NGOs. They attribute their success, among other things, to their commitment to learning and adaptation: “Most commentators argue that an organization’s ability to learn from experience, formal training, evaluation and research, are all keys to its effectiveness” (Smillie and Hailey 2001: 71). In a similar vein, Dennis Rondinelli (1983) identifies some key competencies that characterize NGOs that have a strong learning ethos: the ability to filter data and information, the analytical capacity to reflect on past experience, and a hunger to learn and the insight actually to remember lessons (72). Tracing the contours of one strong learning Asian NGO—a key component of this study—provides inspiration and insight for any NGO aiming to improve effectiveness through a renewed commitment to learning.

Both the socio-economic context of SSA and the organizational context of the NGO world are fraught with complexity. Exploring these complexities is the first area of research in this study. Navigating complexity also requires a clear conceptual framework. This is developed through a broad overview of the biblical, theological and historical underpinnings of the Christian NGO. The current complex world of Christian/faith-based NGOs is further demystified through a helpful typology. The Christian NGO under review in this study, World Vision, is then presented and situated within the broader typology; World Vision Burundi, the particular case study organization is also introduced here. Once the Christian NGO is situated in the broader context, the discussion turns to the realm of organizational learning with a particular application to the non-profit sector. Here are highlighting the key dynamics that contribute to a building strong learning organization. This conceptual framework is then translated into a model that demonstrates the interplay between the different components of the framework. This NGO learning model, fully formed in Chapter V, is then used as a template for a single-case study of World Vision Burundi. The final chapter presents both the methodology and the interpreted data from the case study research and ends with a summary conclusion.

A final premise that undergirds this project is that NGOs can be “helped” in their journey to becoming stronger learning organizations. Despite the learning disabilities and the poor track record, there is hope! A renewed commitment to learning is possible in any given development context. This study is rooted in the conviction that Northern NGOs, and Christian NGOs in particular, can greatly improve the effectiveness of their aid delivery through a renewed commitment to learning at every level of the organization. A single-case study of a particular NGO—World Vision Burundi—became the context for testing the proposed NGO learning model. This case-study, as well as providing important data for evaluating learning in the organization, also resulted in a full-fledged report, a type of organizational audit through the lens of learning (see Appendix VI). An important part of the project design was to provide NGO leadership with a set of observations, reflections and recommendations that can play a part in initiating a process of reform and renewal of the learning culture and commitment of a given NGO. Such renewal, I maintain, is a critical component of improving aid effectiveness.

CHAPTER II

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: THE CHALLENGING CONTEXT & AID EFFECTIVENESS

A. Introduction and sub-Saharan Africa context

It is almost a truism to state that sub-Saharan African (SSA) provides the greatest challenge for foreign assistance. This challenge is seen in full relief against the backdrop of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). According to the 2008 report, not a single MDG is on target in SSA, and if prevailing trends persist, none of the goals will be reached by 2015.⁶ Maternal health (goal 5) highlights the striking contrast between the industrialized nations and SSA: One in 22 women dies as a result of pregnancy in SSA; only one in 8,000 dies in the industrialized nations. A similar contrast can be made with most of the other goals. But how do we explain the staggering inertia of underdevelopment that still hangs heavy over the sub-Saharan (SSA) region? The primary explanation is tied to the region's fragile economy.

A massive collaborative study of the African political economy surveyed the first forty years of post-colonial independence in SSA (Ndulu et al. 2008). The authors identified a series of endemic African “anti-growth syndromes”: state controls, adverse redistribution, intemporally unsustainable spending and state breakdown (Fosu 2008, 137). The countries affected by one or many of these syndromes were compared to a (limited) set of “syndrome-free” countries, also in the African context. The State control syndrome, as an example, has had a deleterious effect on many countries as was evidenced in Senegal where marketing boards set prices well below the market value for producers and pocketed significant rents on the exports and domestic sales—a clear path to economic stagnation. Adverse redistribution is another debilitating syndrome that has been widespread. Although historically there are examples of healthy redistribution in countries such as Cote d'Ivoire, most examples of redistribution are adverse (Fosu 2008, footnote 8).⁷ Unsustainable spending has been another bane to SSA economies. This has been evidenced in the resource-rich countries such as Nigeria and Cameroon. Another “syndrome” not

⁶Easterly (2009), however, demonstrates that MDGs are crafted and presented in a way that is unfair to Africa. His main argument is that SSA has a much larger gap to fill than other regions of the world and that these goals fail to measure and celebrate important progress.

⁷Ivory Coast, at the time of writing (December 2010), is crippled with post-election violence and no longer shines as an economic model.

identified by Fosu could be the vulnerability of SSA economies to global economic crises. The “lost decade” under structural adjustment was precipitated by vast borrowing during the 1970s, exacerbated to a large extent by the dramatic rise in oil prices during the mid-1970s.

These syndromes are at the root of the economic doldrums of SSA. Fosu (2008) concludes that “avoiding syndromes is a near-sufficient condition for preventing growth collapse and is also necessary for sustainable growth” (166). In SSA, only the syndrome-free countries—those with political stability and market-friendly policies—have enjoyed a measure of both political and economic stability that is now translating into sustained growth, and a lessening dependence on aid.

Another set of “transversals” can undermine economic growth as well, such as being landlocked with poor neighbors, being resource rich, or lacking sufficient population in a vast territory (Collier 2007). Adding to these internal challenges is the fact that SSA has been systematically locked out of many global markets where they could enjoy a measure of comparative advantage, such as agricultural exports.⁸ Limited access to markets does more than discourage trade; it also deprives SSA of a host of trade “benefits” such as the acquisition of new knowledge, private and foreign direct investment, and the “changes in attitude and proper institutions” (Ilorah 2008, 93). Such internal and external variables place the challenge of Africa’s development in a sobering light. Weak economies translate into fragile infrastructure, poor services, and by association the staggeringly slow movement toward development goals such as the MDGs.

B. Development aid to the rescue?

Enter development aid. As governments within these countries are lacking the means (and at times the will) to provide essential services, the international community through official development assistance (ODA) has come to the rescue.⁹ This aid comes in many forms. George

⁸Western subsidies to agricultural goods, to the tune of \$1 billion PER DAY (Wikipedia), surpass all public aid to the entire world to the tune of 10 to one. This observation, however, masks the more complicated reality of economic subsidies and their impact. Birdsall (2005) notes that removing such subsidies would benefit first and foremost NOT the poorest countries, but the taxpayers of the developed countries who are carrying the cost of the subsidy. The second most important beneficiary, according to Birdsall, would be the large net exporters of agricultural products such as Argentina, Brazil and the US.

⁹“Rescue” is a relative term. The Canadian government injected \$50 billion into the Canadian economy to help it weather the economic downturn in 2008, more than the entire global commitment of all OECD nations to ODA in a given year.

Mavrotas (2005) identifies the four most common forms: “project aid, programme aid, technical assistance and food aid” (1021).¹⁰ But aid reaches beyond these concrete projects and programs and includes significant debt relief, emergency relief assistance, grants and soft loans, implicit capital transfers and even preferential tariffs from one country toward another (Ilorah 2008: 90). NGOs, both Northern and Southern, add their presence and contribution to the mix, often participating directly in delivering services funded by the ODA channels.¹¹ NGOs also bring their own contribution, most often in the form of direct service delivery. Van de Walle (1999) describes the typical aid recipient African country:

Africa's current social and economic landscape is profoundly marked by aid: in a typical country, 30 to 40 donors in addition to 75 to 125 foreign NGOs fund a thousand or so distinct projects, involving 800 to 1000 foreign experts. Few public institutions have not at some point received aid, while a large proportion of African professionals have benefitted from a donor-funded scholarship at some point in their career. Today, somewhere between a third and a half of total spending in the region on basic health and education is provided by foreign aid. In most countries of the region, the aid business is typically the second biggest employer in the local economy, surpassed only by government, to which it is often preferred by young graduates because of its greater prestige and much more generous conditions of employment.¹²

The verdict is out whether or not this investment is worth it. There are three “schools” of thought, each with a long list of data and persuasive arguments to justify each position. The aid pessimists argue that aid is itself a “syndrome” and that it actually has the opposite effect on the countries it aims to serve (Van de Walle 1999, 2001; Moyo 2009; Easterly 2007). Their main argument is that aid undermines the capacity and the urgency of civil and government institutions to fulfill their responsibilities and actually exacerbates the many destructive tendencies of the political leadership, such as rent-seeking and clientelism (Van de Walle 2001, 150). Easterly (2007) further demonstrates through convincing research that the aid industry has

¹⁰Project aid has consistently had the largest share of aid since 1981, and food aid has been negligible since the early 1980s. Programme aid has fluctuated (Mavrotas 2005, 1022).

¹¹World Vision Burundi, for example, runs a school feeding program funded by the World Food Program.

¹²It is interesting to note, at least in Burundi, that government employment is now better remunerated and is more desirable than NGO employment. In fact, NGOs have had to increase the salaries of many professionals in order to keep them.

a long history of failure to learn from past mistakes and an ongoing penchant to succumb to “perverse political pressures” (668). This camp fails for the most part to acknowledge that not all aid is created equal, and that there is strong evidence that certain forms of aid, given in the right proportions, in the right context, and at the right time have measurable positive impacts on growth and poverty alleviation (Loots 2006, 379).

On the other end of the spectrum are the aid optimists, incarnated in such public figures as Bono and Geldof¹³ (see also Sachs, 2005). The “Report on the Commission to Africa” also reflects this optimism, arguing for quadrupling aid flows to the continent by 2010 (cited in Loots 2006, 363). But the optimists are also selective in their choice of data and theoretical interpretation. They often, according to Loots (2006), adhere to the standard “funding gap theory” which proposes that when a target savings-investment gap is filled, then the projected growth will occur. This theory has been broadly criticized, and yet continues to feed the rhetoric for increased funding. This rhetoric is echoed by the Economic Commission for Africa; it maintains that the “funding gap” necessary to meet the MDGs in Africa is close to \$50 billion (cited in Loots 2006, 367).¹⁴

The third school of thinking on development could be called the “realist” camp; they belong to the “third generation” approach to aid (Loots 2006, 370).¹⁵ These theorists argue persuasively for more effective aid (Collier 2007; Abegas 2005; Mavrotos 2005). The heart of this realist approach to development is its careful reading of the data, and its commitment to identify the right cocktail of factors that would contribute to more effective development. For example, Collier and Dollar (in Loxley and Sackey 2008) note that once aid volume passes a certain threshold of a country’s GDP, it becomes subject to the laws of diminishing returns (173).

¹³Their positive view of development is reflected in their editorial contribution to the May 10, 2010 edition of the *Globe and Mail*. The entire issue is an upbeat overview of all the improvements that are in full swing in the continent. The publishing of the MDG progress report at the heart of the issue seems to dampen the enthusiasm, at least for me.

¹⁴Calling this school of thought as aid “optimists” does not imply that they are unaware of the failures of much development assistance, nor would such proponents be uncomfortable in the “realist” camp described below. The distinction may be more moot than substantial.

¹⁵“First”-generation aid studies were published in the 1960s and 1970s and dealt with the philosophical foundations of aid, assuming, for the most part, that more aid would fill the gap and stimulate growth in poor countries. “Second”-generation studies, in the 1980s maintained the focus on the aid-growth relationship, but added a further dimension of policy reform as a key component for making aid effective in a given country. “Third”-generation studies are those that assume that aid will be an ongoing component of development in poor countries, but emphasize a broader range of factors that contribute to improving the effectiveness of aid, such as institutional reform and good governance (Loots 2006: 368-371).

Mavrotos (2005) identifies how certain types of aid are more effective than others. For example, project aid and food aid are far less effective than program aid, at least in the context of Uganda (1032). Abegaz' (2005) model below is a refreshing proposal of how the right “mix” of factors can contribute to more effective development, these being institutional and policy quality; political and financial reforms; appropriate and timely inputs of ODA; and private funding (448). The model below indicates that ideal ODA flows should be lowest when institutional and policy quality is weakest, and should reach their zenith only when countries get their “basic institutions right” (Abegaz 2005). The actual ODA flows have not followed the ideal in any sense of the term, being relatively high even when institutions and policies are weak, and dropping off too soon when institutional and financial capacity are the stronger (see Figure 1).

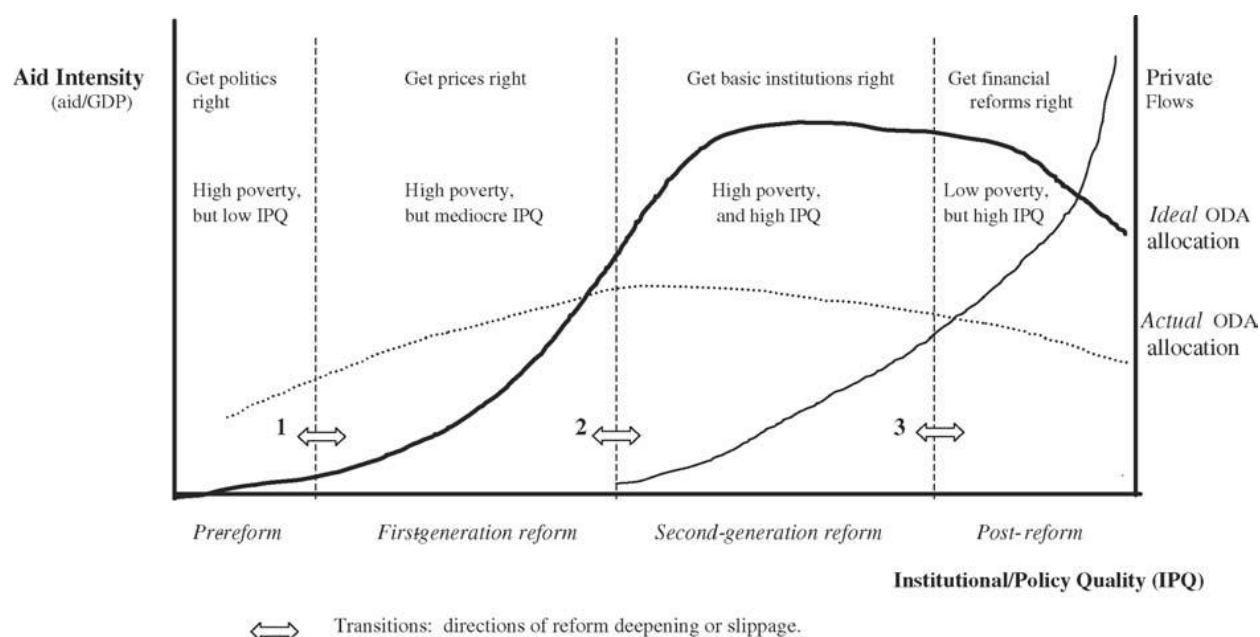


Figure 1: Dynamic Synthesis Model of Aid Allocation (Abegaz 2005: 448)

Despite these impressive models and proposals to make aid more effective, Easterly's (2007) criticism of the aid industry is hard to shake. He hypothesizes that there has been no progress in terms of aid agency improvement over the last four decades, and that the agencies have failed to learn and change even according to their own standards and commitments. He

proceeds to prove his hypothesis point by point. Echoing the above graph, he finds no evidence that aid disbursements were in any way attenuated even when there was clear evidence of poor institution quality and corruption. Furthermore, he identifies only token improvements over the last forty years in other areas; there has been, for example, a decrease in food aid as proportion of aid and a decline in aid tying. But major areas in drastic need of improvement such as revisiting the role of technical assistance, greater coordination across agencies and with governments, and more responsible lending all “suggest an unchanged status quo, lack of response to new knowledge, and repetition of past mistakes” (668).¹⁶

C. NGOs in SSA

The above overview of aid and its “effectiveness” in SSA has many specific applications for the NGO context, particularly the transnational or Northern NGO which is the particular focus of this study. First of all, the above overview identified critical insights into the macro-economic and political factors that shape the context. Although the vast majority of NGOs work at the service delivery level, they are increasingly called to greater awareness and impact at the macro and meso levels of society. For example, being aware of the “anti-growth syndromes” that cripple too many African countries provides greater perspective for tackling poverty issues. But the implications reach beyond the local context. Korten (1987) identifies the need for NGOs to have greater “strategic competency” that would enable them to address broader societal issues with authority; he argues for a more catalytic role in influencing broader forces. Understanding macro-economic and political issues is one such “strategic competency.”

The above overview also identifies a number of critical lessons for NGOs that relate to development effectiveness in SSA. Some of the temptations that derail ODA effectiveness are irrelevant to NGOs, such as granting recurring loans to low quality and corrupt government institutions. But NGOs do face the ongoing challenge of identifying the most effective forms of aid in a given context. For example, the literature consistently identifies food aid as the least effective and often counter-productive form of aid, followed by technical assistance (less consistently). The reasons for the ineffectiveness of food are readily identified: upsetting local markets, creating food dependency, undermining local agricultural initiatives, phasing out

¹⁶A particularly fascinating (and disturbing) piece of his research compares the Pearson Commission (1969) with current statements such as those coming from the High Level Forum discussions at Paris and Accra; almost word for word, the same chronic problems were flagged and solutions proscribed in 1969!

difficulties, and so forth. In light of the counter-productive nature of food aid, NGOs had best weigh their priorities carefully and study the context closely before partnering with food aid initiatives, particularly on the long term. The criticism of technical assistance aid is also an important one for NGOs to consider. This criticism comes not from the “demand” side; there is a hardly a wealth of knowledge and insight into effective development practices. Rather, the criticism is leveled against the parachuting of high-paid “experts” into contexts where their insights lack credibility.¹⁷ Northern or transnational NGOs can easily be painted with the same brush if they fail to root their initiatives in the local soil and to adopt a sensitive learning posture.

The most pertinent application of the above overview to the NGO world is the broad failure of ODA agencies to transform their development assistance through learning. It would be fascinating to do a similar study to Easterly’s (2007), but with the focus on NGOs. He begins with what the aid agencies describe as “good” behavior or best practices and that asks a basic question: “Are aid agencies doing more of what they themselves say they should be doing more of?” (638). He pursues his research by measuring learning in three areas: learning from cumulative experience; reacting to new knowledge; and reacting to failure. The overwhelmingly poor results were identified above. What would the results be for NGOs? What have they learned over the last decades? How have they integrated new insights into renewed practice? How have they integrated the lessons from failure? This would be a pertinent area of research, but is beyond the scope of this project.

Those who work with NGOs, particularly Christian NGOs, are not aid pessimists (the pessimists don’t stay the course). The Christian world view is fundamentally optimistic—God cares for the poor and Christians who work for their good are on the winning side. But neither are Christians naïve optimists. Jesus’ difficult words that we will always have the poor among us (Mark 14.7) provide a sober reminder of the limitations of development assistance. A careful consideration of the Christian worldview leads to the “realistic optimist” camp. As realistic optimists the challenge is to become humble learners who look resolutely at both the challenge and the potential. It also means adopting a posture that rejects facile explanations of complex situations and searches for deeper insights and broader perspectives, wherever they might be

¹⁷ Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart (2008) decry the billions (20) that are channeled into high-paid consultants whose “expertise,” in their view, pays little dividends to their targeted countries. Of that 20 billion, 4 billion is channeled yearly into some 100,000 expatriates who crisscross SSA (101).

found. More than anything it means reaching beyond the self-serving institutional focus toward the stated “raison d’être” of helping the world’s poor.

To sum up, delivering effective aid in SSA is a staggering challenge. Countries beset with “anti-growth” syndromes will by definition be difficult places to deliver effective aid, as history has proven. ODA does not have a good record in the region and these organizations have largely failed to learn and improve their aid delivery. The documented learning failures among the ODA organizations should lead NGO leaders to take note and avoid many of the syndromes that continue to undermine effectiveness of ODA initiatives, such as focusing on aid that creates dependency and is unsustainable. The failure of the aid industry could justifiably lead to a broadly pessimistic view of aid. But the Christian response should be different. As realistic optimists, Christians can cling to the hope that efforts can make a difference, but they must also squarely face the daunting challenge of learning and improving. Before zeroing in on the specific context, stepping back to consider the broader Christian view of development is in order.

CHAPTER III

“CHRISTIAN” NGOs AS KEY PLAYERS

A. Introduction

Christian NGOs are important players in the development game. A cursory overview of the 100 members of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation reveals a striking number of Christian organizations. And some, such as World Vision Canada with an over CDN\$400 million dollar budget and high profile, are major players. That Christians are involved in international development should not be surprising for anyone who has either read the Bible or been exposed to the compassionate vision of Jesus and his early followers; “development” is very much part of the DNA of both Christians and the organizations they have founded.¹⁸ This section will trace the broad contours of the Christian development paradigm. This paradigm has inspired some remarkable initiatives throughout history that deserve mention and that provide much grist of the Christian development mill.

Against this backdrop of theology and history, the current Christian NGO world is then situated. Time is taken to explore and better understand this complex and dynamic world. This section also has a critical angle, weighing a set of factors that have led Christian NGOs to break rank with important dimensions of their biblical and historical tradition. This rupture has contributed significantly to some of the learning disabilities and subsequent ineffectiveness that misshape the Christian NGO world. This overview deals primarily with the those Christian NGOs that find their origin within the Protestant evangelical movement, while not minimizing the remarkable and far-reaching work of Catholic-based NGOs such as Caritas or CAFOD, or those initiatives spear-headed by the such organizations as the World Council of Churches.

B. The Christian development paradigm

1. God has a “design” for humanity

In the early pages of Genesis we are given a striking image of humankind living in a world that was not marked by suffering and injustice. But that would change through what theologians call the “fall” which was not so much a banal and isolated act of eating forbidden fruit as it was a

¹⁸To be clear, it is somewhat misleading to call an organization “Christian.” Biblically, only people can be Christians. Organizations can be influenced by Christian values and led by Christian people, but, without a “soul” they cannot “be” Christian.

fundamental break in God's best design for human existence; living in harmony God and each other, creation was from that point on deeply marred. The first eleven chapters of Genesis paint a startling portrait of humankind drifting toward destruction and mayhem, the "highlights" being the fratricide of Abel at the hands of Cain, the massive corruption and violence that preceded the judgment of the Noah's flood, and the hubris of the builders of the tower of Babel.

With Genesis 12 the portrait begins to change and the seeds of promise are sown in the life of Abraham. This promise of "blessing" that would come through Abraham to the entire world becomes the template for the entire message of the Bible. God would progressively intervene in the history of a family who would become a people, the descendants of Abraham, and through them bring healing and restoration to all of humanity.¹⁹ Through the history of the people of Israel this plan of restoration remained an ideal embodied in the biblical concept of Shalom—peace with God, with the "land" and with each other. The prophets reminded the people of Israel of God's restorative design and purpose and pointed to a day, for example, when swords will be hammered into ploughshares (Isaiah 2.4). This vision of restoration takes remarkable form in Isaiah's prophetic future vision where children do not die or live in misfortune, where the elderly live out their days in dignity, where people will have a just and adequate means of livelihood and experience joy in a productive life, and where people will be in a conversational relationship with God (Isaiah 65) (Alexander 2006, 219). But the bottom line in the Old Testament is that this vision was never realized; the biblical record suggests rather that the absence of shalom characterized the people of Israel for most of their history.

Christians believe that this vision of restoration took a quantum leap forward with Christ's life and ministry. For Christians, Christ became what the apostle Paul called the "new Adam" and offered a new beginning and a whole new set of resources to move toward the fulfilling of God's ancient purposes promised in Abraham; Jesus called this restored vision the "kingdom of God" (Mark 1.15). The heart of the Christian message is that humankind can be reconciled to God through abandoning a self-centered life and turning to God through personal faith in Christ; this spiritual restoration is the seed of a broader reconciliation to others, and ultimately even of creation itself (see Romans 8.19-21). When this kingdom of God comes, God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven—the picture of ultimate restoration.

¹⁹It is not without import that the majority of people on the planet identify Abraham/Ibrahim as their spiritual ancestor.

But Christians also believe that they live “between” the times. There is an “already” and “not yet” dimension to their faith. They experience a measure of restoration in their relationship with God and with others, but they are fully aware that the current state of affairs is far from God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6.10). They also have a strong sense of agency in this regard; they carry a responsibility both to pray and act in order to see God’s purposes fulfilled; they are “co-workers” with God (2 Corinthians 6.1). It is this sense of agency that is the primary driver of Christian involvement in “development.” Jesus captured the essence of this agency in two powerful metaphors: “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5.13-14). Salt is the image of preservation against corruption; light captures the idea of direction and moral orientation. Christians see themselves as agents of change in society, standing in a long line of faithful “servants” of God’s kingdom and his purposes, which they seek first and foremost (Matthew 6.33).

This broad view of development encompasses more than the “underdeveloped” nations and societies of the world. It also cuts to the quick of the paternalistic notion of “us” and “them” in that it undermines the notion that “they” are in need of “development” whereas “we” are “developed.” No society or culture reflects fully the biblical image of restoration or “shalom”; all societies are in need of transformation; none is exempt from needing “salt” or “light.” Bragg (1987) says it well:

The “developed” modernized world needs transformation to free itself from a secular, materialistic condition marked by broken relationships, violence, economic subjugation and devastation of nature; and the “under-developed” world needs transformation from the subhuman condition of poverty, premature death, oppressions, disease, fears. (157)

To sum up, the Christian view of personal and societal transformation is rooted in biblical teaching and biblical history. God’s design for humanity is captured in the Old Testament image of “shalom” or peace, highlighting a state of blessing marked by restoration with God, with one’s fellows and with creation. Christians see the New Testament image of the Kingdom of God ushered in by Jesus as the fulfillment of this ancient vision of shalom. But the vision is not yet complete; Christians are now the agents who seek to further this restoration of God’s will on earth through both prayer and action. This broader vision provides a framework for Christian development, and reaches beyond the “under-developed” world to embrace all cultures and societies, all of which are in need of restoration and transformation.

2. Values that permeate “Christian” development

There are a set cross-cutting themes or “transversals” that provide the strength of the Christian view of development; they serve as the metal “rebar” that solidifies the structure. The first of these is the idea of “stewardship.” In biblical times the steward was the one responsible for his master’s wealth; he would be required to give an account for how he had used the master’s resources. This idea finds its origins in the creation narrative itself, where humankind was entrusted with “dominion” over creation. This idea has been misconstrued by some to include a license for unbridled exploitation, but the idea of God-given responsibility undercuts any such interpretation. Humankind is first and foremost a “caretaker” of creation (Anderson 2006, 58). Bringing this image into the current discussion, the development practitioner, as a steward, realizes that the resources at her disposal are God-given and are thus precious and not to be squandered. Such a value should challenge the Christian NGO to better “learn” to use these resources most responsibly. This theme also challenges what Collier (2010) calls the “curator” vision of human responsibility for global resources. He suggests that this “preservation” paradigm is common among the “environmental fundamentalists” who value preservation of the environment as an end in itself. This is not a Christian value. Christians view the planet and its resources as a blessing from God to be used for serving the needs of humankind. This is not a justification for plundering the planet, but it does provide an important counterpoint to the preservation-at-all-costs mantra so widespread in some circles.

Another value is that of “empowerment.” Although the word has been worn out through overuse, it captures an important principle that is easily neglected in development practice. Such an idea undergirds the commitment to avoiding dependency and transferring agency to those who ultimately must carry their own “development.” “Sustainable” development hinges on this important value. This principle was understood by Christian missionaries as early as the 1800s. Leaders such as Henry Venn and John Nevius crafted a strong empowering “missiology” that led to what was called the “Three-self model”.²⁰ Christian leaders in a given country were to be transferred full responsibility so that the church would cease to be dependent on the West and become “self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating” (Van Rhee 1996). This template provides strong historical underpinnings for crafting development programs that would

²⁰It is fascinating and not without significance that the Chinese communist government co-opted that phrase to name the official Chinese church the “Three-self Chinese Patriotic Church” after the expulsion of all missionaries in 1949.

break unhealthy dependency and empower local people, granting them increasing responsibility for governing and sustaining their community and its development. It highlights the sense of “agency” that is at the heart of effective development initiatives, undermining the all-too-often “Northern” anchoring of local development initiatives. It should further serve as a strong antidote to any forms of neo-colonialism.

A parallel biblical theme that flows from these values of stewardship and empowerment is the Old Testament theme of “jubilee.” According to this practice, land and goods that had been lost through debt or hardship were to be returned to the original owner in the year of jubilee. Although there is little evidence of this being practiced with regularity by the people of Israel, the practice was designed to free the poor and the less fortunate from outstanding debt, without any strings attached. This ideal recognized the crippling and disempowering effects of debt and restored freedom and property to the disenfranchised. It is a powerful “redemption” theme that has inspired, among other things, the movement to free heavily indebted countries from crippling debt at the turn of the millennium. This movement was referred to by Gordon Brown, then Finance Minister of the Labour government, as the most “important church-led social movement in Britain since... the campaign to outlaw slavery in the eighteenth century (Clarke 2007, 85). This “Jubilee” value also resonates with development initiatives that seek to break the stranglehold of debt and limited access to capital so prevalent in poor communities.

Another all-encompassing value rooted in the Christian tradition is the intrinsic worth of the individual, particularly the most vulnerable and powerless. This biblical theme teaches that all human beings are created in the image of God and as such are of inestimable value. To violate that image through violence or abuse is more than an affront against a fellow human being; it is an assault on the very image of God, that which is most sacred. Jesus echoed this Old Testament theme through his teaching as well, describing children as the greatest in the kingdom of God and including outcasts as recipients of God’s welcome and grace. To cause one of these precious little ones to stumble merits the severest punishment (Matthew 18.6). This value fundamentally challenges economic and social systems which “commodify” and depersonalize human beings.

The flip-side of the valuing of the weak and the powerless is the call to inaugurate a system of justice and governance that protects them. This theme permeates the Bible; almost 2,000 verses deal with the theme of poverty and injustice (Stearn 2009, 24). The biblical prophets of

the Old Testament railed against a society that exploited the poor and condemned most severely those leaders who did not stand with God alongside the poor and the widow:

Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, you who sit on David's throne—you, your officials and your people who come through these gates. This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. (Jeremiah 22.2,3)

Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1.16)

These biblical passages and many others root the Christian NGO in the deep biblical tradition of advocacy on behalf of the needy and powerless. The implications of this tradition reach far, challenging the governance structures, the socio-economic systems, and the legal structures that conspire to deprive the poor of their “agency.” The officials and decision-makers—the powerful—are addressed again and again in the biblical record. It is their responsibility to do what is just and right for those who have no power to act on their own. This example should inspire Christian NGOs to move beyond the service delivery paradigm and commit themselves to challenging the many structural “evils” which are often the root causes of powerlessness and poverty.

To sum up, development that is Christian is woven through and through with strong biblical values. Foremost among these is the idea of stewardship, that humankind carries responsibility for the resources we have been given. To use biblical language, Christians are “blessed” to be a blessing to others. As such Christians find themselves on a level playing field with all of humankind; they are not “owners” of resources at their disposal. The Christian also values agency, and is committed to empowering those who are powerless so that they can use their agency to better their own situation. But the Christian view is not limited to the micro-level. There are socio-economic and governance structures (and their “leaders”) whose policies and practices are aligned against the poor, depriving them of their agency. The Christian view rooted in the biblical tradition must challenge the “powerful” and be committed to advocacy on behalf of “orphans and widows,” those who in biblical times were the most vulnerable.

C. The Christian NGO²¹

1. A rich history

The Christian development NGO is a relatively new phenomenon, but it stands in the line of what is called a “para-church” organization. The basic difference between para-church organizations and church organizations is that of focus and specialization. The church’s vision and mandate is broad; churches care for a broad spectrum of needs and priorities. The para-church organization is more focused; it may be concerned about children at risk, or about environmental awareness, or about one aspect of church life in particular such as church growth and cross-cultural outreach. Para-church organizations have historically been a critical part of the Christian world. Within Catholicism the monastic movements and some of the orders such as the Jesuits were (are) “para-church” organizations; they exist to “come alongside” the church and focus on a specific aspect of the church’s mission. Within Protestantism, a plethora of para-church missions agencies became prime movers in seeing the church expand worldwide, particularly in the nineteenth century. Many of these organizations still exist.

But the development NGO or para-church organization is relatively new and grew out of a set of historical factors that deserve mention. During the nineteenth century protestant Christians spanned the globe in what has been called the “great century” of modern missions (Latourette 1975). These missionaries and the Christian movements that sent them out were concerned with more than the spiritual state of the peoples of the world; their holistic vision led them to address socio-economic needs as well.²² One of the most remarkable of these movements is the Salvation Army. The breadth of their social involvement was (is) striking:

Though primarily concerned with salvation and preaching the gospel to the poor, the Salvation Army, like other slum workers, soon found itself providing other services. Most immediate were the needs for food, clothing, and shelter. A "poor man's bank" was established. Day-care centers were provided to permit mothers to get out to earn a living for their families. The army discovered that the legal system was biased toward

²¹This discussion concerns those Christian NGOs that have grown out of the Protestant evangelical community; this analysis would not necessarily apply either to Catholic NGOs or NGOs tied to, say, the World Council of Churches.

²²Beyond the scope of this paper is the discussion of the comfortable and often uncritical relationship between the missionary and the colonial system.

those who could afford to hire counsel, and it therefore provided free legal aid...
(Dayton in Alexander 2006, 169)

2. The “Great Reversal”

But this broader mandate that had been widely embraced in the evangelical Protestant Christian community would narrow significantly at the dawn of the twentieth century. This shift away from social concern to a narrower spiritual focus would be so radical that some have called it the “Great Reversal” (Alexander 2006, 160). The shift was caused by a number of factors.²³ The most significant was the rift between “liberal” Protestants and the more conservative evangelicals. For liberal Protestants who questioned the authority of the Bible and challenged many traditional doctrines, the buzzword became the “social gospel” and the priority shifted from the traditional spiritual mandate to the “social” mandate. Evangelicals disagreed fundamentally with the premise that inspired this shift—that humanity was “perfectable” through human effort. The evangelical stance on the contrary held that only spiritual conversion could affect radical change in the life of an individual or a society. Disassociating themselves from the “social” gospel (and other doctrines) of the liberals became commonplace.

Another factor that led to a narrower focus was widespread disillusionment and social pessimism that swept the evangelical world after WWI. This horrific event also engendered a broad disenchantment with social action in general and fed a common sentiment among evangelicals at the time that things would continue to deteriorate until Christ returned; this perspective would undermine the principle of agency within the evangelical community. This stance, and the rupture between evangelicals and liberals with their divergent agendas, would characterize the Christian community for the first half of the twentieth century.²⁴

3. Renewal of a lost vision

But the post-WWII years marked the beginning of change in the evangelical community and a gradual recovery of a more holistic vision. The rise and growth of Christian NGOs during the post-war years is indicative of that change. World Vision, for example, would see its genesis

²³These factors are proposed by John Stott (in Alexander 2006, 170).

²⁴It is interesting to note that evangelical overseas missions during this period, perhaps in keeping with this narrow mandate, did little to challenge the colonial status quo.

through the vision of Bob Pierce, an evangelical missionary, as he looked for practical ways to mobilize the church to meet the needs of Korean civil war orphans. But the theological underpinnings of a broader vision would also be recovered in the evangelical community as a whole. The watershed gathering of evangelicals in Lausanne in 1974 included a clarion call for reintegrating both the spiritual and the social mandate:

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all people. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. Because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive (Lausanne Covenant 1974)

This renewed vision with its reintegrated theological substrata would provide the foundation for the growth of Christian development NGOs in the post-war years. And they continue to flourish, gathering an increasing share of charitable giving to overseas causes, often at the expense of more traditional para-church agencies whose mandate is more clearly tied to church growth and Christian outreach.

4. The complex Christian NGO landscape

The “marrying” of the spiritual and the social mandate has not been without controversy in the evangelical community. Some, particularly from older generations, are still suspicious of the “liberal” agenda that might be lurking in the “social gospel” (Stearn 2009, 202). Effective Christian NGOs, it can be argued, find ways to integrate that Christian identity into the fabric of their development work and their organizational life. A few Christian NGOs, such as Compassion International and Samaritan’s Purse, integrate an overt Christian outreach element into their development vision and practice. The majority or the mainstream Christian NGOs, however, keep their Christian message low-key, although their Christian values and commitment are at the centre, at least theoretically and ideally, of all they do. World Vision is the most well-known mainstream Christian NGO in this category. Others have moved significantly away from

Christian origins and function for all intents and purposes as secular NGOs. Christian Aid, a UK-based NGO, would be indicative of this type.

Ronald Sider (2004) proposes a helpful typology that helps navigate this complex world of faith-based NGOs. This typology describes a continuum moving from “faith permeated” NGOs such as Samaritan’s Purse and Compassion International to “faith-secular” partnerships where the secular partner basically sets the agenda and controls decisions. In between these two extremes are “faith-centred” NGOs, “faith affiliated” NGOs, and “faith-background” NGOs. Predictably, the further the organization moves toward the secular side of the continuum, the less significant the Christian element in its mission statement, its choice of leadership, its Christian faith practices, and its development programming (Sider 2004). World Vision will be described in further detail according to this typology in the following section.

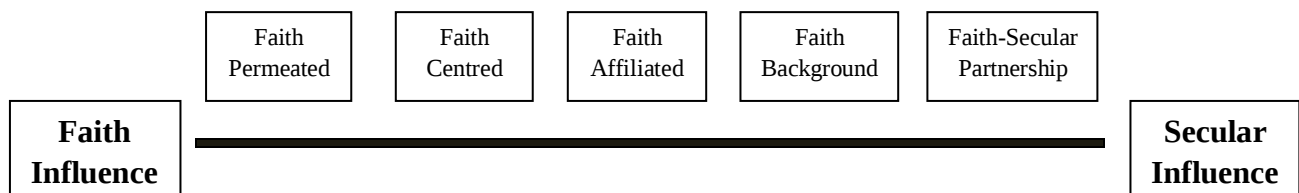


Figure 2. Sider’s (2004) typology of faith-based organizations

Christian NGOs situate themselves at different places on this continuum for a variety of reasons. European Christian NGOs, Rick James (2009) notes, have tended to minimize the faith element in their presentation due to the overwhelmingly secular, even “post-Christian” European culture. North American NGOs, particularly in the US, do not face the same constraints as the broader culture and even government funding agencies (such as USAID) participate openly with faith-centred and even faith-permeated organizations (James 2009, 7). According to James (2009), the main reason for minimizing the faith component, particularly for European NGOs, is to attract secular funding. This motivation is certainly of greater significance in Canada as well, where secular criteria are critical to securing government funding. But this sword cuts both ways. Organizations such as World Vision and other NGOs that have a strong US presence can actually capitalize on their Christian identity to secure significant funding from a donor constituency that is predominantly Christian. Downplaying their Christian identity would be

tantamount to alienating themselves from their most important constituency, although it may serve them well in securing government funding.²⁵

James (2009) argues persuasively, however, that Christian NGOS (faith-based organizations, or FBOs as he calls them) do themselves a disservice by minimizing or distancing themselves from their Christian identity. He notes in this regard that faith orientation is increasingly valued in the aid industry. The Commission for Africa, for example, recommended that increasing funding be channelled through FBOs (James 2009, 7). Faith-based development has further proven more effective in reaching the poorest and is more highly valued by them than the secular counterpart (James 2009, 8). This can be largely explained by the overwhelming spiritual worldview, shared by faith-based organizations, that is woven into the fabric of developing societies. Kurt Alan Ver Beek comments insightfully in this light:

The failure to recognize the centrality of their spirituality ultimately robs the poor of opportunities to tap into whatever strength, power and hope that this dimension gives them and deprives them of opportunities to reflect on and control how their development and spirituality shape each other. (2000)

Prioritizing Christian identity also has a number of positive outcomes for the organization itself. James (2009) notes that organizations are more effective when they have a clear identity and set of values that permeate the organization. He argues that token or superficial affiliation with Christian values or worldview undermines the “value-added” of the FBO. He goes so far as to say that the effectiveness of Christian NGOs is directly proportional to the extent that they operationalize their faith in every area of the decision-making and organizational life.

To sum up, Christian development NGOs took shape during the post-war years as evangelical Christians rediscovered a more holistic vision of the Christian mandate, embracing the physical and social needs of poor communities and not uniquely their spiritual needs. This was a recovery of the more integrated vision of the nineteenth-century Christian movement that had been largely abandoned during the early twentieth century in favour of a narrow spiritual understanding of Christian responsibility. Some Christian NGOs, in keeping with a strong evangelical identity, continue to tie an overt Christian outreach component to their development work. However, the majority of Christian NGOs, World Vision included, have sought to

²⁵It was interesting to note that World Vision Burundi was viewed by some of those interviewed outside the organization as reticent to openly identify itself as Christian.

integrate faith into the fabric of their mission, their organization life, and their development practice, without openly communicating their faith to those served. Still other NGOs on the other end of the spectrum have made their Christian identity more incidental and historic than central. World Vision, however, stands in the mainstream of Christian NGOs and is representative, for the most part, of the faith-centred Christian NGO majority.

An overview of this organization and a more in-depth look at World Vision Burundi is now in order.

CHAPTER IV

WORLD VISION AS A FAITH-BASED NGO

A. World Vision Overview

1. Introduction

World Vision (World Vision) is the largest Christian NGO in the world, offering relief and development services in more than 100 countries.²⁶ Understanding this remarkable global organization is critical to both analyzing the national chapter of its organization in Burundi, and to weighing its overall commitment to becoming a stronger learning organization. This section begins by looking at the global entity of World Vision, situating it in the broader typology outlined above. Studying and critiquing its vision and mission statements helps clarify the extent to which World Vision roots its vision and commitment to development in the rich soil of the Christian tradition. Zeroing in on the specific work of World Vision in Burundi sets the stage for understanding the scope of the research and case study which will be described more in detail in the final chapter.

2. History and Christian identity

World Vision (World Vision) was launched by Rev Bob Pierce in 1950 in response to the staggering needs of hundreds of thousands of Korean orphans in the wake of the Korean War. Although maintaining its focus on helping children and its trademark child sponsorship strategy, World Vision would expand its scope in the 1970s to include an integrated community development model and an emergency relief division. Advocacy would also become a priority (at least on paper) in the twenty-first century.

World Vision is an avowedly Christian organization. Its first value is unequivocal: “We are Christian” (World Vision Canadian website). This value is fleshed out further:

We acknowledge one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Jesus Christ the love, mercy and grace of God are made known to us and all people. From this overflowing abundance of God’s love we find our call to ministry. We proclaim together, “Jesus lived, died, and rose again. Jesus is Lord.” We desire him to be central in our individual and corporate life. (World Vision Burundi 2010)

²⁶The data here are taken from the international website (World Vision International Website)

Its mission further bears witness to its Christian underpinnings:

World Vision is an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God (World Vision Burundi 2010).

These statements and others typify World Vision as a “faith-centred” organization. A closer study of World Vision in light of Sider’s (2004) typology reveals, however, a more nuanced perspective.

3. World Vision according to Sider’s Typology

In many ways World Vision is clearly faith-centred. It is explicitly Christian in its mission statement; board members and management staff must embrace the Christian vision and values; it targets the Christian community in its funding efforts; religious practices play an important part in the organizational activities (Sider 2004). But when it comes to its programming and projects, World Vision (at least in Burundi) leans toward the more secular side of the continuum, and would be better typified from this angle as a “faith-affiliated” organization. For example, it does not, as a rule, promote or foster religious programming that is either integrated with or “segregated from its provision of care” (Sider 2004, 114). The following description of the “faith-affiliated” organization describes World Vision Burundi accurately: “The religious component aspect is primarily in acts of compassion and care; program includes little (and entirely optional) or no explicitly religious activities outside program parameters or hold religious conversations with beneficiaries” (Sider 2004, 114).

Yet here as well, World Vision is hard to typify. The vision documents do explicitly refer to witnessing to Christ by “life deed, word and sign that encourages people to respond to the Gospel” (World Vision Burundi 2010). But my observations of World Vision Burundi, on-site interviews, and the general tenor of the organization would classify it more as a “faith-affiliated” organization, “(one that has) little expectation that explicitly religious experiences of change is necessary for desired outcome; some believe that acts of compassion and care alone have an implicit spiritual impact that contributes to outcomes” (Sider 2004, 115). In fact, one interviewee in Burundi (an outsider to World Vision Burundi) commented that two years had passed before he even knew it was a Christian organization.

It is hard to tell whether World Vision is a faith-affiliated organization or a faith-centred organization. There seems to be somewhat of a mixed message in the organization at a higher level as well. A perusal of the (Canadian) website reveals this ambiguity. The home page has no Christian references whatsoever; none of the drop-down boxes makes any Christian references; none of the program descriptions has any explicit Christian content; even the link to transformational development makes no Christian reference. There is only one reference to the Christian element in the values section of the site. But here as well, surprisingly, the summary mission statement makes no reference either to “the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” or to the importance of bearing witness to Christ and encouraging people to respond to the gospel (explicitly stated in the broader statement in World Vision Burundi’s national office strategy document).

My observations in the field and a cursory overview of the World Vision’s Canadian website point to a certain reticence on the part of the organization to articulate its Christian identity openly. This clearly places it more firmly in the “faith-affiliated” camp than the “faith-centred” one. Interestingly, the US World Vision site is much more open about its Christian identity, seemingly more “faith-centred”:

Wherever we work, our prayer is that our efforts will be used by God to heal and strengthen people’s relationships with Him and with one another. We do this by demonstrating God’s unconditional love for all people through our service to the poor—which includes providing for daily needs, working to build peace and promote justice, and partnering with churches and individuals to encourage spiritual transformation. (World Vision US website)

This difference between the US and the Canadian website may reveal that Canadian World Vision leaders feel more akin to their European counterparts, catering to a society that is more ideologically pluralistic and multi-faith; and as consequence, they seem to “wear their faith lightly” (James 2009, 11). Their understanding of development and the role faith plays in their development vision is seen most clearly in their mission and mission statements.

4. World Vision development framework

a. Vision statements

World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organization dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender. (World Vision Canadian website)

World Vision is an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God. (World Vision Burundi 2010)

Our vision for every child, life in all its fullness.

Our prayer for every heart, the will to make it so. (World Vision Burundi 2010)

The first statement is the most generic of the three. Even here World Vision places its Christian identity front and center, but it makes clear from the outset that its focus is not traditional Christian outreach. They prioritize working with children (mentioned first) with a specific concern for the most vulnerable. Here they stand in the biblical tradition of focusing on the "least of these" (Matthew 25.45). Their commitment to serving across religious lines shows that they do not attach to their initiatives any overt Christian(izing) outreach agenda.

The second statement is more overtly Christian, but it says basically the same thing. They root all they do in their identity as followers of Christ. Promoting human transformation and seeking justice are their first two action words. "Bearing witness to the good news of the kingdom of God" is the third. This third statement is a bit more problematic, particularly for those who are unversed in Christian jargon. This may be why the statement is not found in some versions of the mission statement, such as the one published on the Canadian World Vision website. As mentioned above, Jesus chose the statement the "kingdom of God" as his main motif for the restoration of God's will on earth. The "good news" of the kingdom of God was that Jesus opened the possibility of reconciliation with God to all humans; this reconciliation had far reaching implications on the personal, social, and even environmental plane. When most Christians today refer to the kingdom of God, the reference is broader than the spiritual dimension; it reaches to the physical and social dimensions as well. Presumably, in light of the

former statements and the above discussion, when World Vision refers to the good news of the kingdom of God, it is primarily concerned with the social and physical dimensions. Although spiritual transformation is also referenced in its documents, in keeping with the “faith-affiliated” typology, it does not, at least in Burundi, combine a religious component to its aid delivery.

The final of the three statements captures the *raison d’être*. The statement most clearly unveils their child-centric focus. The “fullness of life” reference is from Jesus’ own words (John 10.10). The second phrase refers to the means that will make this possible—that all humans would be engaged in making this fullness of life for children a reality. The reference to prayer harkens back to their Christian identity and commitment; they recognize that the goal of engaging people and mobilizing response to this need will not be met without God’s help.

World Vision’s core values, for the most part, reflect the above vision and mission statements, with the exception of the focus on partnership and responsiveness.

- We are Christian
- We are committed to the poor
- We value people
- We are stewards
- We are partners
- We are responsive (World Vision Canadian Website)

The above brief overview of the World Vision sheds light on the nature of this organization and explains many of the priorities and strategies that will be explored further in this study. World Vision is a “typical” Christian NGO in that it prioritizes the social and physical dimensions of the Christian development or “transformation” as it is called. It does not ignore the spiritual dimension—which undergirds the vision and priorities as noted above—but it is not given priority. The development model/frame below (attempts to) explain their understanding of the interplay between the various elements that contribute to their goal of development or “transformation,” which they call “fullness of life.”

b. World Vision Development Frame: Overview and Critique

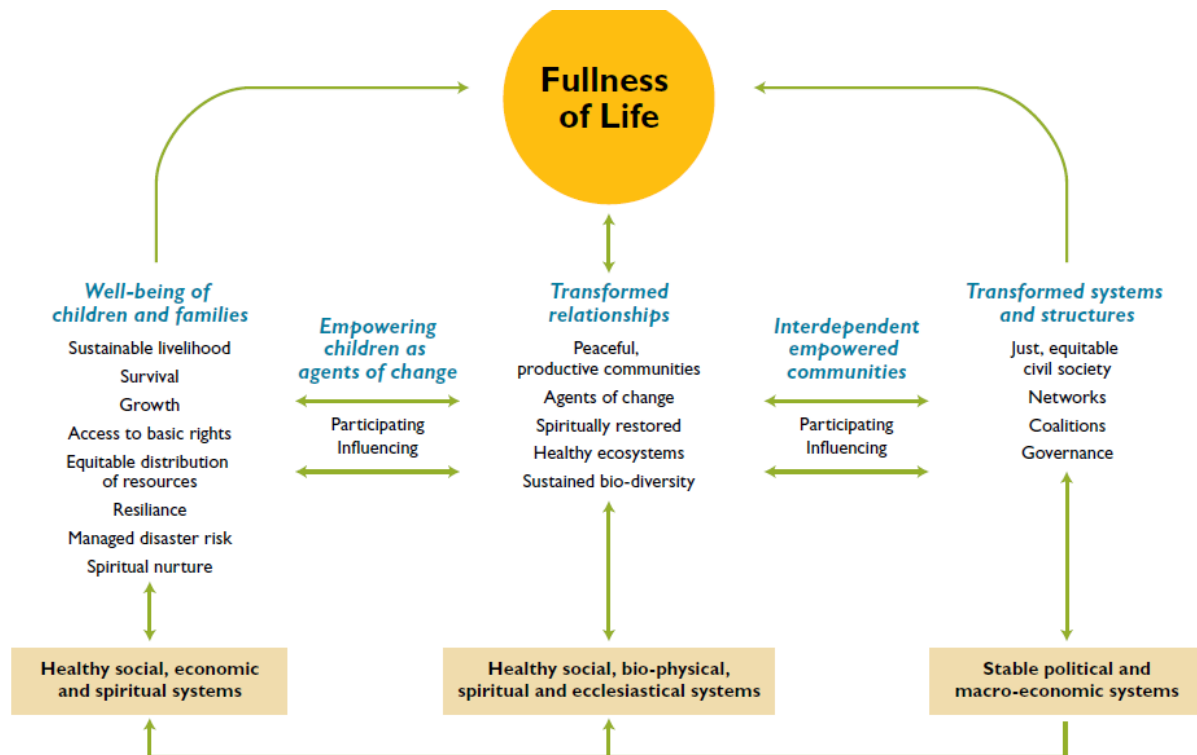


Figure 3: World Vision’s Transformational Development Frame (LEAP Framework 2007)

The five categories (in blue) are what they call the “domains of change.” These are the key investment priorities for World Vision, at least in theory. The goal is transformed relationships within families, communities and in the broader society (transformed systems). What this visual does not clearly indicate, however, is the child-centric focus. The model suggests that World Vision is equally committed to community, societal and environmental transformation as it is to children and family transformation. But this is not the case. The model fails to represent the all-encompassing strategic priority placed on children as “agents of transformation in their families and communities” (LEAP framework 2007: 118). In reality, World Vision, as will be demonstrated in the evaluation section of this study, does not prioritize systems and structural transformation. The child-centric focus is itself also problematic.

World Vision embraces a fundamentally child-centric model (theory) of development titled “Transformational Development” (LEAP Framework 2007, 124). It criticizes adult-centric

models and argues that children are the primary agents of change in their families and communities:

Development theory based on adult-centric approaches has, at best, provided sporadic and inconsistent gains for child well-being and, at worst, increased children's vulnerability. World Vision has spent many years in communities trying to address poverty, yet children are still malnourished, abused, and sidelined from the development process . . . Placing children at the heart of development allows World Vision to become more focused in its contributions while building on existing aspirations of families for their children and local efforts to address child poverty. (Integrated Programming Model 2010)

But we see here the fundamental paradigm within which World Vision operates. Despite the consultation and assessments, the final product will always be child-centric development approach. Here World Vision's listening to and learning from the community can only go as far as their child-centric paradigm permits; the (narrow) theory ultimately shapes the practice.

This child-centric focus goes even one step further: seeing children as the most important agents of change and involving them as partners even in the decision-making process. The World Vision development model focuses on increasing the capacity of children, particularly those most vulnerable, to be involved in the decision-making process: "It is imperative that children's perspectives are included at the programming level" (Integrated Programming Model 2010). It can be argued, even quite persuasively, that this is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse. From the biblical perspective, it is difficult to support a child-focused decision making process within community and family life. Biblically, decisions, directions, and wisdom reside almost exclusively with the parent and the elder, and children are called to honor their parents in their role of authority.

These decisions and wisdom, in keeping with biblical values, will consistently protect the vulnerable, honor the well-being of the child, and stand resolutely against any forms of exploitation (see Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 6, Isaiah 58). It seems to be a flawed argument that an adult-centric model that empowers adults to be stronger wiser leaders and protectors of children could result in "increasing the child's vulnerability" as World Vision literature suggests. Another potential fault line in this argument for child participation in the decision and programming process is the particular emphasis on vulnerable children. The most vulnerable

children are part of the weakest and least powerful family units. World Vision practitioners consistently observed, and the literature also supports this, that the poorest families are inappropriate candidates for most development initiatives, as they lack the capacity to “manage” responsibility (such as a small loan or a new stove; see also Smillie 2009, 175).

Yet World Vision literature suggests that “empowering” vulnerable children will enable them to become contributors in the decision-making process and agents of change in the community. It seems unrealistic that the most vulnerable children, not unlike the family units they are part of, will become appropriate “agents of change” in the community. The paradigm World Vision presents of children as decision-making participants and agents of change is questionable even with a healthy, confident child; it seems totally unrealistic that an acutely vulnerable child will be able to play this role. Research by Boyden and Cooper (2009) on child resilience specifically addresses the question whether children are “up to the task of disrupting the transmission of poverty” (289); the studies on the theme are far from conclusive.

The above model also fails to portray clearly the link between the different domains and the desired “transformation.” Although all the elements of a good model are in the mix, the picture is both misleading and unhelpful. (See Appendix I for a fuller, but still unsatisfactory official description). Its main tenet is that children are the key agents of change in the community, and that focusing on their needs and “empowerment” will be translated into the wellbeing of families. It is unclear in the model how such child transformation will effect family transformation, or how family transformation will result in community transformation. The transformed structures and systems that are also necessary for “fullness of life” seem to get short shrift in the final analysis. This is perhaps the weakest link in their model. It seems unlikely that poor communities, even with years of outside inputs and World Vision activity, will wield sufficient political and economic weight to challenge or change prevailing systems and structures. In the final analysis, World Vision seems to put all (or at least most) of its development eggs in the *children/family*²⁷ transformation basket. In focusing on vulnerable children in poor communities World Vision is addressing a pressing need; but it is unlikely that such a service delivery strategy will result in any significant transformation of systems or structures. Korten’s 1987 prediction seems trenchant: without transformation of the policy and

²⁷The italics are mine and reflect the secondary importance of family in the World Vision paradigm; it is children who are the priority.

institutional setting, the front-line, service interventions prioritized by NGOs such as World Vision may ultimately prove futile (149).

c. World Vision in the light of core Christian development values

The five Christian values that (should) permeate Christian development initiatives are seen to varying degrees within World Vision.²⁸ It has placed primary focus on the weakest and most vulnerable members of poor communities, the children. In that sense it embraces and champions the biblical value of the intrinsic worth of the individual, and of the particular biblical priority placed on the weakest and most needy. The trademark child sponsorship is indicative of this priority, as is the child-centric development frame that shapes its programmes. Other biblical values are less evident. “Empowerment,” for example, does not seem to have a high priority, even though the word is used extensively. A child-centric model that prioritizes children as agents of change in a community is not one that readily empowers adults, who, of course, are ultimately responsible for change in the community. In a similar light, it appears that such an approach may actually foster dependency rather than encourage self-reliance, a strong principle that undergirds Christian community development both biblically and historically. A further Christian development value that seems poorly integrated into World Vision is that of working for systemic and governance change. It was noted above that inaugurating a system of just governance that protects the poor is a constant concern throughout the Bible. Although advocacy is one of the three pillars of World Vision (the other two being transformational development and humanitarian intervention), it is far from being more than a token investment, receiving only 4% of all funding (Heliso 2010).

To sum up, World Vision is a vast organization that stands in the tradition of Christian NGOs that prioritize meeting physical and social needs of the poor and disenfranchised; its particular focus is on children, particularly the most vulnerable. Although anchoring its mission in strong Christian language, it intentionally downplays the spiritual and outreach dimensions of the Christian faith. It also appears to be somewhat ambivalent about its Christian identity and seems in many ways to be more “faith-affiliated” than “faith-centred.” The model of “transformational development” contains the elements of an integrated development model, but its child-centric focus undermines the strength of the frame. It suggests, for example, that focusing development

²⁸See pp. 18-20 for an overview of these values.

at the child and family level will result in system and structural transformation, a claim that belies the nature of community development. World Vision does embrace a number of central Christian development values in its development model and practice, particularly valuing the poor children and families. At the same time, other Christian values such as empowerment and advocacy seem to have little influence in the final analysis. These observations will be further developed the study of World Vision Burundi.

B. World Vision Burundi

1. Introduction

World Vision has a strong presence in SSA. This section builds naturally on the previous section and sets the work of World Vision in the context of a given country. World Vision's work in Burundi is indicative of its strategy and involvement in other countries as will be seen below. This overview provides the necessary historical and contextual context to best appreciate the subsequent evaluation of World Vision's learning culture and learning commitment.

2. Burundi

Burundi is a small, land-locked, densely populated country in East-central Africa. Similar to its neighbor Rwanda, Burundi has been rocked by violent ethnic conflict since its independence. This simmering conflict between Tutsi (the ruling power) and Hutus (the majority population) would erupt periodically, at times with horrific and unimaginable violence. Following the assassination of the elected president in 1993, the country plunged into civil war; this protracted conflict lasted for more than a decade. Although the conflict would officially "end" in 2001 with the signing of the Arusha peace accord, total cessation of hostilities would not occur until 2008.

The impact of this conflict on the population has been staggering. Not only were hundreds of thousands killed in the most recent conflict (similar numbers were killed in previous conflicts as well), but hundreds of thousands more were either displaced or made their way to refugee camps in neighboring Tanzania. On returning to Burundi, these refugees were met with the overwhelming challenge of rebuilding their communities and livelihoods. The conflict also ravaged homes and families, creating over 600,000 orphans and thousands of child-led households (World Vision Burundi 2010). The psychological impact of such a conflict is also difficult to measure. Le Marchand (2002) observes the widespread taboo against speaking about

the former conflict; he argues that it is in fact an unhealthy sign that wounds are yet to be healed. He fears that such silence will deepen both the guilt and the fear that could reignite in further conflict. Development in such a context means more than the rebuilding of homes and livelihoods; rebuilding of confidence and trust must also be part of the future. This is particularly acute among displaced peoples and refugees who have been returning from neighboring countries, primarily Tanzania, around 50,000 per year (World Vision Burundi 2010). Many have found their homes destroyed and have had no resources to build their lives.

The country has a large Christian majority, primarily Catholic, but, similar to other SSA countries, has a plethora of evangelical churches of all kinds, including many “independent” churches that are called “revival” churches. There is significant fragmentation in the Protestant Christian community, with over 250 “denominations” and church groups (World Vision Burundi 2010). There is a small but active Muslim minority as well as an important number (7%) who continue to practice African Traditional Religions (World Vision Burundi 2010).

Although a fragile peace is hanging together in the country, the broader economic impact of the crisis is far-reaching. The key axis of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Program (PRSP) identifies the priority of rebuilding the economy, which includes important infrastructure investments as well as the general specific investments in critical sectors of the economy (Burundi PRSP Annual Progress Report 2009). A further axis is the investment in human capital, targeting the health and education sectors primarily. The 2009 mid-term PRSP evaluation identifies some progress, notably universal free access to elementary education and free health care for mothers and children under five. But the challenge of improving the quality and the effectiveness of these initiatives is ongoing.²⁹

The capital city Bujumbura is a bustling city of 600,000 in this largely rural, densely populated country. And the population is young: over half the population is under 18 years old. Travel throughout the countryside, at least to the main centers, is feasible, and the signs of economic activity, even if much of it is informal, are everywhere. Residents of Bujumbura remark about the striking change that has occurred in the last few years. But the bottom line is that the vast majority of the population is excluded from this growth, and the rural sectors are the hardest hit. The poverty level is double outside of the urban areas, attaining 80% in many

²⁹During a recent visit to Burundi (April 2010), I observed that all public schools in the country were closed due to a strike by the teachers for higher pay. They were not satisfied with \$50/month.

provinces. Cankuzo province is a case in point. Furthest from the major centres, barely accessible without a land rover, largely neglected both economically and developmentally, the percentage of the population living in dire poverty surpasses the country average. World Vision's comparative study of the six provinces in which they work ranked Cankuzo as the second neediest area (World Vision Burundi National Office Strategy 2010).

3. World Vision Burundi

World Vision's work in Burundi began in a limited way in 1963 under the leadership of the regional office in Nairobi. It expanded over the years working primarily with local partners, but ceased operations in 1990.³⁰ The crisis of 1993 and the humanitarian fallout brought World Vision back to the country in 1995, where it was involved primarily in relief and rehabilitation work with the most vulnerable sectors of the society. In the years that followed, the work expanded into a number of the provinces, gradually concentrating in three provinces: Muyinga, Karusi and Cankuzo.

World Vision Burundi has shifted its focus in the last few years from humanitarian intervention to a more integrated development strategy. It is currently in the transition phase where a number of relief-focused projects will eventually give way to the major development strategy, the area development programs (ADP). The ongoing relief-focused projects include a number of food security initiatives, health centre rehabilitation, and some housing reconstruction for returning refugees. Not all projects will be phased out, but the priorities will shift massively toward the ADP programs, which are the central development strategy of World Vision in SSA and globally. This integrative community development strategy is a long term commitment to a community which includes ensuring food security, improved health and hygiene, and education. It is primarily through the ADPs that World Vision Burundi aims to impact 30,000 households by 2012; this number of households represents approximately 150,000 children (World Vision Burundi National Office Strategy 2010). Such a goal will require World Vision Burundi to double its current capacity and services. The goal is to see measurable change in such areas as nutrition, health and education. The key funding instrument for the ADPs is the trademark child sponsorship. To meet these goals requires significant growth on many fronts: staffing, donor

³⁰These data come from the World Vision Burundi National Strategy document (2010).

support, sponsorship. World Vision Burundi's current staff of 150 is expanding to meet the need for growth.

World Vision Burundi is officially under the umbrella of World Vision East Africa office in Nairobi. (See Appendix II for the organizational chart.) For the office to be "autonomous" World Vision Burundi would need its own governing board. With growth, this is a likely part of the not-too-distant future. World Vision Burundi governing structure is quite hierarchical, although there is devolution of authority to the different field offices. This devolution does not mean, however, that the fields are free to pursue development initiatives of their own design; they still must conform to the goals and priorities of the African Regional Strategic objectives. They also must submit to the same governing structure with its reporting and evaluating guidelines.

The senior management team of seven individuals oversees the entire World Vision Burundi work from the head office in Bujumbura. The three provincial regions also have a program manager who oversees the whole spectrum of projects in that region. In Cankuzo province, for example, there is one ADP in place and another in the planning stages, a food security project sponsored by the European Union, a school feeding program sponsored in part by the World Food Program, a vulnerable children project called the Children of Cankuzo, and an agricultural development program experimenting with new forms of manioc. There are overlapping areas of responsibility that seem somewhat cumbersome. For example, there is a sponsorship manager who oversees the entire sponsorship program, but those who work at identifying and following up with sponsored children in the field do not directly report to him, but to the regional program manager.

World Vision Burundi is an important player in Burundi, where it participates with 46 other international NGOs. These NGOs work in various capacities, but most focus on relief work, primarily the re-integration of refugees and IDPs. Care, IRC and CRS, along with World Vision, are among the most significant international NGOs in the country. These NGOs participate in the network *Rassemblement, Echanges et Solutions entre ONGs* (RESO) and meet on a monthly basis. World Vision Burundi belongs to this network but does not take a leadership role; they seek to exercise their influence at the local level rather than the center (World Vision Burundi National Office Strategy).³¹

³¹Full participation in the network is also difficult in that the World Vision Burundi director, as well as other key members of the SMT, do not speak French.

To sum up, World Vision Burundi provides a “typical” example of a Christian NGO working in a challenging development context in SSA. Working in a post-conflict situation such as Burundi is fraught with challenges; the fall-out on the personal and social level is staggering. One unique challenge facing World Vision Burundi is the transition from a primarily relief-focused strategy to a longer-term development strategy. The senior management team (SMT) is expanding the scope of World Vision’s work in the country, and there are definite growth pains. Nevertheless, World Vision Burundi is committed to expanding its influence in some of the neediest corners of Burundi, and there are many. The challenge for World Vision Burundi and other NGOs in both Burundi and throughout the region is to deliver more effective aid. A key to this challenge is becoming a stronger learning organization. This is the next field of exploration.

CHAPTER V

BUILDING A MODEL OF A STRONG LEARNING NGO

Introduction and overview

The model of an effective learning NGO, as indicated in the introduction, requires a strong conceptual framework. Organizational development theory is the main research domain that contributes to this conceptual framework. Organization learning is an important construct within organizational development theory, and has been in vogue for the last twenty years. The first section of this chapter explores the learning organization construct with a view to identifying the key ingredients/dynamics that contribute to creating a strong learning organization. Once identified, the goal is to explore how these dynamics can be best integrated or at least fostered in the NGO context, specifically the Christian NGO. To understand how NGOs can become strong learning organizations, it is also important to explore the unique nature of the NGO context more in depth, and weigh the influences—both positive and negative—that contribute (or not) to learning. These influences are specifically considered in the context of the Christian NGO, although there is much overlap with secular NGOs as well.

The second section of this chapter presents an integrated model of an effective learning NGO. This model identifies the different domains of learning that need to be prioritized if the NGO is to become a strong learning organization. But this framework/model remains “lifeless” or “useless” unless the above learning organization dynamics invigorate it. To use another image, the model is the body of the learning organization; the learning organization dynamics are the lifeblood that or the breath that makes it “live.” Each aspect of the model will be developed specifically in the light of the unique and demanding environment and challenge the NGOs face.

I: Key dynamics/ingredients of a strong learning organization

A. Understanding the nature of the learning organization

1. Towards a definition

The idea and popularity of the “learning organization”³² catapulted into the management literature in the 1990s. Both the term “learning organization” and “organizational learning” are found extensively in the literature. The most helpful “distinction” between the two was proposed

by Finger and Brand (in Armstrong and Foley 2003). For them, organizational learning is the means to the end of becoming a learning organization (74). In other words, every organization has a measure of organizational learning, but only a few organizations integrate learning to such an extent that they approach the ideal of becoming a “learning organization” (see Wang 2003 and Garavan 1997, 26). Organizational learning, therefore, is the primary focus of this research. In other words, the greater the organization can prioritize such learning, the closer it can approach the ideal of becoming a learning organization.

Senge’s (1990) seminal work is the most well-known. Argyris and Schon (1993) are also important contributors to the theme. A plethora of books on the theme have been published, including 150 in one year! (Edwards 1997).³³ Unfortunately, the breadth of the literature is not always matched by depth and clarity. “Learning,” for example, can become a catchword for everything that enables change in an organization (Wang 2003, 8). Several authors, however, help bring focus to the essential elements of a learning organization.

Robinson (2001), for example, identifies the two main emphases that come out in the definitions (58). The first emphasis is primarily descriptive. These definitions are concerned with the nature of the learning process and are more rooted in cognitive psychology (2001, 58). The other set of definitions is more prescriptive or normative in nature, and is concerned with how learning can improve the effectiveness of the organization. Descriptive and cognitive definitions help understand the process and dynamics of learning in an organization; prescriptive definitions help prioritize the outcomes that learning should produce. The best definitions combine the two foci, highlighting how learning impacts both cognition and behavior in an organization:

The Learning Organization is one which facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself. (Pillar in Garavan 1997, 25)

Organizational learning refers to experience-based improvement in organizational task performance. (Argyris and Schon in Tsang 1997, 78)

Organizational learning means the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding. (Fiol and Lyles in Tsang 1997, 78)

These brief definitions point to the important interplay between cognition and behavior; but they are also somewhat misleading in that there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between learning and change (Tsang 1997, 78). Nor do they identify the challenge of “accurate” learning,

³³ An entire academic journal (*The Learning Organization*), launched in 1994, is dedicated to the theme.

of clear understanding, particularly in the complex world of organizations and their environments. A further challenge that Tsang identifies is the difficulty of empirically measuring the actual link between learning and change; in other words, change may have been caused by an entirely different variable than learning. Tsang further identifies an intermediate but important impact of learning: it creates what he calls the “potential” for behavior change. He criticizes many “prescriptive” studies for assuming, without strong empirical evidence, that change has in fact occurred as a direct result of learning. His formulation is helpful and reflects the very “human” reality that change is a difficult process (at both a personal and an organizational level) and that learning may in many cases do no more than set the stage for change. Tsang does conclude, however, that learning “usually, but not always, increases an organization’s capacity to perform better” (79).

One significant discussion at the outset of this overview is whether “learning” is a variable that contributes to overall organizational development and effectiveness or whether it is in fact a paradigmatic “root metaphor.” In other words, is learning only one variable among many, or does it permeate and influence different dimensions of organizational development? The weight of the literature and personal research leads to the latter conviction that learning is a root metaphor that affects every aspect of organization life and function.³⁴ The root-metaphor model is further supported by current research on “metatheory” which in effect identifies the “learning lens” as one such conceptual lens that transcends any particular theory (Edwards 2009, 196).

2. How do organizations “learn”?

But how does learning occur within an organization? Some authors go so far as to say that it is a misnomer to suggest that organizations learn; only people learn (Wang 2003). But Fiol (1985) challenges this, claiming that organizational learning is more than the sum of the individual learning “parts” within an organization. Organizational learning is the net result of a synergistic relationship between three factors or “spheres”, only one of which is the individual. The sphere of the external environment and the sphere of the internal organizational ethos and

³⁴In Worley and Feyerherm’s (2003) organizational development theory, for example, the authors interviewed a set of theorists and practitioners of the domain, asking them three questions. Significantly, two of the three questions revealed a fundamental learning paradigm. The third question is a case in point: “What are the critical needs or issues in *educating* people to facilitate change in the future? What *skills, knowledge and competencies* will the next generation of change practitioners require” [emphasis mine]. This question reveals that the author presupposes that learning is a root metaphor and a key for organizational development, and not simply one variable among many.

culture are also part of the picture. When these spheres are in a dynamic overlapping relationship, as shown in Figure 4, an organization is well-positioned to learn. And from the vantage point of the NGO, it is well positioned to impact its environment with more effective aid.

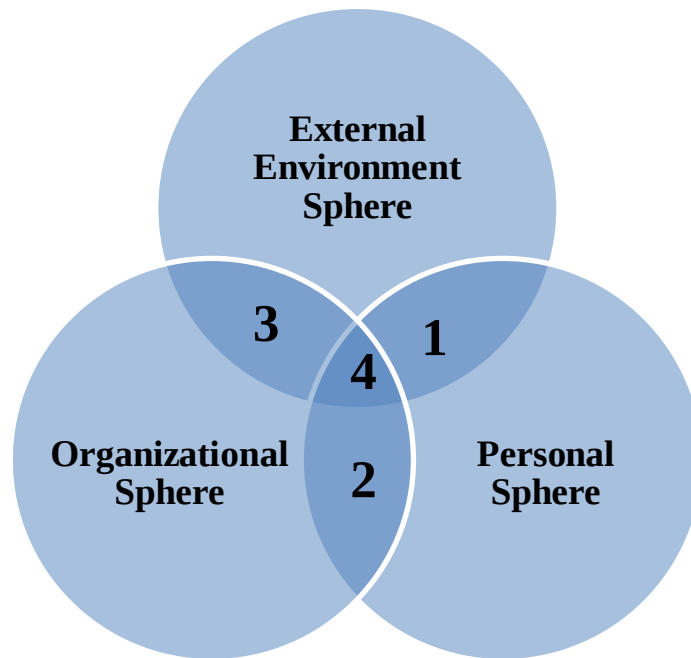


Figure 4: The Spheres of Organizational Learning (author's presentation)

The spaces where the spheres overlap indicate the areas where learning occurs.

- In section 1, a given member of the NGO interacts personally with the environment and through that interaction and inquiry discovers a situation that creates a certain level of cognitive and experiential dissonance.
- In section 2, the learner shares this dissonance with others in the organization and finds others who collectively want to find a solution.
- In section 3 the learners discover that the organization facilitates research into the context that enables them to identify a number of solutions; they also integrate others from the external environment into the learning process.

- In section 4, in the synergy of organizational learning, a learning strategy and policy is crafted that integrates the three spheres and brings resolution to the need.

a. The personal sphere

Each of the spheres merits some particular consideration. The personal sphere is the best starting point. Learning organizations find their spark and sustainability in the personal sphere. Learning, as the great educational theorist John Dewey has noted, finds its genesis in the spirit of inquiry (Elkajaer 2001, 440). This inquiry grows out of a situation of uncertainty that creates a certain cognitive and experiential dissonance. Resolving this dissonance requires both an experiential and a reflective response. Consider a fictitious scenario to illustrate the spheres and process of learning in an organizational context, an NGO context specifically.³⁵

Our development practitioner, “Rose,” has a hunch that something is wrong with the ways that a community has become dependent on the school feeding program. Her NGO provides daily meals in dozens of schools in the area; the food is provided by the World Food Program (WFP) and parents are mobilized to prepare the daily food. Although the program has resulted in increased school attendance, she is concerned about the dependency that has developed: the ways in which parents have lost a measure of initiative to provide for their children; the expectations that children will continue to bring home food from school; the gnawing sense that there is no possible way to phase this out without social upheaval; and the reality that the WFP funding will soon end. These thoughts remind her of a personal experience where her parents chose to break free from a dependent relationship and create their own small business that would eventually enable them to send her to a good school and open the future for her. She identifies their courage as a critical piece of her own journey to becoming a project manager within this NGO. These reflections solidify her resolve to initiate a process of collective inquiry into the phasing out strategy that must begin to take shape within the NGO; she also renews her commitment to do some serious research into others’ experience of phasing out food aid initiatives.

This fictitious example illustrates the process of learning a la Dewey: the learner finds herself in an uncomfortable situation that creates dissonance; this dissonance triggers a process

³⁵ Although the individuals in this scenario are fictitious, the situation is not. World Vision Burundi does operate a school feeding program sponsored by the WFP; this program has created unhealthy dependency, and at time of writing it had no phase-out strategy.

of inquiry informed by personal experience as well as the external situation; this inquiry leads to a commitment to clarify the situation more fully and move toward a resolution; and finally solutions are sought in a collective process of inquiry with others (Elkjaer 2001). The example also identifies how a need in the external environment stimulated the spirit of inquiry that initiated the learning process. It further identifies a set of personal characteristics of an effective learner: a personal interest and investment in the problem, a commitment to discover a solution and to acquire the skills and knowledge to be part of the solution, and a willingness to work with others to that end. Such individuals, as Argyris and Shon observe, are the agents that make organizational learning possible (in Wang 2003, 9).

Although such motivation and commitment is a key for all members of a learning organization, it is a particularly significant trait for the leadership. If the leadership does not value learning and is not committed to creating a learning ethos, then all hope of creating a learning organization is futile. This is highlighted consistently in the literature. Senge (1990), for example, emphasizes that management fosters organizational learning through practicing what he calls the five disciplines of the learning organization; one of these disciplines is “personal mastery,” a key leadership discipline for fostering learning in an organization. Such leaders fit into the category of “transformational” leaders and have been proven to have a more positive impact on learning than “transactional” leaders (Prugamatz 2010, 250). Collins (2005) in his popular and insightful analysis of effective service sector organizations further emphasizes the key role of leaders as catalysts for learning, particularly what has been called “mission-linked learning” (see also Armstrong and Foley 2003, 77).

b. The organizational sphere

Certain dynamics and qualities in the organizational sphere also contribute to creating a strong learning organization. The literature identifies a set of organizational characteristics that create a favorable context for learning. The first of these is organizational “culture” which is broadly understood as the “glue” of the organization, the beliefs and values that favor certain normative behaviors and establish a certain set expectations (Fiol 1985; Sarros, Cooper and Santora 2008; Balthazar, Cooke and Potter 2006). Although a rather nebulous construct, “organizational culture” has been fleshed out through decades of qualitative research and overall has proved to be a valuable tool in assessing organizational dynamics.

Research by Human Synergistics International (in Balthazar et al 2006, 714) has identified three broad organizational culture categories: (1) passive-defensive cultural styles, (2) aggressive-defensive styles, and (3) constructive styles. Both “defensive” organizational cultures do not favor learning. The passive-defensive culture is created when organizational norms place inordinate weight on the security needs of the members and tend to undervalue task; the aggressive-defensive culture, on the contrary, is overly task-oriented at the expense of meeting the security needs of the members (Balthazard et al 2006, 713). Argyris and Shon (1993) have explored this defensive organizational construct in depth and would not draw a hard and fast distinction between the two defensive cultures. Their premise is that a defensive organizational culture is “anti-learning and over-protective” (15). Such a defensive culture, according to the authors, creates a vicious circle in which the actors adopt a defensive posture in order to save face and avoid embarrassment. But this posture does more than shield the actors from embarrassment; it also effectively stops the organization from discovering “values and organizational practices that have contributed to unintended organization problems” (Robinson 2001, 61).

The “constructive” organizational culture, predictably, is fostered when task and people orientations are wed, and when “satisfaction” needs through achievement and “self-actualization” become the predominant characteristics of the organization dynamics (Balthazard et al 2006, 713). Such a constructive organizational culture is rooted in a unique set of beliefs and values; these in turn foster particular norms and expectations. Key beliefs and values that foster learning include the following: the valuing of the individual member, transparency and respect of dissenting opinion, learning as a key to personal growth and improved effectiveness, shared responsibility and “empowerment,” personal growth and accountability to task, and transparency and moral integrity. Expectations and behaviors that flow from these values are easily identified: integrity in areas of responsibility, openness and in sharing of ideas, and growth and personal learning at all levels of the organization.

Again, as noted above, leaders play a critical role in fostering such a conducive learning culture, embracing the values, modeling the behavioral norms, and communicating the expectations (Sarros et al, 2008; Bass and Avolio, 1994, 20). Such a constructive learning culture must also be shored up through appropriate learning mechanisms or enabling structures. Although creating an appropriate learning culture is one sense a “mechanism,” these structures

are more practical in nature and, according to Armstrong and Foley (2003), include opportunities for refocusing on mission, structures for identifying and meeting learning and development needs of organization members, and methods for applying learning in the workplace. This structure proposed by Armstrong and Foley, however, ignores an indispensable learning structure, one that would enable members to learn from and deepen their understanding of the external environment.

A strong learning organization is made possible by committed learners who find themselves in a conducive learning environment/culture that is structured in such a way to encourage learning. One further critical interpersonal dynamic completes the internal organizational picture, that of a commitment to working in teams. Teams create the appropriate “climate” for learning in the organization (Sarros et al). Teams, according to Armstrong and Foley (2003), are an essential part of the “facilitative learning environment” (74). Senge also identifies team learning as the fifth of his learning disciplines; such learning consists in creating an environment for dialogue and stimulating intellectual interaction (Prugsamatz 2010, 246). The key components of effective team, according to Prugsamatz, are trust, interpersonal communication, team expertise, and empowerment (253). Referring specifically to the NGO world, Fowler (2000) describes the critical contribution of teams to learning: “Adopting a team approach creates an ongoing process brings to bear multiple perspectives and tests of personal learning to produce shared knowledge (140).”

c. The sphere of the external environment

The third sphere of an effective learning organization is that of sensitivity to the external environment. Without alignment with the external environment through learning, any organization is doomed to irrelevance (Hoe 2008, 243; Fiol and Lyles 1985, 804). Such alignment enables the organization to adapt and innovate to better serve the “customer.” In the business world such knowledge and learning enables the organization to increase its market share or its profits; in the NGO context, learning about the context of the “beneficiary” and his/her needs and potential is no less critical. This fundamental “environmental” learning orientation marks the watershed between the effective and the irrelevant organization, either in the service sector or the business sector.

Change and complexity are a constant for NGOs that work in SSA; adopting a fundamental learning posture toward this changing environment is critical for a learning NGO committed both to survive and to thrive. But such a learning posture toward the external environment is not passive. Venugopal and Baetz (1995) identify such a stance as assertive and adaptive (22). They further maintain that such a posture is critical for learning from an environment that is characterized by change, uncertainty, opportunity, complexity and even threat (24). Mark Edwards (2009) describes the challenge for organizations that work in a turbulent external environment that is characterized by both complexity and dynamism (rapid change). He maintains that such “turbulent” environments can ideally become the catalyst, a “mediating means,” to move an organization toward a higher more complex level of sustainability; such turbulence can become “a trigger for more visionary types of organizing or planning” (196). Conversely, organizations that do not have a fundamental learning posture and requisite skill, faced with such complexity, can revert to a more basic and ill-adapted organizational form.

A certain “skills paradigm” enables an organization to adapt to the contingencies of complex and changing environment. Important among these are flexibility, system-wide understanding, distributed expertise, an experiential attitude of mind as opposed to the empirical, and knowledge management as opposed to knowledge acquisition (Hill, Bullard, Capper, Hawes and Wilson 1998, 188; Tidd 2001, 176). Hill et al (1998) also note that, in times of uncertainty, the “soft” skills are identified as more valuable than the traditional “hard” skills; skills such as patience, self-confidence, diplomacy, pragmatism and intuition receive greater emphasis in their research.

It is important to note as well that such environmental learning is not uniquely organizational; individuals within the organization must form their own perspectives and convictions, “mental models” on how to interact with and learn from the environment (Venugopal and Baetz 1995). They also need to have a sense of participation in the mission and the impact of the organization on the broader environment.

Placing the initial story of the NGO worker, Rose, in the broader organizational and environmental context helps illustrate the interaction of the different learning spheres that contribute to organizational learning. Rose questions the un-sustainability of the program at the weekly leadership meeting. Her expressed concern is well-received by the team; others express similar concerns. They collectively commit to a process of analyzing the nature of the dependency that the program has created. The director of research in the organization is made

aware of the project and works with them at researching the issue and crafting a strong report that is subsequently made to the director of the school feeding project, who in turn presents the report to the senior management team. The pressing need for a strong phasing out program is identified and becomes part of the broader research that is being done into the whole food security situation of school children in the country. The ultimate result is the crafting of both a phasing out program and a broader strategy for enhancing both the quality of education and food security in the affected areas, in collaboration with a number of multilateral and NGO partners.

Personal learning initiates the process. Collective research and organization feedback complement the personal research and serve to craft a strong report. The report is well received at the organization level because of the strong learning culture that includes the valuing of input and dissenting opinion. But there are also learning mechanisms in place that enable the report to get a hearing and influence the broader policy and programming decisions. Facilitating the process, the senior management team is also in tune with the external environment and is aware of the need to phase out projects that have created unhealthy dependency. They further recognize the complexity of the country context and the importance of investing in programmes and projects that will avoid unhealthy dependency; thus they welcome a report that enables them to move in a direction that is more aligned with the needs of the context.

This simplified fictitious case study illustrates the interplay of the three spheres working synergistically to create learning that results in change. When the three spheres overlap there is a synergy of learning within the organization, something to which an NGO committed to improving aid delivery can aspire.

3. Levels of learning

The goal of organizational learning, broadly, is to enhance the effectiveness of the organization in fulfilling its mission, or at least to create the potential for such fulfillment (Tsang 1997, 78). When the above spheres are synergistically in place, the organization is best positioned to enhance learning that can result in changed behavior and greater effectiveness. But not all learning produces such results. Understanding the different “levels” of learning is also part of the “recipe” for creating an effective learning organization.

The literature identifies three important levels or dimensions of learning. The first, “lower level” of learning is that which enables the organization to solve relatively straightforward,

“how-to” problems (Arevato 2010, 32). Argyris and Shon coined the phrase “single-loop” learning, to describe this lower-level “how-to” learning dimension. Garavan (1997) comments that such learning is “incremental, focusing on issues and opportunities that are within the traditional scope of the organization’s activities” (23). At this level, organizations learn how to “do things right.” Most “training” fits into this category of learning and aims at providing functional skills that answer the how-to questions. An example from the NGO context related to the above scenario would be acquiring or honing a set of skills to enable the school feeding program practitioner to better work with her staff at the local schools. Although valuable, such lower-level learning fails to address deeper structural issues. It does not challenge the status quo.

The next “higher level” of learning has been identified by Argyris and Schon (1993) as “double-loop” learning. This level of learning, also called generative learning, looks for the deeper issues, the structural, foundational, and even personal issues that may lie beneath the surface of a problem. It willingly questions the status quo and the long-held assumptions that have hitherto governed behavior (Garavan 1997, 23). Such “generative” learning seeks to answer the question “why?” It is more concerned with “doing the right thing” than doing things right. In the above scenario, the development practitioner was more concerned with the deeper issue of sustainability of a program and of unhealthy dependency that was being created. Her inquiry went beyond the “how to” to the “why” of the program. And finding answers to these questions could only come through a collective learning process. This higher level of learning in the above scenario challenged many of the assumptions that undergirded such a project. She was able to broach issues around the school feeding project because of a conducive organizational culture that encouraged asking the “why” question (Sun and Scott 2004, 206)

A third level of learning is also identified in the literature and is referred to as “third loop,” “transformative,” or “Deutero” learning (Francis 2004). This learning is more “epistemic” in nature and, similar to double loop learning, seeks to challenge deeply held assumptions and world views. It goes one step further or “higher,” however, and questions the very “frames” within which organizations have traditionally interpreted their environment. In this sense, it is inspired by postmodern theory in that it challenges or “deconstructs” the long-held assumptions and dominant power structures that are easily taken for granted (Stringer 1996, 151; Arevato 2010, 44). Such learning also inspires a strong “action-research” approach where the agenda is set not by prevailing theory but by the context (Arevato 2010, 44). To place such learning in our

NGO scenario described above would require a level of learning and reflection that would revisit the development frames that inspire the NGO itself, not just the school feeding program. Such learning would result in the development of initiatives that grew much more out of grounded theory approach to development, rather than an approach that arrives with a theoretical model already in place. An example of such learning in the context of World Vision would be revisiting the child-centric focus of the development frame and opting for models that view community development in a different light, one that would grow out of listening to the context.

To sum up, organizations can learn, but this learning occurs through the synergistic relationship of the personal sphere, the internal organizational sphere, and the external environmental sphere. The personal sphere provides the spark for organization learning; this spark is ignited through a spirit of inquiry and a commitment to discover a collective solution to a pressing issue in the external environment. The organizational sphere provides the responsive social and collective context—the culture—necessary for organizational learning to blossom. Critical to this organizational context is the developing of a favorable learning culture that is supported by helpful learning structures; central to these are learning mechanisms that foster development of personal competencies in a supportive and trusting environment.

Visionary and learning-committed leaders instill a team dynamic to bring the culture and structures to life. Sensitivity and alignment to the external context is the third sphere that impacts learning. The greater the complexity and pace of change in the external context, the greater the challenge and importance of shaping an organizational culture and structure that is adapted and responsive to a changing environment. Creating such a learning culture in the NGO context is a daunting challenge, but attainable. How to overcome the hurdles and learning “disabilities” that keep this from happening is the next inquiry.

B. Overcoming learning disabilities in NGOs

1. Introduction

It is critical for NGOs to establish a learning posture and commitment. Edwards (1997) provides a sweeping overview of the integral role that learning must play in the life of the NGO: Learning about NGO work on the ground is essential to identify what works and what does not, more or less, cost-effectively: Learning about the impact of wider forces (such as macro-economic policy) is crucial if NGOs are to advocate for change successfully at national and

international levels; learning is the foundation for accountability, dissemination and influence, all things that are increasingly important for NGOs as they move away from a reliance on small – scale project intervention and engage in the broader process of development; learning about changes in the external environment... is necessary if NGOs are to anticipate threats and opportunities, and prepare for them; learning is a key component of staff development and effectiveness; and learning from the ideas and experiences of others is vital if NGOs are to keep themselves alive to innovation and challenge (1997, 236)

Edwards here echoes many of the essential commitments that were identified in the previous section. In identifying the many challenges that NGOs face, Edwards ups the ante for NGOs to learn and move beyond business as usual. Before considering in more detail what might hinder such growth it is helpful to consider a set of factors that predispose the NGO to learning—NGO learning resources.

2. NGO learning resources

The following description of NGO learning resources applies specifically to Christian NGOs, although many of the applications are pertinent to secular NGOs as well.

a. A mission-driven ethos

Gill Robinson Hickman (2004) describes the nonprofit sector, of which NGOs are apart, in the following way:

There is a promising group of organizations that view their institutions as “contexts” for capacity building and contributors to the common good. Such organizations focus on human purposes and values as the driving force of the institution so that gains in economic resources become instruments for concerted human activity in the organization and society. (161)

The description, “contexts for capacity building and contributors to the common good” sets NGOs apart from the broader corporate world that tends to prioritize profits as the bottom line. The focus on capacity building and contributing to the common good more naturally creates a stronger learning posture than focusing on profits.

Christian NGOs further enrich the mission-driven ethos, adding to the development vision a compelling vision of holistic social and spiritual development, and integrating that vision into a

broader “divine” purpose of which they are part (James 2009, 14). In the context of World Vision, that vision is “life in all its fullness,” focusing specifically on the child wellbeing. They further, at least ideally, can anchor their mission in a sense of spiritual calling and agency that lifts them above the mundane values of personal gain, security, and/or career advancement.³⁶ Such a sense of higher calling can be identified in the history and commitment of World Vision Burundi:

Notwithstanding the fragile status and its turbulent context, World Vision chose to be among agencies at the forefront who wished to see change and hope amid the chaotic recovery. The ministry in Burundi was considered *as a call as well as an effort* to play a part in the peaceful reconstruction of the country and community fabric so that children may have abundant lives. (Heliso 2010a, emphasis mine)

b. A values-laden organization

NGOs, furthermore, are values-driven organizations. Here, as well, Christian NGOs can draw from a rich well of inspirational values. Those that inspire Tear Fund, a UK based Christian NGO offer a striking example: “compassion, justice, character, cultural sensitivity, cultural transformation, accountability, leadership, empowerment for service, participations, sustainability and integration” (James 2009, 14). Although these values are perhaps not measurably different from those that inspire secular NGOs, the spiritual dimension and the sense of calling and duty further enrich and anchor these values in more solid ground. To illustrate this, James (2009) refers to a group of nuns who worked in Soweto: “They displayed extraordinary long-term commitment... they expected testing and suffering and accept difficulties with humour. They were in a different league than were career-oriented NGO workers” (14). There was evidence of these deeper values in some of World Vision Burundi staff as well. Several key leaders had turned down opportunities for career advancement, faced times of prolonged separation from their families, and demonstrated unusual grace to difficult colleagues—all this to be involved in something that was of great value to them.

At another very practical level, Christian perspectives and values contribute significantly to developing a strong learning culture. For example, the Bible is replete with insight into human

³⁶I am not suggesting here that salary and career advancement are of no importance for Christian NGOs and their staff, but simply that there are, at least in theory, another set of values that transcends these and keeps them in perspective.

relationships and provides clear guidelines on how to deal with conflict, how to confront those whose behaviour is destructive for the group, how to lead in such a way that inspires trust and transparency, and how to develop the “soft” skills necessary for building effective teams.

c. “Servant” leadership

The leadership structure and qualities favored in the NGO context also contribute, at least ideally, to creating a stronger learning organization. By their very nature, NGOs encourage a diffuse leadership style, where decisions are more favorably made within a collegial or a group context. NGO leaders, for example, must find ways to exercise influence and make decisions within a complex governance structure with multiple stakeholders. Collins (2005) calls this the “legislative” leadership skill, where leadership “relies more upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interest to create the conditions for the right decision to happen” (11; see also Edwards and Fowler 2002, 6). Such a leadership ethos is more inclined to favor learning than the more “executive” leadership ethos common in the corporate world.

NGO leaders lead mission-driven organizations that are values-based. These values further create an environment for leadership that favour development of a learning culture. Conceivably, as NGOs attract mission-driven personnel, the leadership has human resources with which to build a highly motivated team. And when the leadership team is motivated by reaching their mission more effectively, rather than career advancement or remuneration, learning becomes more easily a priority. I experienced this first hand in my work with the senior management team in Burundi. There was strong uniting mission that inspired the director and the members of the team. There was also a palpable sense of inquiry and desire to improve effectiveness through learning.

Here, as well, Christian NGOs can draw on some unique resources. The Bible, for example, provides a unique template for leadership that values the development of a strong team and of investing in building human capacity. Jesus’ leadership relationship with his disciples is the penultimate example of such “servant” leadership.

d. “Higher” learning

Christian resources and perspectives further encourage the higher “double loop” and triple-loop learning identified above as valuable to organizational health (Argyris and Schon). Argyris

and Schon (1993) identify the defensive mechanisms that undermine trust and discourage learning, but survive with difficulty in light of the biblical encouragement to “let nothing be done out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (Philippians 2.3). The fear of confronting destructive behaviour with the truth is countered by the challenge to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4.15). The “soft” skills that enable an organization to create a non-threatening and affirming team environment find rich support in the Christian tradition (e.g., 1 Corinthians 13). The Bible also provides encouragement for “transformative learning.” Jesus radically challenged the deeply-held assumptions of his day. For example, the “conventional wisdom” of the day attributed God’s blessing to material wealth. Jesus, in stark contrast, lamented that it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Luke 18.25).

But this may remain in the realm of the ideal. There was evidence of some healthy internal and relational dynamics in World Vision Burundi that could be attributed to “learning” that is nurtured by these biblical principles. The director also embodies a strong learning commitment and questions the status quo. This is seen particularly in his commitment to lead the organization through a process of change management (Heliso 2010a). At the same time, however, “learning” that would question the aid delivery paradigm and delivery mechanisms was not on the radar screen.

To sum up, NGOs in general and Christian NGOs in particular are well-positioned to become strong learning organizations. They are mission and values-driven organizations and as such favour an organizational environment that is conducive to learning. The type of diffuse leadership that is effective in the NGO context should also contribute to learning. Furthermore, the complex context in which NGOs work can only be carefully navigated with a careful learning compass. The Christian NGO brings a further set of resources that encourage higher levels of learning. The Christian/biblical perspective brings clear focus and motivation for learning to serve the most needy and vulnerable people. The prophetic model of challenging unjust structures and leaders also motivates strong advocacy and intervention even at the macro level. Organizational learning is also made richer through tapping into the deep biblical insights into building healthy and mission-focused groups. But favorable conditions, rich traditions and pressing needs do not always translate into the right response. Other variables that hinder learning can actually trump those that favor it, as will be seen shortly.

3. Avoiding the learning pitfalls

The portrait painted above of the NGO that is positioned and resourced to become a strong learning organization remains the ideal. But being well-positioned to learn, adapt, and grow does not mean that it necessarily happens. This is true for Christian NGOs as well. There is nothing “automatic” about Christian NGOs that makes them strong learning organizations. The resources at their disposal must be accessed and integrated into the organizational life and culture. There must also be a commitment to avoid the following all-too-common pitfalls.

a. An activist culture

Edwards (1997) says it succinctly: “Activist cultures see learning as a luxury” (238; Taylor 2002, 352). This activism is often written into the DNA of the NGO, as they were often birthed in the context of an overwhelming need that required an immediate response. Learning tends to be far down the scale of priorities when urgent humanitarian intervention is needed.³⁷ But the activist DNA that undervalues learning can linger into the development stage as well. Fowler (2000) describes further how activist culture has undermined the priority of learning: “Belief is accepted as sufficient foundation for action, with knowledge generation as a plus” (135).

As long as such knowledge generation is considered a plus or a secondary priority, it will not generate the funds or the energy required to make it a key element of organizational culture. Furthermore, learning in the NGO context is most often relegated to overheads and is not factored into project or program budgeting. With the ubiquitous pressure to keep overheads low (Smillie 1995, 151), it is no wonder that it is the easiest budget line to cut. Fowler (2000) concludes: “So there is chronic under-investment in learning systems and processes” (136). World Vision Burundi is not immune to this pressure: With cuts in funding following the global economic downturn, the human resource development budget was drastically cut in 2010.

b. A complicated political economy

A further factor that inhibits learning, not unrelated to the above, is the complicated political economy of the NGO world. NGOs must become adept at an interesting multi-partner dance with a varied set of stakeholders. Ideally, the “beneficiary” or the “customer” should be the

³⁷It is fair to say that even at the level of humanitarian intervention, a wealth of learning has gone into creating best practices and protocols that govern such intervention today.

primary stakeholder, and the needs of this community and its long term sustainable development should be the primary driver. But decisions in the NGO community must weigh the expectations of multiple stakeholders, and often the expectations of the donor trump the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries. Donors expect, for example, proof of tangible “success.” Smillie (1995) describes this complicated relationship that NGOs must navigate with donors: “If income is to be maintained, success stories are essential. These are often exaggerated, while failures are downplayed or camouflaged. Open evaluation, a perilous business, is therefore avoided as much as possible” (158). The negative impact of this relationship on learning is that errors and even failure are not “embraced as potential sources of learning” (Fowler 2000, 136). Fowler goes further in describing of how this political economy can undermine learning:

There is a loose coupling between the performance of aid and the amount of money allocated to it such that there is more incentive to prepare for the next allocation than to look critically and learn from the past expenditure. This generates a culture that does not make learning a central task (136).

Here, as mentioned above, Christian NGOs face an even more formidable challenge. In the case of World Vision, their primary donor community is the individual donor moved by the particular needs of a given child. Bringing this community to an appreciation of the need for strategic-level intervention at a policy or governance level would be no mean task. This may explain to a large extent why few Christian NGOs, World Vision included, ever move beyond the service delivery paradigm: their donor community would quite simply not fund it -- unless, of course, development education could bring awareness to the donor community of the value of more strategic “third generation” intervention.

But this is a vicious circle. To launch and fund an education campaign would draw funds from other priorities, and would most likely be ineffective in the short run (or even in the long run) at generating new funds; in may in fact have the opposite effect. Smillie’s (1995) assessment continues to ring true: “development education is a virtual non-starter” (140). The failure to prioritize development education in World Vision is further reflected in the recent decision by World Vision international to stop publication of the journal, *Global Future*.³⁸ This excellent educational tool was one of the budget lines to be cut during the financial downturn.

³⁸ Although not a peer-reviewed journal, it does address significant development issues from a more scholarly perspective.

These constraints of the NGO political economy are a significant hindrance to learning that could result in any significant changes in NGO priorities.

The political economy in the NGO world is also fraught with funding insecurity. An example of this is the pressure from the funding community to keep overheads low; low overheads are seen as the sign of an effective and efficient NGO (Smillie 1995, 151). But this valuing of low overheads undermines the ability of NGOs to prioritize strategic investments, one of the most important being learning and HR development.³⁹

The reality of budget constraints undermines learning at other levels as well. Funding insecurity creates a short-term, project-focused organizational culture. Those who work on these projects often function on insecure short term contracts. When staff lives on the edge of uncertainty as to their future, the learning atmosphere becomes tense and trust is undermined—key building blocks of an effective learning culture.⁴⁰ But this financial insecurity touches other levels of the staff as well, and (constant) efforts at fund raising and crafting effective project proposals can often sap all the energy of an NGO, leaving little room for reflection and learning.⁴¹

c. Centralization of authority

Northern NGOs for the most part operate within a strongly centralized governance structure. This is the case for World Relief and Samaritan's Purse, as well as a number of European NGOs such as Action contre la faim and COOPI. Such a governance structure centralizes decision making and removes responsibility from local stakeholders within the organization. This was

³⁹The constraint of low overhead is felt acutely at an administrative level in many NGOs. One friend of mine, who heads a small international denominationally-based Christian NGO, struggles with administering a multi-million-dollar budget with a shoe string staff (only two other staff). He even has to raise his own support so that the all the funds can be channeled into overseas projects. His experience is not unique in the Christian NGO world. My own experience confirms this. I am on a board of a small NGO with an operating budget of 2.5 million. We only recently began to charge a 10% assessment on funds given. Prior to implementing this (meager) assessment structure, we "survived" on major volunteer time investment and struggled to keep afloat administratively. But passing the assessment policy was difficult, to say the least.

⁴⁰This insecurity and frustration was palpable in some of the interviews I had with field staff in World Vision Burundi. Their one-year renewable contracts were a continuous source of frustration. Nor did these technicians know if the end of one particular project (the next month) marked the end of the job with World Vision Burundi.

⁴¹I experienced this first hand in a recent interview with the harried director of an International NGO in the Central African Republic. I presented to him the value of an organizational audit through the lens of learning; his curt response was that if he did not secure funding for a number of pressing projects there would be no funding for anything, and that funding for learning was the least of his priorities.

experienced firsthand in my attempts to find an organization willing to be studied. Two organizations accepted my request at the country level, only to have it vetoed at the international level. This problem is not limited to Christian NGOs. The failure to devolve authority to local decision makers undermines the ability of those closest to the need to make decisions, and to facilitate contextualized learning initiatives. In this sense, World Vision has made great strides in the devolution of authority to the country offices; such devolution placed in the hands of country director the power to facilitate my study without needing higher approval.

d. Business as usual

The shifting context in which the NGO finds itself can also stifle learning or overwhelm the (weak) learning structures that are in place. M. Edwards (2009) also identifies regression to a more ill-adapted organizational form as a possible response to what he calls a “turbulent” external environment (195). It is relatively easy for learning to become atrophied in an NGO, and have it fail to move forward into the next stage or “generation” of involvement (Korten 1987, 149). Korten foresaw in 1987 the need for the NGO to move into the “third” generation of involvement where it would “find itself working in a catalytic, foundation-like role rather than an operational service delivery role” (149). But this has not happened, and for the most part NGOs continue to function in an operational service-delivery role.

This is true for organizations such as World Vision. Even though it weaves the priority of advocacy, partnership, and collaboration throughout its documentation, it remains firmly entrenched in the direct service delivery paradigm. The complexity of this “next generation” role, and the learning that will be needed to undergird it, may in fact be too far outside the box of NGOs still preoccupied with service delivery. Single-loop learning that helps the NGO perform “business as usual” is easier to prioritize and manage than the “triple-loop” learning that would challenge the status quo and propel the organization in more strategic areas of development.

To sum up, NGOs are beset with a number of learning disabilities that are difficult to overcome. The first is their activism; it is difficult to increase the priority of learning and reflection (and the requisite budget) when surrounded by overwhelming needs. A second disability is tied to the political economy of the NGO world, one riddled with competing expectations and financial limitations. The weight of donor expectations, for example, can easily trump learning from and adapting to the needs of the beneficiaries. Financial constraints, in

general, often undermine the priority of learning, placing the NGO members under constant pressure to prove that outputs justify inputs. A final factor that can undermine learning is the governance structure of many Northern NGOs that centralize decisions making in international offices distant from the needs of the national organization.

C. Getting it right: inspiration from BRAC, a strong learning NGO

The above sections have outlined the qualities of a learning organization and have applied the model broadly to the NGO context. Providing an overview of a successful learning NGO will help pull together a practical working model for helping NGOs to become stronger learning organizations.

1. BRAC: an overview

BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities, but initially, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) is the world's largest and arguably most successful NGO. Smillie (2009) in his inspirational overview of BRAC provides a glimpse into the remarkable impact of this organization:

It has breached the borders of development orthodoxy, discovering the fallacies in standard approaches to community development and demonstrating that poverty can be pushed back dramatically if it is tackled directly. It has shown that poor, even completely destitute, women... can learn, earn, and lead. It has shown that enterprise, sound business principles, and the market can be powerful allies in the fight against poverty (1).

What is perhaps most remarkable about BRAC is the scope of its impact:

Four million children, 70 percent of them girls, have graduated from BRAC's 68,000 primary schools. Millions benefit from the work of BRAC's health centres... and the 70,000 community health volunteers who have joined the effort. BRAC's microfinance operation loaned more than \$1 Billion US in 2008, achieving a repayment rate of more than 95%... BRAC has demonstrated that opportunities for meaningful enterprise do exist in villages (Smillie 2009, 2)

Indeed, much more could be said about their research into the high yielding varieties of chickens, their dairy sector that processes more than 90,000 litres of milk a day, their silk

industry, their printing presses, and the fact that 80% its income of \$495 million in 2006 (not counting micro-finance) was self-generated (Smillie 2009, 3). What concerns this discussion, however, is the ways that BRAC has prioritized learning and the influence this priority has had on its remarkable success. The above discussion identifies the qualities of a strong learning organization. In BRAC these qualities are exemplified.

2. BRAC—a dynamic learning organization

The above research identified three critical spheres that serve to invigorate and inspire a learning organization: the personal sphere, the organizational culture sphere, and the contextual sphere. These dynamics are clearly present in BRAC.

a. The personal sphere

Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder of BRAC, as well as his close associates, were avid learners. They discovered in their challenge to address the overwhelming needs for development in the wake of a devastating cyclone in 1974 that they needed a much deeper and clearer understanding of “how things actually were on the ground” (Smillie 2009, 38). So began their commitment to learning through careful research, through listening to village voices, and through an “adaptive approach to development” (38). This listening quality shines in the BRAC leadership. They were (are) learners whose vision was deeper than meeting primary needs; their commitment was to help the poor understand “why they were poor, isolated and disenfranchised” (Smillie 2009, 218). Their ideas were inspired by authors such as Paulo Freire and Frantz Fanon, yet they were not captive to any particular ideology. They were committed to improving the situation for the poor through both their psychological and their material liberation (154). BRAC’s leadership fit well Senge’s (1990) description of “learning organization leaders” who view themselves as “responsible for learning” (340).

b. The organizational culture sphere

In strong learning organizations the learning culture, as noted above, must be shaped by appropriate structures and learning mechanisms. These are part and parcel of the fabric of BRAC and its work, and are made possible by a budget commitment to allocate 7% of the salary budget to staff development (Smillie 2009, 188). Furthermore, training centers are ubiquitous and

training modules are a constant. This is seen in BRAC's relatively new work in Uganda. The 50-bed training facility in Kampala is fully booked, serving their 1,800 staff who work in more than 20 projects (Smillie 2010).

The emphasis on training was both internal and external. There was a foundational commitment to training of the villagers and a constant commitment to training of staff. The leaders believed firmly that if "programs were to succeed, it had to invest heavily in training as well as research and evaluation" (Smillie 2009, 231). The organizational culture is shaped by its commitment to providing learning opportunities both to its staff and to those they serve.

c. The contextual sphere

Commitment to learning from the context and adapting aid creatively to the context is the most remarkable trait of BRAC. Its learning is very much "action research." It holds strongly to the central tenet of action research that "those who had previously been designated as 'subjects' should participate directly in research processes and that those processes should be applied in ways that benefit all participants directly" (Stringer 1996, 7). Such a commitment to aligning everything to the context led to rethinking and recasting aid in the mold of enterprise, encouraging self-reliance and breaking unhealthy dependency.

3. BRAC's commitment to learning at every level

Identified above are the different levels of learning that are key to creating a strong learning culture in an NGO. What is striking about BRAC is its effectiveness at each level of learning. At the lower "skills" level, "doing things right", BRAC has developed a set of practical skills that have been proven so effective that they have been co-opted by other NGOs and government organizations (GOs). Almost single-handedly, BRAC has been responsible for seeing rates of TB drop by 50% in many regions of Bangladesh; and its program is "being replicated in two-thirds of the sub-districts of the country in collaboration with the government" (Choudhuiry and Bhuyia 2004).

Encouraging higher levels of learning is important for BRAC. In terms of double-loop, generative learning, BRAC is on the front lines. It has proven itself adept at willingly questioning long-held assumptions (Garavan 1997, 23). It is much more concerned with "doing the right thing" and finding practical ways to create sustainable change in communities. And for

BRAC, sustainability is more than a buzz-word. Part of its ethos is to think about development in much broader terms than service provision; it is committed to fostering economic development that will provide livelihoods and economic sustainability, evidenced in the commitment to implement initiatives that can be taken to scale, creating a critical mass, overcoming underdevelopment inertia. This critical mass is also a critical “mix” of “education, health and enterprise” (Smillie 2009, 257).

BRAC takes learning even to the third loop. It has a different “frame” than the average development NGO. It is willing to move, for example, into the realm of “for profit” if it means creating “social” enterprises where profits can be channeled back into the organization and where stakeholders benefit more than shareholders (Smillie 2009, 250). It is working with a new paradigm and seems to have embraced the third-generation role that Korten (1987) has outlined. This is seen in the fact the organization has become a catalyst and resource for change that reaches far beyond the borders of Bangladesh.⁴² The commitment to sending its best people for PhD studies, and of forming its own university also speaks volumes to the value placed on higher levels of learning.

4. BRAC, avoiding learning pitfalls

Similar to other NGOs, BRAC is an activist organization. But this activism was tempered from the very start by a series of failures and impasses that necessitated a stronger research focus and a more concerted commitment to understanding deeper issues that contributed to underdevelopment. This enabled BRAC to prioritize learning at the same level as acting.

Another advantage that BRAC has over most NGOs is that it functions within a different political economy, and in many ways a different paradigm. The main difference in the political economy is BRAC’s dogged commitment to structure its programs according to the needs in the context, not according to donor and funding expectations. As a Bangladeshi-based NGO, it has a measure of freedom in this regard that Northern NGOs would not enjoy. Smillie (2010) commented that many of BRAC’s initiatives would have had funding cut before they reached any kind of success, had they been considered by CIDA. Through a series of choices and a different model for development, BRAC has freed itself from many of the constraints that come with dependence on outside funding. This freedom has enabled it to be more concertedly

⁴²BRAC is the largest NGO in Afghanistan and is already one of the largest, if not the largest, in Uganda.

committed to the grassroots needs of those served.⁴³ It also has enabled them to learn from failures without needing to gloss over them to secure ongoing funding.

The final learning pitfall that has plagued NGOs has also been avoided for the most part by BRAC. The organization was birthed in a very complex environment where overwhelming needs, political conflict and government failure were the order of the day. They honed their priorities in such an environment and saw the complexity of the problems and the situations as a challenge to overcome. It could not import solutions to the problems; they had to be homegrown. This priority fueled the strong learning focus that characterizes the organization.⁴⁴ And now BRAC takes its expertise to the world: It has a solid understanding of what creates and nurtures poverty and what is needed to change the status quo. It experiments, it listens, and it goes straight to those it wants to work with. It innovates, and it learns (Smillie 2009, 244).

To sum up, BRAC provides a striking example of a strong learning NGO. The dynamics that create a strong learning organization are clearly in place: Gifted and visionary leaders model and prioritize research and inquiry; the organizational culture is structured at every level to foster and prioritize learning; and everything is designed with a view to creative adaptation to the context. Furthermore, BRAC and its leadership are concerned with pushing the boundaries of learning. It is now spreading its impact around the world.

II. An NGO learning model

A. Introduction:

The previous discussion provided a sweeping overview of the dynamics of a strong learning organization. Three dynamic spheres overlap and create the needed synergy for learning that can result in transformation: the personal sphere, commitment on the part of the leadership to prioritize research and inquiry; the organizational culture sphere, the integration of learning mechanisms and structures that facilitate learning and research; and the contextual sphere, the commitment to align programs and projects to the needs of the context. These are the dynamic ingredients that contribute to forming a strong learning organization.

⁴³Interestingly and significantly, they are NOT called within BRAC circles “beneficiaries”; they want to nip any dependency notions of development in the bud.

⁴⁴Smillie notes (2010) that other NGOs were birthed in a similar context of necessity, such as CARE, World Vision and Plan International. Such necessity did not foster a similar commitment to learning in these organizations.

The following model identifies five learning domains and proposes a workable template both to evaluate and to integrate learning into the fabric of the organization. The learning dynamics identified above breathe life into this model. Each learning domain identified below remains academic or static without the being invigorated by the above learning dynamics. This will be highlighted throughout the discussion.

The NGO leverage-learning model

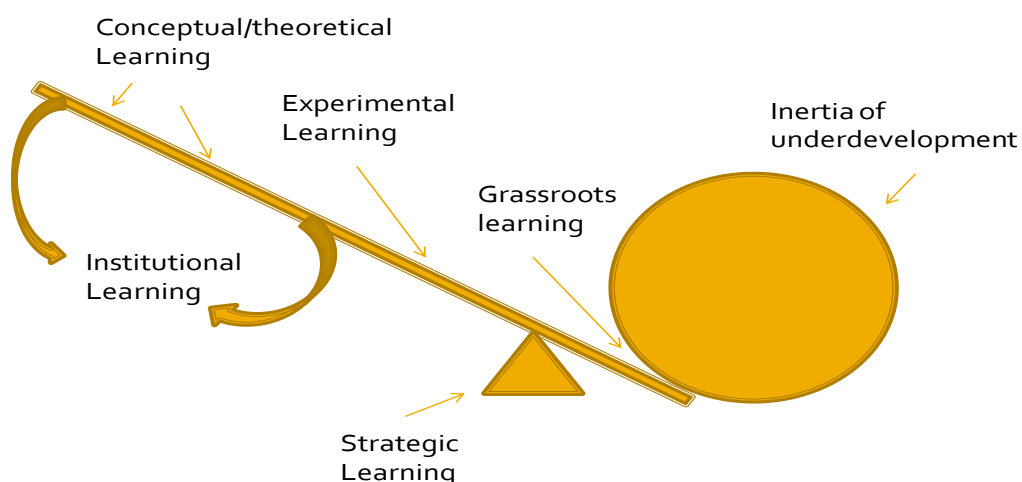


Figure 5: NGO leverage-learning model (author's presentation)

B. Presentation of the model

The focus and ultimate goal of the development NGO is to overcome the inertia of underdevelopment. The idea of “inertia” comes from physics, and refers to the mass of a body, and its “resistance to being accelerated” (Wikipedia). It was established in a previous chapter just how significant the mass of the inertia of underdevelopment is in SSA. NGOs view this inertia, and their particular role in overcoming it, somewhat differently.⁴⁵ The above model illustrates that the best way to overcoming inertia is through careful leveraging, and that a commitment to

⁴⁵There is also significant debate about how effective the development industry has been in overcoming this inertia in any significant way. Some analysts suggest that 60% of such aid is largely ineffective (Fowler 2002, 295).

learning at each critical dimension of the organization life and practice is the key to overcoming the inertia of underdevelopment.

The illustration is incomplete, however. The reality is that no single NGO is able to overcome the inertia of underdevelopment. Overcoming underdevelopment inertia requires a multitude of strategically placed levers of NGOs, GOs, businesses and civil society organizations; only these joint efforts will be sufficient to overcome the inertia, to metaphorically get the development “ball” rolling, and to keep it rolling. According to the model, once the development ball is rolling, development becomes “sustainable” and no longer dependent on massive outside leverage. This theory also points to the reality that it will take more effort to get the ball rolling than to keep it rolling.⁴⁶

Before delving more into each learning domain, the overall model merits more clarification. The pole must be strategically placed under the inertia of underdevelopment, indicating that the NGO must address a particular need or symptom of this inertia. In other words, there has to be a plan to address a specific need. But this placement is only the beginning. The pole requires length in order to apply effective leverage. Grassroots and experimental learning contribute critical knowledge and insight into the needs of the beneficiaries, and into the best ways to meet those needs; these dimensions provide a certain length to the pole, and a measure of leverage. But theoretical/cognitive learning provides that extra length that multiplies leverage; such reflective thinking enables wisdom to be distilled from knowledge gathered through experimentation (Fowler 2000, 138). Strategic learning is similar to theoretical learning, but touches on the collaborative nature of learning. It was noted above that no one organization is able to overcome the inertia of underdevelopment. When an organization prioritizes strategic learning it is careful to insure that its contribution fits into the bigger picture (it is coincidental in the model that the fulcrum is placed under the grassroots section). Finally, “institutional” learning in the model refers to learning that enables effective internal functioning of the organization. Such learning strengthens the pole and helps it “deliver” under pressure. Without strong institutional learning in an NGO, it will quite simply break under the strain of trying to overcome underdevelopment inertia.

⁴⁶At the same time, it is unrealistic and naïve to assume that “sustainable” development will be free from all inputs and totally self-sufficient. Nor is this an ideal to be reached for. Smillie (2010) argues that ongoing inputs into certain programs are justifiable in that these programs may provide a public good that is worth ongoing subsidies, such as public transit.

C. The five learning domains

1. Grassroots learning

a. Introduction

This learning domain refers to learning that comes from careful observation, data gathering, listening to local stakeholders, and interpreting the context. Effective grassroots learning requires, for example, strong participatory approaches and a careful ethnographic stance (Chambers 2008). To be a strong grassroots learning organization also requires a commitment to “contextualizing” development practices to the local context, and not an uncritical importing of initiatives from other contexts. According to the model, grassroots learning happens at the interface with the development context.

b. Overview

With grassroots learning, the organization commits itself to listening to and learning from its primary stakeholders, the local people who daily face the grinding effects of poverty. They, after all, are the “poverty experts” (Narayan and Petesch 2002, 2). The World Bank-funded study, *Voices of the Poor*, is a striking example of grassroots learning. It is built on this fundamental premise that “a policy document on poverty strategies for the twenty-first century must be based on the experiences, priorities, reflections, and recommendations of poor children, women, and men” (in Narayan and Petesch 2002, 2). This study, which mobilized hundreds of researchers across dozens of countries, employed the best tools of “participatory research” such as open-ended interviews, interactive activities, and small group discussions. They were also careful to interview a cross-section of the population and to involve them in identifying problems, collecting and analyzing data, and deciding on follow-up action (Narayan and Petesch 2002, 3).

Robert Chambers (2008) has been at the forefront of proposing and perfecting “participatory” strategies. The foundational approach, honed in the rural context in the 70s, was called Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). This would later be called Participative Rural Appraisal and then finally expand beyond the rural focus and be called “Participatory Learning and Action” (PLA) (2008, 86). In each of these approaches it is the local people who, organized into small groups, “map, diagram, observe, analyze and act” (86). Chambers identifies the main components of this approach, which reveal the genius of effective grassroots learning. The first foundational component is the requisite attitudes and behaviors that serve as the “precepts for action” (97).

These attitudes and behaviors flow from the paradigmatic question, “whose reality counts?” (see Table 1 for Chambers’ overview of the these requisite attitudes and behaviors). This question “forces reflection on how powerful outsiders tend to impose their realities on local people” (98).

Out of this listening and receptive paradigm comes a set of methods that are interactive, visual, and contextually appropriate. They employ local materials to make maps and diagrams that represent the many dimensions of their “communities, lives and environments” (87). These methods stand in stark contrast to the verbal methods that characterize most analytical approaches. Chambers maintains that these methods serve to “reverse power relations and empower lowers” (99). The final principle component of this Participatory Learning and Action approach is called “sharing” (101). This principle encourages the input of all stakeholders and invites participation across gender and social lines. In recent years this idea of sharing reflects the openness to other theoretical frameworks and approaches. Chambers sees this approach as representative of (an important) paradigmatic shift “from top-down to bottom-up, from standard to diverse, from control to empowerment” (102).

Table 1
Behavioral Precepts of Participatory Learning and Action (Chambers 2008, 98)

Box 5.1 Behavioural precepts of PRA	
Precept	indicating
Introduce yourself	be honest, transparent, relate as a person
They can do it	have confidence in people’s abilities
Unlearn	critically reflect on how you see things
Ask them	ask people their realities, priorities, advice...
Don’t rush	be patient, take time
Sit down, listen and learn	don’t dominate
Facilitate	don’t lecture, criticize or teach
Embrace error	learn from what goes wrong or does not work
Hand over the stick	or chalk or pen, anything that empowers
Use your own best judgement at all times	take responsibility for what you do
Shut up!	keep quiet. Welcome and tolerate silence

The value of this participatory approach to learning is further highlighted in Stringer's (1996) discussion of community-based action research:

To the extent that people can participate in the process of exploring the nature and context of the problems that concern them, they have opportunity to develop immediate and deeply relevant understandings of their situation and to be involved actively in the process of dealing with those problems (32).

This commitment is more than an effective tool in discovering the needs of the poor; it can also contribute to reversing the all-too-common power-dynamics that remove from the hands of the poor the dignity to shape their future (and their present). Springer (1998) provides a very helpful list of “working principles” that undergird community-based action research (38). His observations resonate deeply with Chambers and demonstrate the critical value of prioritizing responsibility and accountability.

This view of accountability is the make or break paradigm when it comes to grassroots learning. Kilby (2006) provides a helpful definition of accountability: “Accountability then is about power, authority, and ownership—and defines the relationship between actors through indentifying who can call whom to account, and who owes a duty of explanation and rectification...” (953). Kilby presents a probing analysis of the general failure of NGOs to prioritize and formalize such accountability. He concurs with Mulgan (in Kilby 2006) that most NGO accountability to their beneficiaries is “discretionary and little more than ‘grace or favor’” (952). Kilby concludes that such informal accountability is insufficient in “empowering” the constituency; in fact, this lack of formal accountability and mechanisms to ensure it can lead to increasing dependency (960). Within the NGO community there is a pressing need for new accountability priorities and mechanisms that will ensure that the constituency “can engage more fully in the development processes that affect them” (Kilby 2006, 961).

c. BRAC as a model

BRAC provides a remarkable example of an NGO committed to such grassroots, participatory learning.⁴⁷ Its dogged commitment to understanding the context and the causes of poverty and underdevelopment was the driving priority. One of the conclusions that grew

⁴⁷Interestingly, many of Chamber's ideas were honed through his observations of BRAC in the early 1980s (Smillie 2009, 4).

directly out of careful listening to the voices of the poor was the need to focus on economic development activities for rural poor women (Smillie 2009, 58). This would become the trademark focus. BRAC also discovered, similar to the World Bank study, the non-negotiable need for engaging the poor in the process from the ground up (Narayan and Patesch 2002, 66). BRAC would find through its grassroots research, for example, that micro-credit was only an initial step; a fuller answer to lifting the poor out of poverty was to be found beyond micro-credit in the development of productive enterprises (89). This decision to reach beyond the normal paradigm for NGO involvement in local communities grew directly out of the commitment to understand local dynamics, to learn, and to reach further. In essence, BRAC saw itself as fundamentally accountable to the ultimate stakeholder, the poor of Bangladesh.

d. Learning dynamics and grassroots learning

The above discussion of grassroots learning alludes to the critical role of learning dynamics. The contextual dynamic, the commitment to align the development initiative with the actual needs of the community is non-negotiable and provides the starting point for grassroots learning. The personal dynamic contributes to the spirit of inquiry that is necessary for effective grassroots learning. The organizational culture dynamic is also critical—does the organization provide the necessary funding, time, and research to undertake the process of careful grassroots learning research? Are those engaged in the process trained in doing action research and in crafting participatory approaches to implicating the local stakeholders in the process? Without a supportive organizational culture, place grassroots learning will be largely ineffective.

2. Experimental Learning

a. Introduction

The focus of experimentation is the flip-side of grassroots learning. A given practice aimed at addressing a development need requires a monitoring structure to measure the effectiveness of this initiative and modify it accordingly. But an organization with a strong experimental learning stance has more than a careful monitoring process; it also is committed to honestly facing failure and learning from it. Furthermore, similar to the above discussion of grassroots learning, it does not uncritically import outside initiatives; it is committed to adjusting them after experimental evaluation, or to integrating entirely an entirely different initiative. This commitment to

experimentation lengthens the pole and provides more leverage for the task of overcoming underdevelopment inertia.

b. Overview

The link between grassroots learning and experimental learning is readily identifiable, and the principles and fundamental components needed for effective grassroots learning apply equally to the experimental domain of learning. If grassroots learning enables the NGO to gather information and invaluable data about the needs and priorities of a given population, experimental learning works with that data and aims to transform it into knowledge that can be translated into a workable plan (Edwards 1997, 237). But that knowledge itself is plastic and malleable, and experimentation serves to discover the most appropriate form for the knowledge. Edwards (1997), citing Schon, goes so far as to say that this is the essence of NGO learning: reflection in action or learning by doing (237). Edwards further maintains that if such learning is missing, “then the other layers of learning will be defective as well” (243).

This experimentation stance is doubly critical in the development context, for no two contexts are the same, and naively importing a project or program lock, stock and barrel, will most likely be inappropriate. Smillie (2009) calls this “rote learning” and concludes that if it fails in schools, it will fail “just as badly in the world of development assistance” (66). But such practices are commonplace in organizations that have developed and embraced certain models of development that have worked elsewhere.

Such experimental learning requires a commitment to test ideas and a willingness to accommodate mistakes and even failure. Learning from failure, Edwards (1997) maintains, is “essential if the same problems are going to be avoided in the future” (238). The feedback from experimental learning must therefore permeate the system and be a catalyst for change. The discoveries of experimental learning must be minted into “coinage” that can be useful for further planning and project implementation. Such lessons provide learning capital that must be transformed into wise policy and improved practice.

Such “knowledge management” is a critical component of the learning culture in the organization (Wang 2003, 12). Tsang (1997) goes so far as to say that “no learning can take place in an organization unless it possesses a proper memory system” (83). But arriving at accurate learning from experimentation is no mean task: the data can be misinterpreted; the

organization frame of reference can distort the data; and cause and effect are not easily identified, especially in complex socio-cultural systems (78). Nonetheless, a commitment to learning through experimentation is non-negotiable for any learning organization.

Experimentation learning includes both monitoring and evaluation. Both of these processes are difficult in the NGO context. One of the main reasons for this is the difficulty in establishing a bottom-line for measuring effectiveness. In organizations working in complex environments, the bottom line must be linked directly to the “beneficiary” or “customer,” to the impact of a given program on improving particular conditions. But such improvements are very difficult to measure, and the failure to see improvement may in fact be due to other variables beyond the control of the NGO. The tendency then, in monitoring and evaluation, is to measure outputs rather than outcomes. For example, it is easy to measure the number of wells drilled, or the number of children enrolled in school; it is much more difficult to measure the degree of control over decisions, or an improved sense of well-being that comes from greater financial security (Fowler 2002, 298).

Another related challenge identified by Fowler (2002) is that the desired outcomes such as poverty alleviation or sustainable development are ultimately outside the reach of the NGO. These outcomes depend in the final analysis on the local people themselves; the NGO can have no more than a catalytic role (299). Thus measuring performance, relevance or “success” of a given initiative may not be a fair evaluation of the initiative itself. Or if the program “succeeds” it may not be directly linked to the initiative at all; perhaps another totally unrelated variable tipped the scales. These observations do not nullify the importance of experimental learning, monitoring, and evaluating; but they do remind the NGO of the limitations of such evaluation.

c. BRAC as an example

BRAC again provides a remarkable example of experimental learning at its best. Its experimental stance enabled the organization to discover effective methods of income generation that set it apart from others. For example, the development world is littered with failed attempts at income generation. What led to BRAC’s success, according to Smillie’s (2009) analysis, was the combination of technical expertise and an implicit understanding of and commitment to the unique economic and socio-cultural context (91). This commitment to context (grassroots learning) was combined with a dogged determination to experiment until they could find an

approach that would be technically feasible and reproducible without requiring major ongoing inputs. To make this happen, decisions were made early in BRAC's history to build research and evaluation into each of its projects.

Such a strong experimentation and evaluation stance bore fruit. This success story is remarkable: more than 2 million women are now part of BRAC's poultry program; its feed mills (begun to provide feed for chicks) produces nearly 40,000 tons of feed yearly; in 2007 its hatcheries turned out nearly 13 million chicks. This success actually spawned a much larger poultry industry that has swept the country (99). Although this is hardly a model for all NGOs to emulate, especially those who are uncomfortable with the enterprise motif, it does illustrate the power of experimental learning.

d. Learning dynamics and experimental learning

As with grassroots learning, each of the dynamics is important. Effective experimental learning requires a strong personal commitment, particularly on the part of the leadership, to face failures honestly; it also requires a special sensitivity to the context. The organizational culture dynamic is one that is perhaps most often lacking at this stage. Integrating strong and effective monitoring structures requires specific organizational mechanisms. Furthermore, feedback from the monitoring and experimentation must be channeled into redesigning projects and even rethinking policy. A unique organizational challenge is also finding ways to integrate the local stakeholders in the evaluation process, designing feedback tools that are adapted to the milieu, and, in many cases, to the oral learner.

3. Theoretical Learning

a. Introduction

This important learning domain is critical for the bigger learning picture. Good practice is impossible without strong theory/concepts. The leverage learning model demonstrates that a strong theoretical stance adds critical length to the pole and thus increases leverage. Examples of good theoretical learning in an organization would be its commitment to tap into broader research that sheds light on critical development issues. Commitment to theoretical learning is also reflected, for example, in the capacity building of staff and management. Without a commitment to theoretical learning, development NGOs will be unable to sustain and adapt their

development initiatives. Their leverage and effectiveness is directly related to such a learning commitment.

b. Overview

Theoretical learning is perhaps a hard sell in activist organizations such as NGOs. But theory is a critical component of improving policy and practice:

A knowledge of theory is important, however much practitioners may distrust it, because theory is what underlies policy; practical men in authority who believe themselves to be quite exempt from an intellectual influences are usually slaves of some defunct economist, as Keynes reminds us. (Edwards 1997, 244)

A good theory offers sound reasons to support a given assertion or conviction (Osmer 2008, 102). If an NGO makes a decision to pursue a given direction through a set of programs and initiatives, it will require a solid theoretical underpinning to justify it and to enable it to stay the course. In the former discussion of levels of learning, the importance of “double-loop” generative learning was noted. These higher levels of learning are the realm of theory, of “mental models” as Senge (1990) calls them (187). At the theoretical level the question is why, not how. And if that question cannot be answered with clarity, then no direction is sustainable.

For Christian NGOs, one critical dimension of theoretical learning is ensuring that vision, policies, and practices resonate with biblical worldview and values. It was noted in Chapter five 5 that World Vision has been rather selective in its prioritizing of biblical values: it champions the rights and needs of children and the most vulnerable, for example. But it gives little weight to other values that should inspire, for example, courageous advocacy, empowering of adults, and the transforming of structures that perpetuate injustice. I argued in a previous chapter that the theory that undergirds the child-centric development model is not supported biblically. The only possible way for World Vision to rethink its development frame would be to revisit the theory that shapes it through a higher-level, “theoretical” learning commitment. Such a commitment, however, seems unlikely in light of the history and “DNA” of the organization.

Commitment to priorities such as the following would indicate that the organization prioritizes theoretical learning:

- Ensuring that employees understand vision and values;
- Offering regular ongoing training opportunities for staff at all levels;

- Providing higher-level training for upper management;
- Deepening research and understanding of macro and meso socio-economic issues;
- Building institutional memory;
- Shoring-up and prioritizing advocacy.

A few comments on these priorities are in order. Understanding mission and values is an indispensable component of strengthening theoretical learning for the NGO. It was noted in the overview of learning the value of mission-linked learning; the more employees can appreciate and embrace the vision and values of the organization, the richer their motivation for learning and working (Armstrong and Foley 2003, 7). The ongoing training of staff at all levels offers them the opportunity for theoretical reflection on their work and can increase both their competence and work satisfaction. Higher-level training for upper management ensures that learning continues to be prioritized throughout the organization. If the NGO wants to work effectively on more than the symptoms of poverty, it will need to understand the complex root factors that exacerbate the situation; thus the importance of research into macro and meso socio-economic issues. Building institutional memory is the important process of distilling lessons learned and translating them into better policy and practice. If the organization wishes to advocate for the most vulnerable in society, then understanding the scope and depth of these issues is required. One critical area of research for World Vision with its child-centric focus, would be the whole question of “resilience” and the capacity of a child to “disrupt the transmission of poverty” (Boyden and Cooper 2009).

c. BRAC as an example

BRAC provides a remarkable example of an organization committed to theoretical learning. All of the above commitments are front and centre in BRAC’s list of priorities. First of all, they are committed to HR development and facilitate this with a dedicated budget and the building of dozens of training and resource centres (TARC) throughout Bangladesh; they have made TARCs a top priority in their work in Uganda as well. Over 126,000 of their Bangladeshi staff attended courses at one of the TARCs in 2006 (Smillie 2009 189). They also prioritize management training and have consistently encouraged their upper-level staff to pursue higher education. This commitment to theoretical learning is further seen in the fact that they have a “Research and Evaluation Division” (114).

Opening BRAC University in 2001 also speaks volumes to their commitment to sustain their development efforts and enrich their vision through education and theoretical learning. The faculties prioritized on the university campus are those that address the broader development needs of the country, such as the School of Public Health (Smillie 2009, 193)

d. Learning dynamics and theoretical learning

It can be readily seen how each of the three dynamics plays a role in prioritizing theoretical learning. The personal commitment to prioritizing theoretical learning, particularly by the leaders, is essential. They must be well-trained and possess the requisite skills in their areas of responsibility. But their learning posture and commitment to furthering their own education is important for prioritizing learning across the organization. Organizational culture must complement the learning posture of the leadership. Learning mechanisms and structures provide the resources, margin, and opportunities for ongoing training and research. Having an ear to the context and crafting research according to contextual needs is also vital.

4. Strategic learning

a. Introduction

Strategic learning is tied to theoretical learning. The main idea behind strategic learning is that the organization is committed to finding its most effective investment. This requires a strong listening stance and discernment of both the context and the strengths the organization brings to the development challenge. Connected with strategic learning is the commitment to listen to and collaborate with others, for the task is far greater than the resources of any given organization. Without strategic learning, massive efforts can be squandered. This is clearly demonstrated by the model. (To be clear, the placement of the fulcrum under grassroots learning is not significant; the placement of the fulcrum simply illustrates maximum leverage). If the fulcrum is misplaced on the pole—if the organization does not function strategically in cooperation with others according to its strengths—then all the other dimensions of learning are rendered insignificant; no effective leverage can be applied to the inertia.

b. Overview

A number of authors identify the critical importance of strategic learning (Edwards 1997; Korten 1987; Prugamatz 2010; Fowler 2002). This is not surprising in light of the growing complexity of the development context. Edwards and Hulme (2002) describe this priority:

The changing global environment also challenges the NGOs to develop ways of working that are less focused on promoting their own profile and more concerned with building alliances, working with others, and dividing up roles and responsibilities in a cooperative way. (7)

As early as 1987, Korten identified the need for a new generation of NGO involvement and for a whole new set of strategic competencies that would multiply the effectiveness of the NGO's limited resources (155). Ten years later Edwards (1997) echoed the same theme. For example, he notes that the demands of careful advocacy, a strategic competency, require a much more careful and far reaching type of research:

In advocacy work it is particularly important that NGOs learn from sources outside the agency as well as internal contacts and experience, as this helps to challenge what can become too cozy a consensus when judgments are being made about ambiguous information (245)

Prugamatz (2010) demonstrated that learning from other organizations in a meaningful network was one of the most effective ways of sustaining organization learning (251). The greatest encouragement for prioritizing strategic learning, however, is the stark reality that NGO effectiveness will be negligible without it.

Strategic learning that leads to greater effectiveness means different responses for different organizations. As Edwards and Hulme (1992) note, "there is no such thing as an 'optimal' strategy for NGOs, even given similarity in context and background" (211). The first step therefore in finding appropriate leverage is identifying the particular role and strength a given NGO brings to the table, its own core competencies (Bergenhengouwen, ten Horn and Mooijman 1997). Some NGOs, such as World Vision, bring a number of strengths that contribute to exercising greater leverage. The first, of course, is their commitment to the health and well-being of children. It seems self-evident that understanding the challenges and intricacies of the needs of the children in Burundi should be understood broadly and deeply by World Vision. Bringing

awareness of these needs, championing them, mobilizing other partners to address them seems to be a strategic step for World Vision.

Another role and strength of World Vision is its well-developed training modules and resources. Their reputation precedes them. Making their training resources and opportunities available to other NGOs and development practitioners would also be one way of multiplying their effectiveness. This, combined with the international reputation of World Vision, lends itself naturally to a leadership role in partnering with churches and other Christian NGOs. Surprisingly, the Strategic Plan (2010) relegates World Vision to a less influential role in the NGO world: “As tradition, World Vision is more influential at the local, community levels rather than the centre.” This interesting comment explains perhaps the fact that World Vision has not taken a more influential and strategic leadership role.

The second key step for greater strategic learning leverage is identifying the link between local operational work and broader partnership and impact. This is a difficult but critical link for a number of reasons. One is the challenge of securing funding. The donor community for Christian NGOs is motivated by meeting primary needs and operational success. For an NGO to work significantly at an advocacy level, for example, which presupposes a long term horizon, may be a hard sell to donors.⁴⁸ This underlines the importance of linking work at the operational level with work at the systemic level, and of communicating this carefully to the donor community. Another challenge is identifying links between the operational work and the systemic work, and striking the balance between the two: “The balance between participatory, field-based learning and learning which feeds into wider policy and advocacy related work is probably the most difficult for NGOs to strike” (Edwards 1997, 243). Edwards and Hulme (1992) further identify the challenge of integrating different “strategy mixes” into an NGO’s development focus (215). Although the ideal would be that these strategy mixes would be mutually reinforcing, they may generate internal conflict or compromise favored status with government authorities.

A final step for effective strategic learning is the commitment to build the requisite skills to do this well. Korten (1987) refers to the skills needed for a “catalyst” role: “(T)he organization must have experienced professional staff who combine in-depth country knowledge, professional

⁴⁸This may explain the observation in one of my interviews that advocacy, although prioritized on paper for World Vision, is ignored for the most part where the rubber meets the road.

credibility and facilitation skills” (153). Fowler (2002) provides a helpful list of capacities that are essential for different types of leverage:

- Civic-learning about how NGDO actives work their way into and influence the ability of civil society to interact with government and market;
- Policy-linked learning, which looks for patterns in experience and generic features that shape the overall development process and the aid system;
- Advocacy-linked learning, which searches for examples and ‘people stories’ and can underpin pressure for change;
- Scientific learning about the relations between trends, actions and context, which can contribute to renewal of vision, mission, and strategies as well as the propagation of new ideas or understanding about development (355)

It is a significant commitment for an NGO to acquire the necessary skills for such strategic learning and impact. This commitment will only be sustained with a shift in priorities and even paradigm. NGOs are fundamentally activist organizations as noted above; to prioritize reflection, bridging or advocacy is a tall order, particularly when the “results” of such an investment are difficult if not impossible to measure, particularly in the short term. Such a shift requires prioritizing higher levels of learning that would revisit some of the key long-held assumptions. It also requires more than a modicum of humility to recognize the fundamental limitations of current practice and the necessity to become more strategic and collaborative. Finally, it challenges the self-sufficiency that is too much a part of the NGO world. But such a commitment is critical if the NGO world wants to play its part in overcoming underdevelopment inertia. Edwards and Hulme (2002) provide a succinct synopsis of this critical role: “The strength of NGDOs lies in their ability to act as bridges, facilitators, brokers, and translators, linking together the institutions, interventions, capacities, and levels of action that are required to lever broader structural changes from discrete or small-scale actions (9).”

c. BRAC as an example

BRAC also demonstrates the importance of strategic learning. A striking example of this is the commitment to work extensively with pilot projects with a view to eventually scaling up the projects and popularizing the discoveries. They also have demonstrated a strong commitment to work with other partners. BRAC’s remarkable work and breakthroughs in Oral Rehydration

Therapy (ORT) were made possible through drawing on technical and moral support from a range of partners, including the government Centre for Diarrhea Disease Research. Their decision to focus energy and research into critical areas of economic, educational, and health needs is further evidence of the priority of strategic learning.

d. The learning dynamics and strategic learning

Strategic learning begins with visionary leadership. Leaders must be big-picture thinkers who are able to chart the best way to see efforts multiplied for the greatest effectiveness. Having an organizational structure that encourages such research and strategic learning is also critical. Such a priority would require identifying and empowering the right people to research and explore the best avenues for the organization to invest in. All this must be pursued against the backdrop of the needs within the given country/regional context.

5. Institutional learning

a. Introduction

According to the model, institutional learning is the internal learning posture and commitment of the organization. The stronger this internal, institutional learning the stronger the pole and the greater capacity for applying leverage at the point of development need. If the organization is not learning and growing in these critical areas, the pole will weaken and can easily break when pressure is applied. The effective learning organization must not only position itself to learn about its external environment and challenges; it must also address the challenge of strengthening institutional learning, of learning to function internally.

b. Overview

“Institutional” learning may seem to be an interesting title for learning that enables the organization to function effectively and accomplish its mission. But an insightful evaluation of “institutions” provided by Nabli and Nugent (1989) provides this definition of an “institution”: “a set of constraints which governs the behavioral relations among individuals and groups” (1335). It is precisely these governing restraints or values that influence relationships that shape institutional learning.

Foundational to understanding institutional learning is the conviction that an organization is a system, and that these systems need to function well for the organization to be healthy and to move forward. The different “systems” within an organization can be viewed in three broad but overlapping categories: the input systems, the management systems, and the output systems. No organization can function without these systems. The alignment of these systems with each other enables an organization to function well and to achieve its desired outcomes. These systems in the NGO world tend to have an added level of complexity in that securing ongoing inputs (financial) is complex and often unpredictable, and one of the outputs of the system has to be securing of the necessary funding. In common NGO parlance, the “clients” or “beneficiaries” are not the only, and sometimes not even the primary, stakeholders; however, the donors are (or can be) the primary stakeholders. But the concern here is not to unravel the complexities of NGO internal functioning; rather, the concern is to determine how the different systems can best function in such a way that fosters learning and, by association, more effective outputs and outcomes

These structures can be in place, but for them to be effective and to contribute to learning, another set of values must permeate the system. These are transversals” or cross-cutting values that must be woven through the entire system and be embraced by all the members. Systems theory, inspired by the biblical description of the functioning of the church “body” (1 Corinthians 12), identifies four critical “transversal” values that can be borrowed to help understand what contributes to making a strong learning organization.

- alignment of vision, the degree to which members understand and embrace the vision of the organization;
- alignment of communication, the effectiveness of the communication within the organization;
- relational alignment, the level of harmony and trust within the organization;
- giftedness alignment, getting the right people in the right positions with the right training.

Vision Alignment

The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 provides a sweeping overview of his metaphor for the church, the human body. His overarching and recurring theme is that the body is the metaphor

par excellence for unity in diversity: “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body” (I Corinthians 12: 12). The factor that provides unity to the body is the common faith in Christ and relationship to him, the head of the body. Believers share in the common life of the head.

When we transfer this image to the organization, this “alignment” with the head points to the first critical value of vision alignment—the understanding and embracing of the mission and values of the organization. Without this common vision and values being embraced broadly in the organization, competing visions and secondary issues can steal the energy and effectiveness of the organization. This is the first and perhaps most critical dynamic. The literature also identifies this important dynamic. Armstrong and Foley (2003), for example, identify mission-linked learning as the most meaningful construct in their study of learning organizations (76).

Communication alignment

The body imagery underlines the importance of communication. The Apostle Paul also underlines this importance: “If one part of the body suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (v. 26). The body’s nervous system makes such communication possible, as do other systems such as the circulatory system and the endocrinal system. When there is a breakdown in the nervous system or other systems, the members are unable to function in harmony with each other, and the body breaks down.

Communication in an organization is equally vital. To be effective, such communication is more than informational or “transactional” (Bass 1994, 12). Transactional communication is an exchange of information necessary for given task; it is results oriented. Transformational communication sees the person as a valued asset, someone who can carry responsibility (12). Transformational communication is seen in the above biblical quotation; there was a sharing of something deeper than information; life is shared, both pain and joy. This indicates the type of communication that contributes to a strong learning organization. It is particularly important in creating a strong team dynamic. Strong teams are committed to a task or a goal; but they are equally committed to one another (Katzenbach and Smith 1993, 60). Sun (2003), quoting Gardiner and Whiting, also identifies communication as a significant factor in the success of learning organizations (206).

Relational alignment

This alignment is the flip side of communication alignment; they are interdependent. The biblical passage in 1 Corinthians focuses on the relational element more than the others. Two destructive attitudes are identified in the passage. One is an attitude of superiority and self-sufficiency: “I don’t need you” (12.21). This attitude contributes to isolation and can lead to cataclysmic breakdown of relationships, particularly if the attitude is promulgated by leadership. It further paralyzes any constructive team dynamics. The other destructive attitude is self-deprecation, self-disqualification: “Because I am not an eye, I don’t belong to the body” (12.16). The attitude is equally destructive, and nips initiative taking and sharing of ideas in the bud. When these two destructive attitudes face each other, the results are a complete relational breakdown, one self-effacing member of the team kowtowing to a strong and independent personality. Such a relational dynamic unravels the fabric of a healthy team; this fabric is trust (Gardiner and Whiting in Sun 2003, 206).

The literature on team dynamics consistently underlines the vital importance of relational alignment. Patrick Lenicioni (2002) identifies as the two first steps in team dysfunction the absence of trust and the fear of conflict (197); both these dysfunctions flourish where the above attitudes are common. This echoes with Argyris and Schon (1993) in their analysis of defensive mechanisms that destroy team dynamics and inhibit deeper, “double loop” learning (27). These defensive mechanisms often grow out of deeply rooted insecurities. Relational misalignment is more than an inconvenience in an organization; it destroys the team dynamic, short-circuits learning and saps the energy of the organization to accomplish its task.

“Giftedness” alignment

The overarching theme of 1 Corinthians 12 is that the different members of the body are gifted, are of value, and contribute to the health and functioning of the body. No gift or capacity is superior or inferior to the next. None is “more qualified” than the other; each member has an important role to play. But the passage alludes to the fact that there are many members and many roles to play in the body. The same imagery applies to the organization. There are many roles to play and a broad swath of gifts and abilities is needed for the organization to function effectively.

Central to creating a strong learning organization is getting the right people in the right places with the right set of skills and gifts. Very practically, this value elevates the importance of

screening new candidates, of careful performance evaluation, of training and of accountability. A strong learning organization is careful to “get the right people on the bus” (Collins 2005, 14); and once they are there, to value them, train them, and keep them. The flip side is also true; those who don’t embrace the vision, who fail to meet expectations, who are unable or unwilling to function as a dynamic member of a team, must be escorted “off the bus” as well. This is difficult in a non-profit organization, particularly in the challenging context of a country such as Burundi where the pool of candidates is very shallow; it is also difficult in a value and mission-driven organization that tends to be weak on the performance review side.

These values are the “oil” in the engine of an effective learning organization. They make the learning culture and the team environment come alive. They also create a great ambiance of trust that fosters the sharing of ideas so critical to solving problems; they further create the right posture for generative learning so important for preparing the NGO for serving in a complex and changing environment (Garavan 1997, 23; Prugamatz 2010, 246).

c. BRAC as an example

Not having studied the internal dynamics of BRAC, I find it difficult to evaluate through this lens. There is certainly a strong vision that drives the organization, embodied in the remarkable founder and his cadre of visionary associates. There is also evidence of strong team dynamics that grow out of valuing the contribution of innovative ideas and people. The literature also suggests and the results testify to the strong commitment to getting the right people in the right positions and empowering them in their task. It is my conviction that a careful analysis of the inner workings of BRAC would bear evidence that these values are highly esteemed in the organization.

d. Institutional learning and learning dynamics

When considering institutional learning, the personal dynamic and the organizational culture dynamic loom large in importance. For the above values to be embraced in the institution, leadership must set the stage: projecting a clear vision, modeling open communication, inspiring trust in associates, and providing clear direction for staff development and empowerment. A conducive organization culture is also vital. Without the appropriate organizational mechanisms

that encourage communication and facilitate capacity building of staff, institutional health and strength will be out of reach.

D. Synthesis of the model

The five learning domains identified in the leverage learning model provide an integrated frame for understanding the role of learning and improving NGO effectiveness. Prioritizing the different domains enables an organization to apply leverage to the development task. BRAC has been presented as an organization that has exercised remarkable leverage in a very needy context; its commitment to prioritizing the different domains of learning has contributed significantly to its success. The above model is a frame, a structure. Without the contribution of what have been identified as learning “dynamics,” the model remains lifeless or powerless. The personal dynamic of leaders and staff who are committed to learning and inquiry, dissatisfied with status quo, is mandatory. The organization culture dynamic is also critical at each juncture; appropriate mechanisms enable learners to research, explore and question and discover. The final dynamic of alignment to context is also essential; the agenda for learning must grow out of the needs of the context. But when these dynamics invigorate learning in these different domains, as is demonstrated in BRAC, the results can be outstanding.

One final area of exploration remains: the case study analysis of World Vision Burundi according the leverage-learning model.

CHAPTER VI

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDY FINDINGS

The previous chapter presented a learning model template for analyzing the different learning domains that are critical for an NGO to exercise leverage and effectiveness. This chapter, first of all, provides an overview of the methodology that was used to apply this template in a case study of World Vision Burundi; this is followed by a presentation and interpretation of the data.

The five learning domains are seen in their dynamic relationship in the following diagram, and are reproduced again here for the reader:

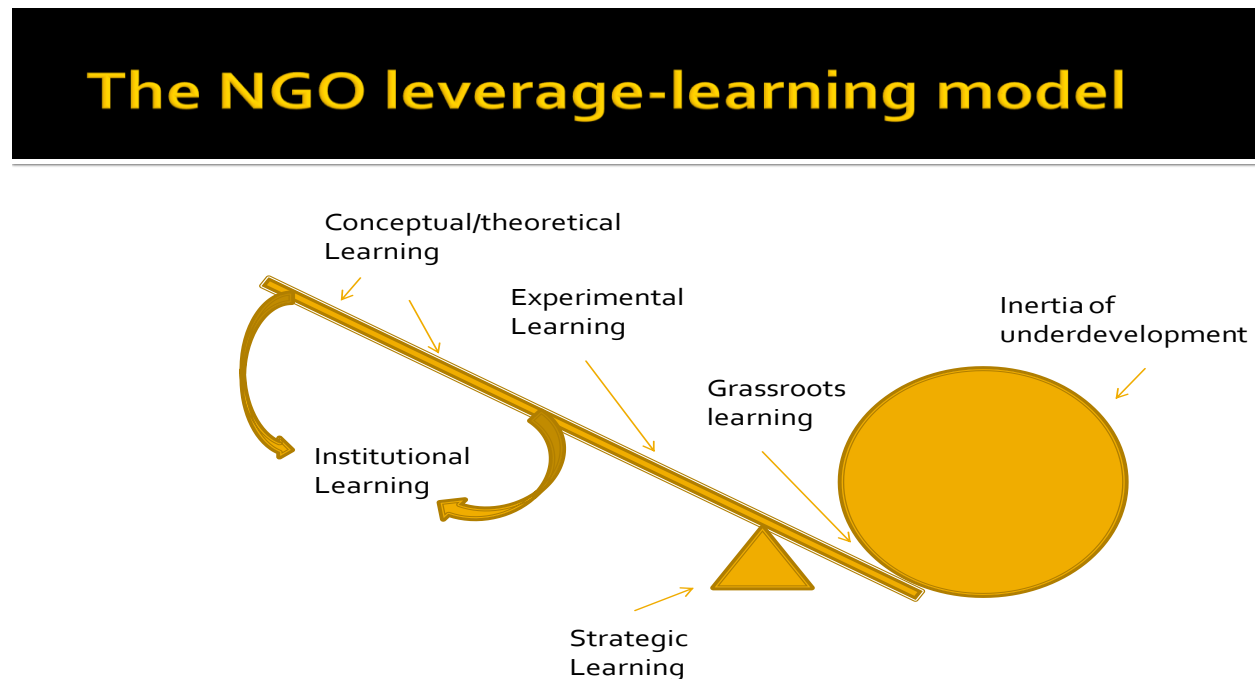


Figure 6: NGO leverage-learning model (author's construct)

Overcoming the inertia of underdevelopment is the goal of the development NGO. The only possible way to overcome this inertia is through careful leveraging as the lever imagery indicates. The full complement of different learning domains working synergistically multiplies the contribution of a given NGO to the task of overcoming the “inertia” of underdevelopment in a given community. It is important to remember, however, that no single NGO has the resources

and ability to exert sufficient leverage; this picture can only be completed by situating a number of NGOs and GOs strategically around the inertia so that the maximum leverage could be applied and succeed in overcoming the weight of underdevelopment in a given community, region, or country.

The five learning domains, in review, are the following: grassroots/contextual learning, which flows from the commitment to be sensitive to and learn from the local context; experimental learning, reflected in the commitment to treat development initiatives as experiments to learn from and subsequently modify; theoretical/conceptual learning, which ensures that the development initiatives are rooted in sound theory and broader research; “strategic” learning, which looks at the dimension of learning that is tied to strategic partnership and advocacy; and finally, “institutional” learning, which reflects the internal dimension of learning, the specific learning “culture” of a given organization. As these learning domains work synergistically, the organization is best positioned for greatest effectiveness in applying leverage to overcome the inertia of underdevelopment. This template is used as the framework for the research design and methodology described below.

I. Methodology

A. Qualitative research through a descriptive single-case study

1. Introduction and rationale

A single-case study design suited the project for the following reasons. First of all, it was not feasible within the time frame to do multiple case studies. Secondly, the goal was to find a specific context for applying the above learning organization model and to exploring how this model might contribute to both evaluating and improving the learning commitment and culture of a given organization. A single-case study served this purpose adequately (Willis 1997). Interviews from a cross-section of individuals involved in a given organization provided the main source of data for the analysis. Other data was gathered from observation and documentary research.

Finding a Christian NGO to study was difficult. After being turned down on two occasions, I personally contacted the director of World Vision Burundi, Simon Heliso.⁴⁹ As a learner committed to improving organizational effectiveness, he responded favourably to the request

⁴⁹He agreed to be named. He was the only interviewee who was asked to reveal his identity.

even though he was given only short notice. He not only agreed to host the study, but also facilitated access to management and staff for interviews; he further made it possible for me to travel to visit one of World Vision Burundi's programme areas. His warm welcome and the full cooperation of World Vision Burundi made this research possible.

Part of the agreement with World Vision Burundi was that a report and recommendations would be submitted to World Vision Burundi within two months of the study (see Appendix VI).

2. Key objectives

The case study was designed to analyse the different domains of learning that are central to an effective NGO. As the overarching objective was to evaluate the commitment to learning within the broader organization, it was critical to interview a representative cross-section of both management and staff in the organization. It was hoped that 20 to 25 interviews would be possible within a two-week time frame. In fact, thirty-four interviews were completed.

A secondary objective of the case study was to present the senior management team (SMT) of World Vision Burundi with a general evaluation of the learning culture and commitment of the organization. Obtaining an overall perspective on the learning culture of World Vision Burundi would be best served by observing their work "in the field." Spending three days visiting one of their programme regions was proposed and made possible.

3. Field procedures

First of all, the project was approved by the ethics review board at the University of Ottawa. These ethical guidelines were shared with the director of World Vision Burundi. Once verbal agreement had been made to pursue the research, an official Memorandum of Agreement was signed with the director of World Vision Burundi (See Appendix III). The director and his associate then forwarded me helpful archival and project documentation that I could review prior to beginning the onsite interviews. They also made available significant supportive documentation throughout the analysis stage of the project.

Once on site, I provided the SMT with a briefing of my study goals and an introduction to the learning model. They provided initial feedback. The Director's associate then set up interviews for me with all members of the SMT and as well as representatives from other departments. The interviewees were chosen from a broad cross-section of management and staff, although

interviews in the Bujumbura office were primarily with the SMT and other department heads. Interviews in the project area of Cankuzo included members of the field staff as well. In the final analysis only 8 of the 29 World Vision Burundi interviews were with field staff; the rest were senior or middle management.

Before each personal or group interview, the participants read and signed the “interview consent form” (see Appendix IV). During the second week of my stay, I traveled to one of their project areas in Cankuzo province. There I observed team dynamics, visited two of the projects, and conducted more interviews. I had one brief discussion with a group of men in the “colline” (the community organizational similar to the “village” but less densely populated), but little substantial data was gathered. On my return, I completed a further set of interviews with more of the staff at the head office and conducted a debrief exit interview with the SMT. During the final week I also interviewed a number of “outsiders” to World Vision, some who knew the organization well and others who did not, but understood the NGO world and the development context in Burundi. These interviewees were recommended to me by an employee of Light University who knew them personally; he also set up these interviews on my behalf.

Although the interviews were my primary source of data, I made some important observations through attending and participating in a number of activities. I attended, for example, the early morning “devotional” times on four occasions, where a member of the team would comment on a Scripture passage and then the group would pray together. I also led the study time on two occasions. This gave me a sense of some of the internal and relational dynamics within the organization. I further enjoyed several opportunities for relaxed conversation over meals with some of the senior staff. Four long conversations with the director helped me appreciate his vision and passion, as well as hear a number of his frustrations. A similar relationship developed with the program manager in Cankuzo. These unique opportunities provided an inside track into the “heart” of the organization. I further observed some of the team relational dynamics during the eight hours of travel up country with seven members of the Cankuzo team.

The extensive interviews, however, provided the main source of data. These interviews included both open-ended and structured questions (see Appendix V). For senior and middle management, the personal and group interviews began by signing the consent form. I then presented the model and followed this up with a set of open-ended questions tied to each learning

dimension. For “institutional” learning questions, I integrated a more structured format, employing a loose five-point evaluation scale in a number of the interviews to measure some of the internal dynamics (Questions F.4-7 in Appendix V). The results are reproduced in the report, but only ten interviewees had scores recorded, and this scale was not used with the staff, but only management; neither did the middle-management in Cankuzo complete the scale. So the findings are only helpful in the ways that they confirm some of the other data. The approach with the field staff was directed more toward their area of expertise. However, I explored the internal organizational dynamics in staff interviews as well, but did not address such areas of leverage or theoretical learning. So the interviews varied somewhat between the staff and the management. These differences are indicated in Appendix V, where the interviews are reproduced. Table 2 indicates the number and type of interviews, as well as the different roles and positions of the interviewees.

Table 2
Interviews in Burundi, March 28 to April 13, 2010

Category of interviewee	Total Numbers	Male	Female	One-on-One Interview	Group Interview
Senior Management Team (SMT)	5	4	1	5	(The SMT also participated in two group discussions)
Middle Management Bujumbura	9	8	1	4	5 (one group of three, one group of two)
Middle Management Cankuzo	7	6	1	1	6 (one group of six)
Field Staff Cankuzo	8	5	3	0	8 (two groups of three, one group of two)
Outsiders	5	5	0	5	
Total	34	28	6	15	19

4. Analysis of the data

Interviews were not taped; however, about 80 to 90 per cent of the interview content was captured through extensive note-taking during the interview. This data was then printed and consulted extensively when preparing the analysis and compiling my report for World Vision

Burundi (see Appendix VI). The report itself is designed for World Vision Burundi management. It is structured systematically according to the above learning model. It begins with a general overview of the model, a brief explanation of the methodology, and then, through the lens of the model, a more in-depth analysis of the data. Each section ends with a summary conclusion. The final section proposes a set of recommendations that flow from the analysis. A companion document that includes the theoretical underpinnings of the model is also available to the SMT. A draft of this report was submitted two months after the field research was completed (June 2010). The director responded to the report in detail prior to final submission; many of his suggestions and modifications were integrated into the final report document. A copy of the entire thesis was requested and will be submitted once fully approved by the University of Ottawa.

The data analysis for the thesis proper is more in-depth and has stronger theoretical underpinnings; it also has stronger critical and academic underpinnings and conclusions, although it follows the same basic format as the report that was submitted to World Vision Burundi.

To sum up, the descriptive case study design enabled the broad evaluation of the learning culture and commitments of a particular NGO, World Vision Burundi. The semi-structured interview questions were formulated according to each dimension of the learning model. The interviews took place in both a personal and a group context. A number of interviews of those outside of World Vision Burundi were also completed and provided an important counterpoint to the other data. Added to the interview data are those gleaned through direct personal observation and participation in a few events. All the data were analysed through the theoretical lens of the above learning model.

II. Overview of findings

A. Grassroots learning

1. Introduction

Grassroots learning considers the extent to which the organization listens to and learns from its primary “clients” or beneficiaries and their development needs. This dimension of learning could also be referred to as contextual learning and refers to learning that comes from careful observation, data gathering and interpretation of the context. As noted in the previous chapter,

effective grassroots learning requires, for example, strong participatory approaches and a careful ethnographic stance (Chambers 2008). To be a strong grassroots learning organization also requires a commitment to “contextualizing” development practices to the local context, and not an uncritical importing of approaches from other contexts. According to the learning model template, grassroots learning is that which occurs from direct contact and interaction with the development context; the model illustrates that it is the pole that is wedged under the need.

Now that World Vision has moved definitively away from relief focus toward a development focus, grassroots learning or contextual learning has become a much higher priority. But this shift in its own right has not been easy to navigate, particularly in communities that had received aid during the relief phase. (In fact, a recurring comment of the interviewees at the field level was how difficult it has been to change the perception of those who have become “habitués à recevoir” (used to hand-outs). In the projects that have a stronger development focus, grassroots/contextual learning is a higher priority, particularly in the area development programs (ADPs). In the projects that began with a stronger relief focus, learning has been difficult to integrate. This analysis of contextual/grassroots learning has therefore two different tracks, one for the primarily “relief” initiated projects, and the other for the development projects, primarily the ADPs.

2. Contextual/grassroots learning in relief-focused projects

One of the main relief projects in Cankuzo is the food security program sponsored by the European Union. Interviews with the field workers/technicians revealed a striking disconnect between the observed and reported needs on the field and any subsequent adjustment of the program. They also commented that they were not in any way included in elaborating the project. The technicians expressed repeated frustration at the total lack of response to their expressed concerns. Furthermore, these technicians are the interface with the local community and speak on behalf of the local people. They gave numerous examples of how the project was maladapted to the context: only 1 goat was available for every 100 homes; only 10 of the 25 “agents de santé” (community health workers) were offered training; banana seedlings were offered to the households, but beans were needed. The actual mid-term (24 month) report does identify some of these failings, but seems to minimize them:

Le feedback donné par les bénéficiaires à Cankuzo est positif, spécialement avec un accent mis sur la valeur des arbres et la valeur des champs de démonstration/ les trous de compost. Beaucoup de ménages ont beaucoup apprécié la distribution des chèvres, *même si le nombre de chèvres distribués dans le cadre de ce projet semble être petit par rapport aux besoins dans les communautés* – la distribution de plus de chèvres et autres animaux domestiques devrait être envisagée pour les projets à venir. (Food Security Cankuzo Interim Report 08-09, emphasis mine)

Feedback from the beneficiaries in Cankuzo is positive, particularly regarding the value of the trees the demonstration plots, and the compost holes. *Homes receiving goats much appreciated them, even though the number distributed seemed small in light of the needs in the community.* Greater distribution of goats and other domestic animals should be considered for subsequent projects (Food Security Cankuzo Interim Report, italics mine)

To the technicians' exasperation, this mid-term report did identify many failings of the project and changes were proposed, but nothing ever materialized. They were also given the impression that they would be involved in reworking the project; again, nothing ever came of it. If I understand correctly, these problems were exacerbated by the departure of one of the coordinators; after his departure, the proposed changes never got traction. Although many details are obscure, the three technicians interviewed were at their wits' end. To make matters worse, the project is coming to a close very soon, and the technicians said there was nothing of substance in place to carry forward any of the investment. A six-month no-cost extension has been granted but will not provide enough time to make substantial changes to the project. This project, at least through the eyes of the technicians, demonstrates a glaring failure in learning and adapting to context. According to the program manager in Cankuzo, the project was implemented in a time of crisis and there was little or no assessment that helped shape the project. Perhaps this lack of assessment at the initial stages set the project on its course toward failure? At the same time, it seems, at least through the eyes of the technicians, that much more could have been done to learn and adapt this project to its context.

I did not extensively interview those in charge of other projects, such as the Children of Cankuzo project. Perusal of the documentation for the Children of Cankuzo project seems to reveal a lack of careful pre-assessment in that it proposes that child-led households that are

acutely vulnerable will be able to attain a measure of livelihood sustainability, and this without the mentor/caregiver strategy integrated elsewhere. This belies the literature and weight of careful observation that the “poorest of the poor” and the most vulnerable are unable to manage and benefit from normal development initiatives, such as new stoves or small loans (Smillie 2009, 175). The school feeding program was also established, primarily as a “relief” project; it depends fundamentally on food given by the WFP. (World Vision Burundi runs the school feeding program in forty-two primary schools in Cankuzo province). The results of the project are encouraging, particularly the increased number of girls attending school. There was a measure of learning that helped adjust the program, particularly the decision to provide an extra ration for girls and thus encourage their families to keep them in school. As well, the program initially hired some local people to cook the food, but has now mobilized parents and families to be involved in food preparation at the schools. At the same time, the project has been primarily relief focused, and there appears to be no clear “next step” should the WFP no longer provide the food. As yet no one seems to have “learned” or devised a grassroots solution to carry this project forward. There is little evidence of a strong commitment to grassroots learning in the relief-oriented projects.

3. Contextual learning in the area development programs (ADPs)

Extensive pre-assessment is an important part of the ADPs, the development program par excellence within World Vision. According to the “LEAP” framework,⁵⁰ assessment is the critical first strategy toward what they term “transformational development.” Assessment is defined as the “process of defining the ‘why’ of a proposed programme/project by collecting and analyzing information on the community, the agency and other partners.” The purpose of this assessment according to the LEAP document is to understand the context and issues causing poverty; to identify needs, opportunities, and resources within the community; to decide on the feasibility of contributing to tackling poverty; and to set priorities for this contribution (LEAP framework).

The published assessment report that undergirds the ADP in Cankuzo reveals the priority of assessment that precedes project implementation. This assessment can take over a year and may cost up to up to USD \$90,000. The process begins with a pre-assessment workshop attended by

⁵⁰The LEAP framework is the main structuring and planning document for the ADPs.

representative members of the community and various stakeholders. Subsequently, data is gathered, primarily through focus group interviews. This assessment influences, among other things, the development priorities of the ADP. For example the ADP near Cankuzo town has food security as its first priority, whereas other ADPs for the first stage may prioritize health and hygiene and only secondarily agricultural development or education. The local community, through workshops and focus groups, is consulted as to what development needs should take priority; the ADP implantation plan honors their choice. I sensed in speaking with a group of men who were part of an association working within the ADP that they felt honored, “empowered” by World Vision’s work among them (but it was a bit disconcerting that they could not identify any practical “outcomes” or “learnings” from the different initiatives, such as the agricultural demonstration plots). In the area of health and hygiene there is also a strong commitment to consulting the population as to their needs and receiving their feedback on proposed activities.

First-hand insight into the process was gleaned through interviewing a group of enumerators who were gathering initial data for a potential ADP in a neighboring community. This group of four young adults is contracted to bring together representative groups from the “commune” (the broader region that is made up of a number of “collines”). Their questions address four main areas: agriculture, animal husbandry, education and health/nutrition. They also gather external and environmental data. Their assessment work is indicative of the data gathering that is woven into the ADP design. If I understand the process correctly, the work of these enumerators follows several other preliminary steps in the process: studying the broader macro issues, ensuring that funding is available, and meeting with potential partners or stakeholders. The enumerator’s work is to gather secondary and qualitative data through general research and focus group discussions. This entire process of data gathering, according to the LEAP framework, can take up to six months. From this data, an assessment report is drawn up, and, if approved, the design phase begins. This phase can take from seven to twelve months and brings together both members of the communities and other stakeholders. The goal is to fashion a prioritized intervention and resource contribution plan.

A team of World Vision experts oversees the process. This team brings together expertise in many areas such as health, program design, monitoring and evaluation, education, food security/livelihoods, and child sponsorship. The final design document becomes the blueprint for

the ADP. World Vision Burundi has three new ADPs on track for this year and a fourth in the design phase; the commitment to the assessment process is significant.

From my estimation, the four young enumerators were given some good tools for their work as well as clear guidelines as to how to proceed with forming and interviewing the representative focus groups. Their goal through these focus group discussions is to get a sense of the overall needs and priorities of the area. They also interview the “chefs de collines” and other community and church leaders. Although all four of these young people were university graduates, it was surprising that none had had previous experience or training in this area. It was explained to me that this is not the normal procedure. I assume that they will not be interpreting the data, but it seems that having at least one experienced member of the team would have been wise.

At the same time, the data gathered through the assessment process, and the interpretation of this data, will not fundamentally alter the structure of the ADP. This structure is used across the spectrum of development initiatives with World Vision, and includes the trademark emphasis on child sponsorship as the main strategy and source of funding. This is a non-negotiable (for ADP projects at least). One consequence of this policy is that a major investment of time and effort goes into “sensitization” regarding the nature and benefit of child sponsorship, often misunderstood by the community and by parents/guardians. In this regard World Vision reveals a significant weakness in its commitment to “grassroots” learning. Its own policy can easily trump the expressed needs and priorities of its beneficiaries who would not identify child sponsorship as the community and family choice. Sponsorship is an effective funding tool that appeals to the individual donor and ensures steady and ongoing income for a development initiative, but it is not a grassroots strategy. “Learning from” and honoring the wishes of the beneficiary take a back seat in this case. To be fair, sponsorship is never “imposed” on a community, and there is an important process of assessing readiness for sponsorship; at the same time, this is the default strategy.⁵¹

4. Conclusions regarding grassroots/contextual learning

In development projects, particularly the ADPs, local beneficiaries are consulted extensively in project pre-assessment. There is also a thorough contextual analysis of the broader community

⁵¹ A theoretical discussion of the child-centric focus was presented in the previous chapter.

through many different angles. This indicates that World Vision Burundi values contextual learning. At the same time, the fundamental child-centric development paradigm, which places sponsorship at the centre of project design and implementation, risks undermining the “contextual” learning process. For example, the World Vision experts who oversee implementation would not have the freedom to restructure the ADP according to an adult-centric model, even if the weight of the observations and the will of the community were overwhelmingly pulling in that direction. Consulting with and learning from the community is an ongoing priority in project design and implementation, but only within certain “child-centric” parameters.⁵²

Relief-oriented projects have suffered more acutely from a lack of contextual/grassroots learning. Interviews with local technicians indicate that such a learning “stance” and commitment has not been prioritized. However, further research would be necessary to fully appreciate and validate these observations.

B. Experimental learning

1. Introduction

Experimental learning is the natural next step after grassroots learning. A given practice aimed at addressing a development need requires a monitoring structure to measure the progress of this initiative and to modify it accordingly. But an organization with a strong experimental learning stance has more than a careful monitoring process; it is also committed to facing failure honestly and learning from it. Furthermore, similar to the above, it does not uncritically import outside initiatives; it is committed to adjusting them after experimental evaluation. Placing experimental learning in the context of the above learning model, it is clear that experimentation lengthens the pole and provides more leverage for the task of overcoming underdevelopment inertia.

As experimental learning and grassroots learning are two sides of the same coin, many of the above observations are valid here as well. As presented above, projects that were birthed in the context of relief need to be considered somewhat separately from the ADP projects.

⁵²It must be emphasized, however, that the child-centric focus does not mean that development initiatives do not involve community and adult leaders. The focus on food security, for example, has mobilized men in the community to work extensively with agricultural experimentation.

2. Experimental learning within World Vision Burundi

World Vision has developed and refined a number of instruments and frameworks to ensure careful monitoring and evaluation of its many programs and projects. The LEAP framework (2007) (now being replaced by the Integrated Programming Model) lays out in careful detail the steps to assess, design, monitor, and evaluate a given project. Similar to the above discussion of grassroots learning, the relief-focused projects are much lighter on the experimental learning scale than are the development projects. There are signs that some of the relief-focused projects had been modified thanks to monitoring and evaluation, but one particularly project, the EU food security project, seemed impervious to any proposed changes that came from evaluation (according to interviewees).

The ADP program has a stronger experimental learning design that includes careful evaluation in light of baseline indicators. For example, World Vision Burundi employs and trains local people to be “community development workers.” These workers visit homes daily to monitor basic health and nutrition, and to see whether the child is attending school. The food security priority of the ADP I visited also has a set of baseline indicators from which to evaluate progress that include the introduction of new agricultural techniques and better quality plants. Monitoring of health projects also has clear set of indicators to measure progress and a project design that enables modification.

One sign of “imported” rather than experimental, home-grown, learning is the evaluation structure itself with its reports and expectations. These reports not only are cumbersome and overly bureaucratic, but are also poorly adapted and non-transferable to the local population. Effective experimental learning that involves beneficiaries would require a set of evaluation tools that are simpler and more hands-on. Several interviewees, even at the management level, expressed frustration with these tools and the expectations that comes with them; they are overly complex and “pushed too harshly top-down.” This observation is echoed by Taylor (2002):

There are courses, models and packaged responses to an increasing array of NGO needs: from planning tools and methodologies to management courses, from computer-based monitoring systems to fieldwork intervention methodologies.... They are often being experienced as undermining and distracting when “pushed” by those in positions of power. (349)

Another sign that the monitoring and evaluation process is poorly adapted to the context is the lack of sensitivity to the post-conflict reality of Burundi. One fall-out of this post-conflict reality is that trust takes time to build and that the pace of life is slow. There is little evidence that this contextual reality is factored into the programs/projects and the evaluation process. Another reality in the regions where the ADPs are being established is that there are few local people who have the requisite skills to fulfill the needed roles within World Vision. As a result, many of the staff commute from other regions of the country; this somewhat undermines the community-based commitment that is a pre-requisite for experimental learning.

A final related point concerns translating experimental learning into institutional memory that can be used in turn to modify policy and practice. It was flagged by a few interviewees that institutional memory of World Vision Burundi is quite weak. One noted an overall failure to document and make discoveries available for the sake of learning and improving practice; the only focus was on marketing purposes. Another interviewee lamented that many of the success stories have gone undocumented and lessons learned have not been translated into best practices. The fact that the main responsibility of the communications officer is marketing is perhaps another indication of this weakness.

3. Conclusions regarding experimental learning

Experimental learning has an important place in project design and implementation, at least with development projects. The ADP project in Cankuzo has not yet entered a significant evaluation stage, so it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the evaluation tools. Regarding “experimentation” that led to failure, it was revealed in the interviews that some projects had in fact been failures and that lessons had been drawn from them. It is hoped that some important lessons would be drawn from the EU food security project that will help avoid some of the shortcomings that were shared in full relief during the interviews. Further research would be needed to confirm the impression that many of the projects (particularly those with primarily a relief focus) were not being monitored and evaluated effectively. For example, no one was able to clearly point to the next steps for phasing out the school feeding project. It was noted, however, that talk of sustaining the school feeding program is somewhat misleading in that it was not designed to address the food security issue; the goal of the program was to increase enrollment, and it has succeeded in that. One of the interviewees noted that monitoring The

Children of Cankuzo Programme revealed that the most vulnerable households lacked the capacity for benefitting from some of the inputs. It was not clear, however, whether or not this discovery had resulted in any modifications to the program.

There is also a set of cultural dynamics that need to be more carefully considered in the Burundi context, such as the need to have a stronger community presence and to respect the slower pace and responsiveness of the population. On a similar note, many of the project design and monitoring frameworks are overly complex and ill-suited to easy transference to the local population. Furthermore, opting for a one-size-fits-all evaluation framework reveals a fault line in experimental learning. There also is a need for more careful documentation and dissemination of discoveries gleaned through experimental learning.

C. Theoretical learning

1. Introduction

This important dimension of learning is critical for the bigger learning picture. Good practice is impossible without strong theory/concepts. The leverage learning model demonstrates that a strong theoretical stance adds critical length to the pole and thus increases leverage. Examples of good theoretical learning in an organization would be its commitment to tap into broader research that sheds light on critical development issues. For example, if the development project addresses the needs of children that have experienced trauma, to what degree is research into the effects of trauma on children reflected in the initiative? Expertise/strong theory is needed for good research at the grassroots level as well. For example, if the development project addresses an agricultural need, to what degree are agricultural technicians and specialists integrated into the planning, execution and monitoring of the project? Theoretical learning is particularly important in advocacy initiatives, as this requires a deep and broad understanding of critical issues. A development organization that has a strong commitment to theoretical learning, among other things, will ensure that qualified technicians/specialists are employed and consulted; it will prioritize research; and it will both integrate and disseminate effective ideas. Commitment to theoretical learning is also reflected in the commitment of the organization to train its people through appropriate academic programs. These and other commitments lengthen the pole and create significant leverage for the organization.

2. Analysis of World Vision Burundi commitment to theoretical/conceptual learning

Theoretical learning in World Vision Burundi will be evaluated from several practical angles. An evaluation of World Vision through the lens of biblical values/theory has been presented in Chapter Four. It was noted in that same chapter that faith-based NGOs benefit greatly from clearly embracing their Christian identity and purpose (James 2009, 3). The interview format was not designed, however, to measure specifically the degree to which biblical values shape the understanding of development among the staff and management, so such a discussion is not integrated in this section. Only the first “angle” of analysis considers the role of the Christian variable.

a. Ensuring that employees understand vision and values

Each new employee is given a basic orientation to the mission statement, core values, history of World Vision Burundi, strategic mission and organizational structure. However, the majority of new staff training and orientation resides with the personnel supervisors. It is unclear how effective this orientation is in imbuing the new employees with the vision and values of the organization. In light of the high turnover of staff and the growth in new staff, more intentional and structured orientation of new personnel seems essential. Until recently, a yearly staff retreat had been scheduled. Staff expressed widespread disappointment about this cancellation. It seems that this event at an interpersonal level was much appreciated. It could also provide a unique opportunity to instill a richer and deeper understanding of the vision and values that undergird World Vision’s work.

On a more positive note, the morning devotional times provide a regular reminder of the spiritual values that undergird the organization. All employees are divided into small groups and are required to attend prior to the start of the work day. One of the members of the group reads a passage from the Bible and then provides some comments on the passage. Members of the group share different needs. The group then prays for those needs and for one another, although not all members pray. These early morning events are a daily reminder that the Christian faith is a critical piece of their development work.

b. Theoretical learning and staff development

The ongoing training of staff is a strong priority in World Vision Burundi. In fact, it has the reputation of being the strongest training NGO. Several referred to it, in fact, as the “nursery” for training development workers for other organizations. (Many staff that have left World Vision Burundi now work for other NGOs.) The staff development guideline outlines the scope of training that is available. Some of the field staff, however, expressed frustration that the training provided to the supervisors was only shared superficially with them. One commented, “How can you adequately share in 30 minutes what you learned in a week?” Three of the field staff also expressed frustration that their training was more “information” than “formation” and that they were given few opportunities for improving their skill set. Although there are opportunities for some to travel to neighboring countries to observe and learn from similar projects, training of field staff was identified as lacking. A few middle-management/coordinators also expressed that training opportunities are theoretically available, but the actual opportunity might come up “once in five years if you’re lucky.”

Meeting deadlines and submitting reports can also trump the priority of training. In spite of the few negative comments, there was overall positive feedback on the opportunities for training and professional development within World Vision Burundi. For example, I interviewed three participants in a modular MA program who were pleased with the opportunity and encouragement they received to pursue this training; they further received financial assistance to pursue this training.

World Vision Burundi has a competent human resources (HR) development manager, who is responsible for both recruitment and training. Her role, and the role of human resources in general, is not to develop the training, but to ensure that staff/management participate in regularly offered training events (usually semi-annually). World Vision Burundi also organizes quarterly management forums to attract and develop talent and help management improve skills. One challenge they are facing in 2010 is that the capacity building budget has been cut due to financial constraints. As the project budgets do not include a budget line for training, this funding must be secured through other sources. At the time of interview, there was still no firmly identified funding source for this.

c. Theoretical learning and empowering management

It is a sign of a strong commitment to theoretical learning that World Vision Burundi sponsors, for example, Masters-level training in leadership and management. At the same time, it is surprising that the next level of learning, the PhD level, is not part of the training vision and commitment of World Vision as an international organization. No funding or sabbatical allotment is possible for doctoral-level studies. This may be an indication of the limited commitment of World Vision to become a stronger learning organization. World Vision is the most important Christian NGO in the world; developing competent doctoral-level researchers, writers and spokespersons should be a high priority. It was noted in the previous chapter that BRAC has maintained this commitment to offering the best training to its staff, even at the doctoral level.

d. Theoretical learning and understanding macro and meso socio-economic issues

World Vision strategic and planning documents highlight the importance of researching and understanding issues that affect development, yet it does not have a department or point person that is responsible for research. The following strategic focus indicates the need for such a person:

In the areas of World Vision Burundi's strategic focus, through quality ministry, resource optimization, and focusing on programs that have comparative advantages over others World Vision will give priority to activities which can have a "catalyst" effect to the broader economy of the country. Operational efficiency and quality is therefore considered as key in soliciting support and partnerships. (World Vision Burundi Strategic Plan 2010)

Only careful and dedicated research will enable World Vision Burundi to identify those catalytic activities that will affect the broader economy.

e. Theoretical learning and building institutional memory

A former employee who had a long and fruitful career at World Vision Burundi spoke at length of the failure to create this strong institutional memory. His observation was that reports were most often not designed for learning and building memory, but for donors and for marketing. This observation finds some credence in light of the nature of the "communications"

officer. The job description for this person is not to communicate insights and learning to the staff, but to showcase the development successes to the donor constituency. There is no dedicated person responsible for archiving and synthesizing learning and insights to ensure that the organization moves forward with greater clarity and fewer failures. A member of the senior management team echoed this concern as well. He commented how quickly they run over things, how they often fail to see things through to maturity. He lamented the lack of documenting a strong list of best practices and integration of these tested ideas.

f. Theoretical learning and shoring up advocacy

Advocacy requires careful research. For an NGO to speak authoritatively on an issue, such as a child protection issue or a structural issue that limits access to education or basic medical care, then careful research is vital. There are signs of this commitment in the area of health. Qualified health personnel oversee health assessment in a given community, particularly as part of the ADP assessment process. World Vision Burundi also works closely with the government authorities in this assessment process. At the same time, more significant research into broader structural and nation-wide issues is critical. Commitment to either doing this research, or being part of such a research team, is lacking.

3. Theoretical learning conclusion

World Vision Burundi is committed to the idea that good practice flows from good theory. Its reputation for being a strong training NGO is a great indicator. World Vision Burundi also has a strong set of mission/values/procedures documents that all staff are required to understand and embrace. It further provides ongoing and regular staff development opportunities. The organization has thought through the ways and means of building projects and monitoring their effectiveness. At the same time, opportunities for this training are often sporadic for middle-managers, and a number of field-staff feel entirely excluded from it. Training at a Masters level is both encouraged and supported, but learning at the PhD level is not valued within World Vision as an organization.

Regarding learning about the broader society, the evaluation is much more muted. There is little evidence of careful study of broader socio-economic issues or of collaborating with others to that end. World Vision Burundi has also been weak at building institutional memory and

integrating insights into new initiatives. To return to the leverage learning model, the pole is lengthened through a measure of commitment to theoretical learning, but it could be much longer. Having a key person dedicated to deepening the well of overall learning, careful research, and institutional memory would be an invaluable contribution.

D. Strategic learning

1. Introduction

Strategic learning is tied to theoretical learning. The main idea behind strategic/leverage learning is that the organization is committed to finding its most effective investment. This requires a strong listening stance and discernment of both the context and the strengths the organization brings to the development challenge. Tied to strategic learning is the commitment to listen to and collaborate with others, for the task is far greater than the resources of any given organization. Without leverage learning, massive efforts can be squandered. This is clearly demonstrated by the model. (To be clear, the placement of the fulcrum under grassroots learning is not significant; the placement of the fulcrum simply illustrates maximum leverage). If the fulcrum is misplaced on the pole—if the organization does not function strategically in cooperation with others according to its strengths—then all the other dimensions of learning are rendered insignificant, and no effective leverage can be applied to the inertia. Two dimensions of strategic learning are considered in this analysis of World Vision Burundi.

2. Strategic learning in World Vision Burundi

a. Strategic learning and partnership

On paper World Vision is committed to working strategically, building partnerships, collaborating, and facilitating collaboration among different partners, particularly Christian groups:

An integral part of the implementation approach is focusing on capacity building of partners including alliances with churches and local associations in order to contribute to spiritual and social transformation; bringing faith-based organizations together for more fruitful collaboration in order to address the material and spiritual needs of the community, especially in the domain of peace building and HIV/AIDS. (LEAP Framework 2007)

A specific World Vision Burundi commitment highlights one angle of this commitment to leveraging partnership:

In the areas of World Vision Burundi's strategic focus, *through quality ministry, resource optimization, and focusing on programs that have comparative advantages over others* World Vision will give priority to activities which can have a “catalyst” effect to the broader economy of the country. Operational efficiency and quality is therefore considered as key in soliciting support and partnerships (Approved World Vision Burundi Strategy 2008, emphasis mine)

This written commitment and the reality seem quite dissonant, however. The conclusion of a number of “outsiders” to World Vision Burundi, but definite insiders to the development world in Burundi, was unequivocal: World Vision (and other NGOs as well) have only a token commitment to collaboration and partnership building. One interviewee spoke of the spirit of competition that characterizes NGOs; this, he commented, sadly leads to wasted resources and ineffectiveness. With regard to partnering and working alongside churches, these outsiders also gave a very negative evaluation of the NGO world, including World Vision. One leader commented that it took three years before he even knew that World Vision was a Christian NGO; another spoke of the organization's reticence to identify with the Church for fear of compromising certain funding partnerships. A denominational leader was unequivocal: NGOs basically work only parallel to the churches; they do nothing with the churches. These observations stand in stark contrast to the expressed value and commitment of World Vision: “The primary role of World Vision's programme staff is to serve as a catalyst and builder of capacity of local partners and partnerships toward improving and sustaining the well-being of children within families and communities, especially the most vulnerable” (IPM 2010). To be fair to World Vision Burundi, this quote comes from the new IPM framework document that has not yet been integrated into overall project design.

Even at the NGO-to-NGO level, there seems to be little more than token collaboration. This struck me when I visited the region where the first Cankuzo ADP is being implemented. We drove past a field where a number of people were working collectively. The ADP director mentioned that that field was a project of another NGO in the region. Yet he made no mention of collaboration between these two initiatives. Furthermore, the group of six coordinators that I met in Cankuzo identified a total lack of synergy with other NGOs in the province. The program

manager in Cankuzo is part of a network of NGOs that work in the province and meet together monthly, but they have no joint strategy for the province. He recognizes the need, which is a good place to start.

But the bottom line with World Vision Burundi, according to both insiders and outsiders, to both upper and lower management, is that it is turned inward. It basically does its own thing. The system itself is not geared for collaboration. There is little capacity-building of partners, only token alliances with churches, and a fruitless lack of collaboration with other NGOs. One interviewee commented that something either in the values of the mission of World Vision would have to change to prioritize this. Perhaps related to the above comment on theoretical learning, World Vision Burundi needs to appoint a person whose main responsibility is ensuring that partnerships/leverage learning is more than a token commitment. This harsh evaluation, however, must be tempered by some recent encouraging initiatives.⁵³

b. Strategic learning and Advocacy

Advocacy is one of the three pillars of World Vision, the other two being Transformational Development and Humanitarian Emergency Intervention. Advocacy is woven into the strategic plan in World Vision Burundi, particularly in their commitment to contribute to social justice, equity and inclusion in the target community (Strategic Objective 3). They envision advocacy as a way of drawing attention both nationally and internationally to related justice issues. Their sub-objectives include the following:

World Vision will partner with credible, local actors to mobilize ADP communities to raise awareness and increase harmony on issues of ethnic diversity and cross-cutting issues of gender and child protection; [c]ommunity groups and associations will be supported through practical ways to raise issues to their respective authorities, particularly in regards to issues affecting the wellbeing of children. (Approved World Vision Burundi Strategy 2008)

Advocacy is also a key strategic element in two of their “cross-cutting” themes: peace building and child protection. These themes find particular expression in several of the

⁵³These include an MOU with CIALCA, a consortium of agricultural research organizations to work together in banana propagation. World Vision, World Relief and Floresta Burundi are also exploring partnership options in the new southern ADP – Rutatna. Partnering with local NGOs in the context of the ADPs is more and more common.

objectives, as seen above. These laudable objectives do not seem to find much traction, however, in light of the comments in the interviews. Advocacy through partnership that results in lobbying and awareness to critical human rights and justice issues will require intentional partnership at a number of levels, and a more significant investment by World Vision Burundi.

One veteran World Vision Burundi interviewee referred to advocacy as the lame leg in the three-legged stool of World Vision's priorities, both internationally and nationally in Burundi. To make the point, reference was made to the miniscule financial commitment globally to advocacy, a mere 4% of World Vision's total financial investment. Specific reference was made to the importance of painting the full picture of child health in Burundi so that the organization can lobby on behalf of carefully identified needs. Without such a careful commitment, working together with other partners, it seems difficult if not impossible to speak authoritatively and act responsibly on an issue.

3. Conclusion regarding strategic learning

Strategic learning, the commitment to finding the optimum place of investment with respect to its core competencies, the strengths of other partners, and the broader development needs, is the weakest learning dimension of World Vision Burundi. The organization suffers from a common malady that afflicts large NGOs: self-sufficiency. An important leveraging step would be to capitalize on its strengths, such as training and facilitating partnerships, and making them available to the larger development community. Although partnership and joint advocacy are valued on paper, there is little evidence of this in reality; however, there are some encouraging signs that this is changing. An important next step is making strategic learning, with its twin expressions of partnership building and advocacy, a primary value of the organization. This value could be reinforced through the creation of a department committed to research, partnership and advocacy, and of allocating a gifted person in the organization to lead this.

E. Institutional learning

1. Introduction

The above learning domains have focused on learning and adapting to the task at hand; in this case, the challenge of learning from the context, from experimentation with different initiatives, from theory and skills acquisition, from strategic analysis of broader issues. One final

learning domain ties them all together, that of “institutional” learning. This domain of learning focuses on the internal dynamics of the organization, of how well the members of the organization learn to function together effectively and efficiently in accomplishing their task.

In light of the leverage learning model, an organization that is committed to strong institutional learning is one that has the strength to apply leverage. In other words, the stronger the “institutional” learning culture, the thicker the pole and the greater the potential leverage. The description in the previous chapter provided an in-depth overview of each of the four lenses that serve to analyze the internal, “Institutional” learning of World Vision Burundi:

- alignment of vision, the degree to which members understand and embrace the vision of the organization;
- alignment of communication, the effectiveness of the communication within the organization;
- relational alignment, the level of harmony and trust in the organization;
- giftedness alignment, getting the right people in the right positions with the right training.

Learning to align these different critical components of an organization strengthens the pole and enables pressure to be applied to the task. If the organization is not learning and growing in these areas, the pole will weaken and can easily break when pressure is applied. An effective learning organization must not only position itself to learn about its external environment and challenges, but must also address the challenge of strengthening institutional learning, of learning to function internally.

2. World Vision Burundi institutional learning analysis through four lenses

a. Vision alignment

Learning at this level is an ongoing challenge at World Vision Burundi. World Vision Burundi does have strong vision/mission documents, but ensuring that employees understand and embrace this vision becomes difficult in light of the current number of new staff. Embracing vision requires time and margin. It needs to be soaked up and acquired by osmosis. Constant reminders are essential. Here, as well, interviewees expressed concern that the yearly staff retreat was no longer part of the picture. Others also commented on the constant demands on time and the lack of margin to even sit down with your staff and ensure that they understand the vision,

the bigger picture. On a similar note, one interviewee lamented the heavy policy and procedure requirements, and how easy it is to be so preoccupied by these things that you forget the vision, which is the child.

The role of the coordinator for Christian commitment is critical and valued. The now defunct yearly retreat could be an important touch point for (re) learning and being reminded of the *raison d'être* of the organization. At the same time, it was encouraging to see the vision and values posted on the door of the Cankuzo office and to sense the program manager's passionate commitment to the full spiritual vision that undergirds World Vision. The morning devotional times are also important times for refocusing on this spiritual commitment.

Vision alignment received the highest rating by the interviewees (3.5 out of 5).

b. Communication alignment

There are some definite needs at this level. There is no “communications” department at World Vision Burundi. The current communications officer is responsible for external communication and media relations. It was expressed by at least one interviewee that it is critical to have a communications officer for an organization that has surpassed a staff of 150. One effort to facilitate internal communications is the quarterly electronic newsletter. With a few exceptions, up-down communication was quite effective; the SMT succeeds in communicating with the field for the most part (with periodic technical difficulties). Down-up communication shows some signs of strain, however. There are apparently some cultural barriers and social barriers that impede this communication. It was noted in the Burundian culture that people don't approach supervisors to express concerns as a rule, and expressing concerns about working conditions is seen as dangerous, for you could lose your job. Several field staff expressed deep concerns about not being heard. They also appeared to be out of the loop in terms of understanding what the next steps were for them as their project was drawing to a close. The failure of communication with these field staff was glaring. Others in higher positions of responsibility also commented that down-up communication is inefficient.

The French-English issue also came up often. The common language is Kirundi, but the language of education has been French. World Vision Burundi has chosen to function in English, yet most staff are much more comfortable in French. This creates a significant challenge for

those who are not fluent in English, particularly when it comes to training opportunities or completing reports.

Overall, communication was average at 3 out of 5.

c. Relational alignment

Most interviewees commented that there has been improvement at this level. In the last couple of years there were some issues that some of the interviewees alluded to; these led to firing of some staff. Not everyone has left on the best of terms either. At the same time, none of the interviewees currently employed identified any major relational issues that were adversely affecting the organization. One commented that it has “improved tremendously.” The level of trust and camaraderie was also evident among the World Vision staff in Cankuzo. The program manager has a strong pastoral approach with his staff. On a practical level, there is a recourse system in place to deal with grievances.

I was not able to discern any level of tension over the historic Hutu-Tutsi conflict. A few interviewees did express that there was an unofficial “affirmative action” priority to get more Hutus into the organization following the Arusha Accord in 2003. None identified any concerns with respect to this, but discussing the “issue” is shrouded in taboo for many Burundians. One interviewee commented that the retreats had been helpful in this regard. At the SMT level there was evidence of a strong and harmonious working relationship. The director’s vision is to empower his staff, and he seems to be a strong team player and is not afraid to devolve authority.

Overall relational alignment is strong, with a 4 out of 5.

d. Giftedness alignment: the right people in the right job with the requisite skills

This section directly ties to the above discussion on the priority of human resource development. The evaluation is quite mixed as noted above. There is only a small pool of qualified individuals to draw from in the Burundi context, and those chosen have to be strong enough in English to qualify. This may be one of the reasons that the SMT has four members out of seven from other countries. As new staff may not meet the required qualifications, considerable training needs to be done in the field. Opportunities for training were described above.

A major and recurring concern at this level is the salary question (it came up consistently in all the interviews). One of the reasons for the high turnover is the remuneration that has not kept pace with other organizations. And this sword cuts both ways, limiting the capacity to draw qualified candidates, and undermining the current staff. One of the expressed values of World Vision is that they value people. Yet staff members have trouble feeling valued when their salary does not reflect their contribution. Several also expressed concern that their contracts were all short term, and that even if the contract was extended, it took months at times for the contract to be finalized. Many live with constant insecurity. One manager did comment that things are on the cusp of changing.

Evaluation through the giftedness lens is weaker, 2.5 out of 5

3. Conclusion institutional learning

The “vital signs” for World Vision Burundi are good, at least with regards to institutional learning. There is nonetheless much room for improvement. There is overall alignment in the key areas. In order to keep a deepening appreciation of the vision and values of World Vision Burundi, it would be very helpful to reignite the yearly retreats. Nevertheless, the morning devotional times are valuable moments for reaffirming the spiritual dimension of World Vision Burundi. Communication is quite strong, but there is significant room for improvement, particularly the down-up flow. Having an additional dedicated communications person or department could be a valuable contribution to improving communication flow. It seems, as well, that the decision to function in English creates an unnecessary burden on the communication in a country that still leans toward French. Trust and relational alignment is strong across the board, but the spiritual retreats would serve to strengthen it further. The giftedness alignment is mediocre, due to a number of factors, not the least of which is the pace of growth of the organization and the need to find qualified staff in a small pool of candidates. This problem is exacerbated by poor salaries and short and uncertain contracts. Many feel undervalued and unmotivated in such an environment. This concern must be attended to for the long term health of the staff and the organization.

III. Overall conclusions

A. Review

The proposed NGO leverage learning model pulls together the best of the theory on learning organizations and applies it specifically to the context of the development world. It highlights effectively the interplay, even interdependence, among the different learning domains. None can be neglected without seriously impairing the strength and effectiveness of the organization. If the organization is committed, for example, to strong grassroots learning and “action research” but fails to integrate its discoveries into a broader and richer theoretical framework, it will lack leverage and effectiveness. Or if the organization is committed to championing the rights of the poor through well-researched advocacy and effective lobbying, but fails to create a healthy functioning team dynamic in their internal organization, it will break under the pressure.

B. World Vision Burundi—a mediocre learning organization

The weight of the evidence suggests that World Vision Burundi is far from being a strong learning organization. There are significant concerns that have been flagged in each learning domain. Grassroots and experimental learning are undermined by a one-size-fits-all development model that is weak in a number of areas, two of which are significant. First of all, because of the rigid development frame, World Vision Burundi cannot implement other than a child-centric model of development, even if evidence and the will of the community suggested a different model. Secondly, at the experimental level, World Vision Burundi uses complex evaluation and monitoring instruments that are cumbersome for trained staff, and out of the reach of the local stakeholders. Although monitoring and assessment is an important dimension of the ADPs, the failure to adapt these instruments to the local stakeholders is a failure in learning and adaptation which can only distance the stakeholders from eventual ownership of the projects.

Theoretical learning is a stronger learning domain within the organization, but here learning seems to be more “single-loop” than “double-loop” learning. In other words, training focuses primarily on skill acquisition. Double-loop learning that would challenge prevailing paradigms (such as the child-centric model) is not on the agenda. To be fair, questioning the development frame and priorities may be beyond the purview of the local management; they are part of larger organization and a larger region, where these priorities have been established. But the very

nature of the World Vision organization and its one-size-fits-all development frame militates against such “double-loop” learning.

Strategic learning has priority on paper, and there are a few encouraging signs that this priority is gaining momentum.⁵⁴ But the strategic learning that focuses on establishing partnerships and prioritizing advocacy is difficult for a large organization such as World Vision that has established a set of self-contained goals and strategies; it seems unlikely that the pattern of remaining on the periphery of networks and of focusing on service delivery will change without a radical questioning of the status quo.

Institutional learning is the strongest learning domain of World Vision Burundi, thanks in large part to the tone and priorities of the director and the SMT. This “institutional” strength is a key resource that can help move World Vision Burundi toward becoming a stronger learning organization.

C. World Vision Burundi—weighing the learning potential

The hope for World Vision Burundi lies in the vibrant learning dynamics that are evident in the organization, particularly in the leadership. Personal commitment to learn and change and a strong sensitivity to context is clearly seen in the leadership. There is a strong spirit of inquiry in the SMT, embodied by the director and reflected in the management team. The recent document “Change Management Plan” (Heliso 2010a) reflects the resounding commitment of the director and the SMT to move beyond the status quo at many levels. One of areas of proposed change is to restructure the work in the ADP to foster a “more systematic relationship with local stakeholders (evidenced by frequent and documented meetings and responsibility sharing)” (Heliso 2010a). This priority reflects sensitivity to a contextual reality that needs to be changed, as well as a desire to make it happen. Other change domains reflect a similar commitment on the part of the director and the SMT.

Another characteristic of World Vision Burundi also predisposes it to becoming a stronger learning organization: the relatively healthy learning culture within the organization. There are a number of organizational learning mechanisms that facilitate learning. For example, the “change management plan” also prioritizes a stronger devolution of authority and a flatter organizational

⁵⁴See footnote 53.

structure. Such a priority places more responsibility and decision making in the hands of local personnel; such devolution creates responsibility that in turn encourages learning.

An initial step in the direction of becoming a stronger learning organization would be to prioritize the weakest areas, that of strategic learning and certain dimensions of theoretical learning that would strengthen advocacy. In light of this evaluation, I proposed that World Vision Burundi revisit its historic stance that keeps it on the periphery of networking with other NGOs. To that end, I further propose that it create a staff position dedicated to researching theoretical and strategic learning initiatives; this would be a good first step toward prioritizing learning and increasing leverage and effectiveness of the organization.

The above recommendations have the potential for moving World Vision Burundi further down the continuum toward becoming a stronger learning organization. But the weight of this study leads to the conclusion that movement down this continuum, even with the proposed changes, will most likely be only incremental. The bottom line for World Vision Burundi, and for World Vision in general, is that the prevailing development paradigm with its child-centric focus, its overweening commitment to service delivery, and its failure to prioritize broader systemic issues, will continue to limit creative rethinking and re-prioritizing learning. In other words, the best case scenario is that learning and “re-learning” will only happen within certain well-defined parameters. The sad result will be limited leverage and impact for World Vision.

Appendix I

World Vision Transformational Development Model (Frame)

Following is a brief look at three frameworks. To learn more, consult references in the bibliography.

Transformational Development (TD) Frame

(World Vision Transformational Development Network 2002)

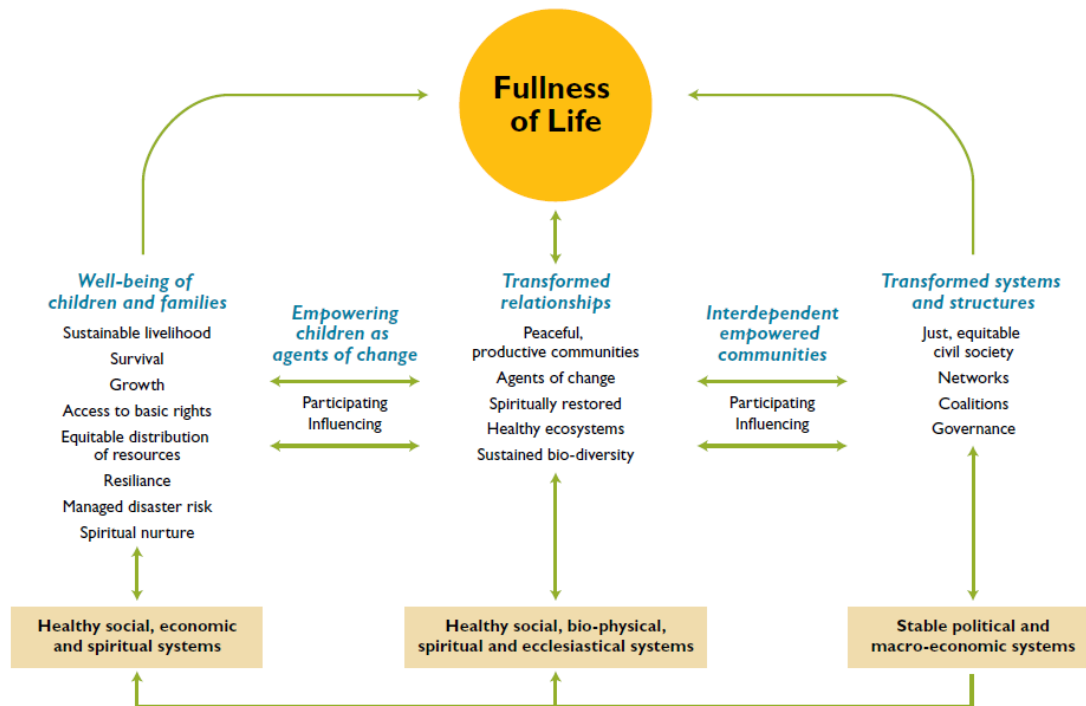
World Vision's TD Frame is built upon a description of poverty as disempowerment. This model describes five domains of change as the keys to mitigate poverty and lack of development. These five domains, described below, interact to promote sustainable transformation in social, biophysical, political, economic, spiritual and ecclesiastical systems. The five domains of change are:

- 1. Well-being of children and families.** The capacities of families and communities to ensure the survival and growth of all their children, are enhanced by championing their human rights to health and basic education, as well as spiritual and emotional nurture. Children's and families' well-being also requires opportunity to develop a sustainable household livelihood with just distribution of resources, capacity to earn a future livelihood, protection from abuse and exploitation, as well as reduction of the risk of exposure to disasters and HIV/AIDS.
- 2. Empowering children as agents of change.** World Vision's TD Frame places children at the centre of change. Children participate in the development process in age-appropriate ways, becoming agents of transformation in their families and communities.
- 3. Transformed relationships.** This domain focuses on the need to restore relationships with each other, the environment, and with God. Equitable, just, peaceful, productive and inclusive relationships within households and communities impact social, political, economic, spiritual and ecclesiastical aspects of life. Healthy ecosystem and biodiversity programmes responsibly manage environmental resources.

4. **Interdependent and empowered communities.** The presence of a culture of participation empowers families and whole communities to influence and shape their situation, through coalitions and networks at local, national, regional and global levels, based on mutual respect, transparency, and ethical/moral responsibility.
5. **Transformed systems and structures.** This domain includes structural, systemic, and policy issues that impact development – including participation in civil society, private and public sectors, government, availability of and access to social services, means of production, and just distribution of resources in the state. These systems and structures impact social, religious, economic, and political domains at local, national, regional and global levels.

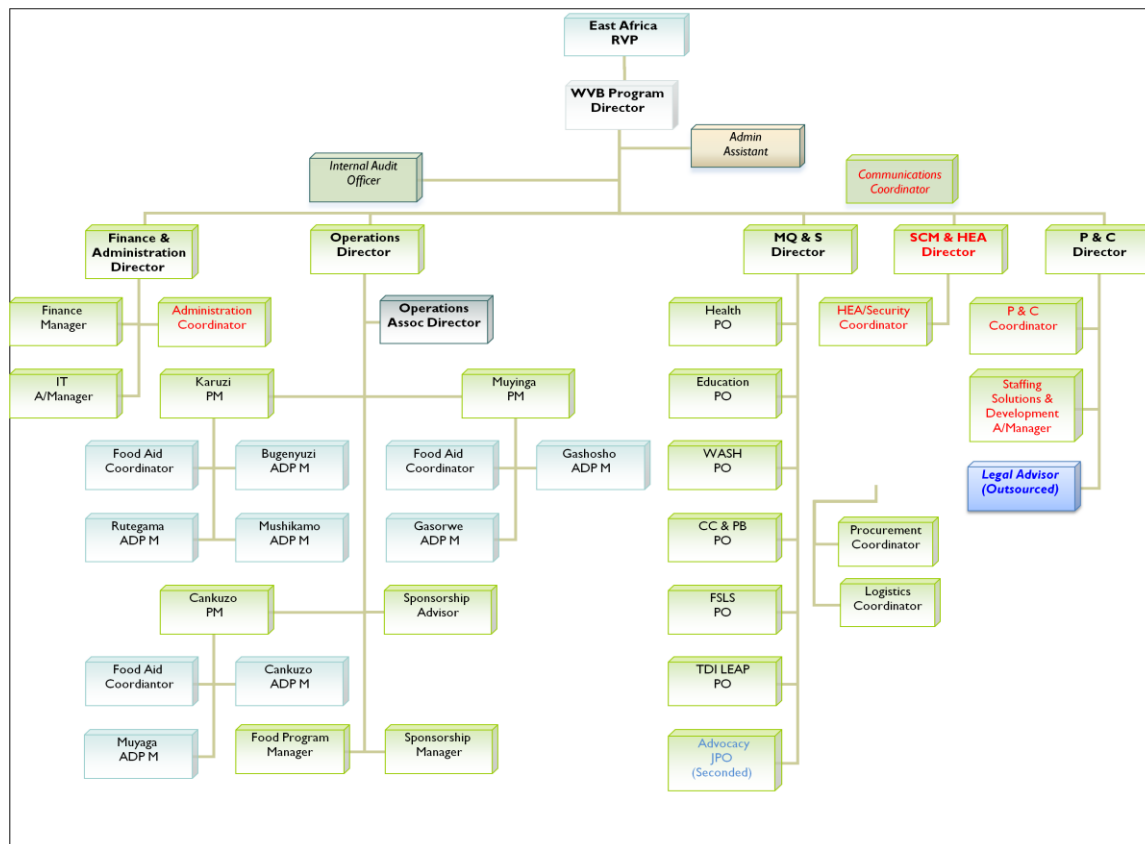
Work still needs to be done in understanding and describing relationships between each domain. However, Figure 12 shows, in a basic way, how domains can interact to result in fullness of life. Compare similarities with the two other models discussed below.

Figure 12. Relationship between TD Frame's Domains of Change



Appendix II

World Vision Burundi Organizational Chart



Those interviewed in the above management chart:

- Each member of the management team: the program director, the finance and admin director, the operations director, the personnel director (P and C director) and the Humanitarian Emergency Director/security measures director (also has role Ministry Quality portfolio).
- Most members of the Cankuzo management team: the programme manager, the food aid coordinator, the Cankuzo Area Development Program manager, the food program manager, the sponsorship manager. Also (not in chart) Children of Cankuzo coordinator and the EU project manager.
- Other members include the sponsorship advisor, the communications coordinator, the health programme officer, the ADP programme officer (not in chart), the infrastructure program officer (WASH) and the associate operations director.
- Other interviews were at the support and technical level and do not figure in organization chart

Appendix III

Memorandum of Understanding between World Vision Burundi & Barry Whatley

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between World Vision Burundi and Dr. Barry Whatley, researcher from the department of Global Studies and International Development at the University of Ottawa

Dates: March 29 to April 13, 2010

Project Overview: The goal of the research project is to study the role of learning in World Vision Burundi. The particular focus is on the organizational commitment to integrate learning into its project development, its professional development of employees, and its organizational culture. His study aims to discern the presence, priority and practicality of learning in the organization and suggest a number of recommendations that would help improve the learning culture within the organization.

Methodology: Dr. Whatley will conduct interviews with different levels of management and staff, as well as with beneficiaries of a given development project. He will also meet with a focus group of World Vision students that are part of the DAI program in leadership at Light University. He will brief the leadership team prior to beginning his research; he will meet the same team to debrief before he leaves. Written consent will be sought from all interviewees/focus group members prior to meeting; this consent form insures participants of anonymity and freedom to not participate or withdraw at any time. Senior management will be given opportunity to review all findings of the project prior to publication.

Logistics: Dr. Whatley agrees to cover all costs incurred by his visit and to work within the constraints and guidelines established by World Vision Burundi.

World Vision agrees to

- provide access to archival documents that would be in significance to the research
- help identify a representative cross section of the organization to be interviewed
- inform staff and management of the research project and encourage participation in the interviews/discussion groups
- provide reasonable logistic support/access to facilitate 20 to 25 interviews that will take place during the three weeks, including travel and accommodations to one of the project sites

Dr. Whatley agrees to

- respect the protocol that World Vision establishes for him
- cover all costs incurred by his visit
- conduct himself in a way that is non-intrusive and respectful
- honor the ethical guidelines established in the consent form and in the ethics review of his research project
- explain survey focus, methodology, plans and expected outcomes to a representative group of World Vision Burundi Management before commencement of the study

- hold an exit conference both at the field level and with World Vision Burundi Management to give initial feedback on the progress of the survey and possible outcomes
- submit an electronic copy of the research to World Vision Burundi within two months from the date of research

Both Parties agree not to use each other brands, trademarks and logo's prior to written consent of the other party. Communications about the joint program, the MOU or that in any way refer to the other party can only be done after written consent of the other party.

The nature of communication under this MOU is envisaged to

- Publicize results achieved under the program via common channels such as workshops, websites, and technical reports;
- Mention the cooperation between the two parties on the each party's website, newsletters and stakeholders meetings.

Signatures

Dr. Barry Whatley, researcher: _____

Date: _____

Simon Heliso, Program/Country director: _____

Date: _____

Appendix IV

Interview Consent Form

Study: Helping Christian NGOs become stronger learning organizations

Researcher: Barry Whatley

Supervisor: Philippe Regnier, University of Ottawa, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Department of Global Studies and International Development.

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Barry Whatley under the supervision of Philippe Regnier.

The Study: The purpose of the study is to help World Vision Burundi become more effective in its aid delivery through evaluating its commitment to learning at each stage of its planning and aid delivery process. The objectives of the study include the following:

- Identify the different types of learning that occur in the organization
- Understand the overall learning “atmosphere” that exists in the organization
- Discover to what degree the beneficiaries are involved in learning process
- Recommend ways in which World Vision could improve its commitment to learning

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of either

- responding to interview questions OR _____
- participating in a focus group discussion _____

During this time, I will respond to questions and give my feedback on my experience. The interviews will take place from March 30, 2010 to April 13, 2010. The long interview will take one hour; the shorter interviews will take 30 minutes; the focus group discussion will take one hour 30 minutes.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I share openly about my experience within World Vision and my assessment of certain aspects of the organization. Some elements of what I share may be more personal in nature, and I may feel uncomfortable if that information was made public. I have been assured by the researcher that information will be confidential and if the content of what I share is used in the study, I will not be identified.

Benefits: My participation in this study has the potential to help World Vision as an organization to become a stronger learning organization that is more effective in aid delivery.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential, and anonymity will be insured. I understand that the contents will be used only for the purposes of this study. The content of the interview/discussion will be used as data; certain quotations may appear in the document, but the person will not be identified. Barry Whatley is committed when he completes the study to not sharing personal information regarding the respondents that might reveal their identity. I also

agree to keep the content of the focus group discussions confidential; nor will I divulge the names of the participants.

Conservation of data: The data collected, notes from interviews and discussion forums, will not be stored on any platform or in any place where others might access them. The hard copies and electronic copies of data will be kept securely for five years and then will be shredded or deleted. Only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data. World Vision will receive a detailed but anonymized report of the research of the findings by June 15, 2010.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be deleted and not integrated into the study.

Acceptance

I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Barry Whatley, student of the department of Global Studies and International Development at the University of Ottawa, under the supervision of Philippe Regnier

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact:

Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research,
University of Ottawa,
Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 159,
Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Tel.: (613) 562-5841
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Witness's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix V

Questionnaires for group and personal interviews

Introduction to the project: Reading the Consent Form (Appendix I) introduced the interviewee to the project and assured him/her of anonymity and confidentiality. A general overview was shared with each interviewee:

Thank you for your willingness to be involved in this interview process. The fact that you are sitting here indicates the commitment of your organization to invest in its employees and help insure that the organization continues to learn and deliver more effective aid; the leadership has agreed to facilitate my research into helping World Vision Burundi become a stronger learning organization. What is a “learning organization”? A basic definition brings some clarity:

The organization that builds and improves its own practice consciously (is) continually devising and developing a means to draw learning from its own and others’ experience (Taylor 2002). A strong learning organization is not happy with the status quo; it recognizes that there is always room to improve and that lessons must be both grasped and that knowledge must be applied in order to effect change. The following questions are designed to help discern the presence, priority and practicality of learning in the organization. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. You are free to NOT respond to any of the questions if you feel responding would in some way place you in an uncomfortable situation with respect to your supervisors or co-workers. You will not be identified by name when the data is compiled.

An overview of the model was shared with the management and middle-management as part of the introduction; this model was not shared with support staff and field staff.

INTERVIEW SENIOR MANAGEMENT (Long interview and foundation of all other interviews)

A. Introductory Questions

1. Please tell me about your role and position with World Vision?
2. How many years have you worked here? What training have you had?
3. What to you appreciate the most about working with World Vision Burundi?

B. Grass-roots, participatory learning

1. In an NGO, there are often competing voices that need to be heeded—the voice of donors, the voice of “organization” and its core values and ideology, the voice of strong personalities within the organization. How effective has World Vision been in listening to its primary customers and their needs and priorities?

2. Can you tell me about a couple of ways that World Vision is committed to listening to beneficiaries? How have you made sure to assess clearly what they value?
3. What are the ways that World Vision insures that it listens to the needs of the beneficiaries and gets important feedback from them?
4. What would be two or three ways that World Vision could integrate learning and feedback from beneficiaries into the planning and evaluating process?

C. Experimental learning

1. To what degree is Experimental learning is a core value and priority for World Vision Burundi.
2. Describe the project management stages for me. What is the role of experimental learning in that process?
3. There are three types of development projects: experimentation projects, pilot projects, and demonstration projects. Can you describe an experimentation project? How would you identify when a project is ready to become a pilot project? When a pilot project is ready to become a demonstration project?
4. What freedom do field managers have who sense that the “experiment” is not working to either alter or stop a project? How is that call made?
5. Can you think of one or two things you have learned from “failed” experiments that have helped you succeed the next time around?
6. What three commitments would help World Vision be a stronger experimental learner?

D. Theoretical and research learning

1. How would you evaluate the commitment to research and in-depth analysis in World Vision Burundi?
2. Do you have a person who is responsible for researching the broader issues of development? Do you have “experts” on staff in different areas? How do these experts contribute to the work of World Vision Burundi?
3. What are the critical areas of World Vision’s work that require more significant research focus? How does World Vision insure that these areas are researched?
4. What areas of theoretical learning/reading are considered priority for World Vision management? How does World Vision invest in equipping leaders to be better researchers and thinkers on the issues that surround development?

5. What are some of the ways that you have been trained to understand your particular area of responsibility?
6. What would be two or three commitments that would help World Vision be more thoughtful and well-researched in critical areas?

E. Leverage Learning

1. How would you evaluate the priority of partnership and advocacy in World Vision Burundi?
2. What particular commitments does World Vision Burundi make to build partnerships with other NGOs, GOs or other civil society organizations such as churches?
3. Who are the key people in the organization who are well-placed to speak with authority on specific issues, such as child health or vulnerability?
4. What are two or three commitments that World Vision Burundi could make to strengthen partnership and advocacy?

F. Institutional learning

1. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of your organization in fulfilling its mission and reaching its goals?
2. Both exogenous and endogenous (external and internal) factors influence the effectiveness of an organization. What would you identify to be three internal dynamics in the organization that hinder its effectiveness? What 3 internal factors contribute to its effectiveness?
3. Four key areas of “alignment” are essential for a healthy organization:
 - Vision alignment
 - Communication alignment
 - Relational alignment
 - Giftedness alignment
4. How would you evaluate, on a scale of 1 to 5 the strength and clarity of the vision of World Vision, 5 being strong and 1 being weak. How well are the vision and values understood and embraced by the members of the organization? What specific commitments/practices strengthen this embracing of a common vision? What factors might undermine it?
5. How would you evaluate, on a scale of 1 to 5 the quality of the communication in the organization? How well does communication flow down, and up? What factors enhance communication in the organization? Detract? What two or three commitments would improve communication?

6. How would you evaluate... the level of trust in the organization, the “relational” alignment? What contributes to building of confidence and trust? Undermines? What two or three changes would improve the trust?
7. How would you evaluate... the level of competence in the organization, the “giftedness” alignment? Are people in the right place with the right skills? What factors help ensure that this happens? What hinders it? What commitments could help strengthen this? Do you feel personally that you are given opportunities and encouragement to improve your skills?

G. Final summary question

1. What two or three commitments/changes could significantly improve the organization and its effectiveness?

INTERVIEW MIDDLE MANAGEMENT AND PROJECT SUPERVISORS

This interview follows the basic outline given above, but focuses in on specific areas of expertise, such as experimental and evaluation learning for project supervisors. For example, our interview with the six project directors in Cankuzo focused in depth on grassroots and experimental learning questions. There was less time spent on theoretical learning and leverage learning. Institutional learning questions were explored however.

INTERVIEW FIELD STAFF

The particular focus for these was on the area of expertise, and particularly on grassroots/experimental learning for they are directly on site and can best evaluate this. The “model” as such was not shared with them, as it was with senior and middle management. The questions regarding institutional learning were given equal weight as with the other interviews, however.

INTERVIEW FIELD WORKERS

As these workers are less an integral part of the organization and have shorter contracts, the focus of the interview was discerning their role and how their observations contributed to grassroots and experimental learning. Institutional learning questions did not apply.

INTERVIEW BENEFICIARY

1. Tell me how the project with World Vision has impacted your community?
2. What do you appreciate about World Vision?
3. What hope do you have for the future?

INTERVIEW OUTSIDERS

1. What would you identify as the top 3-5 development needs in Burundi?
2. What role does World Vision play in meeting those needs?
3. Do you consider what they are doing to be effective? Why or why not?
4. What is World Vision known for in the broader development community?
5. If you had the ear of the leadership of World Vision, what would you encourage them to do better, or stop doing?

Appendix VI

Report for World Vision Burundi

Report to World Vision Burundi
July 24, 2010

Discerning and improving the organizational learning culture of World Vision Burundi

Study done by Dr. Barry Whatley in the context of an MA thesis with the University of Ottawa titled, “Helping Christian NGOs become stronger learning organizations.”

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Report to World Vision Burundi

Final Document, August 16, 2010

Discerning and improving the learning culture of WV Burundi

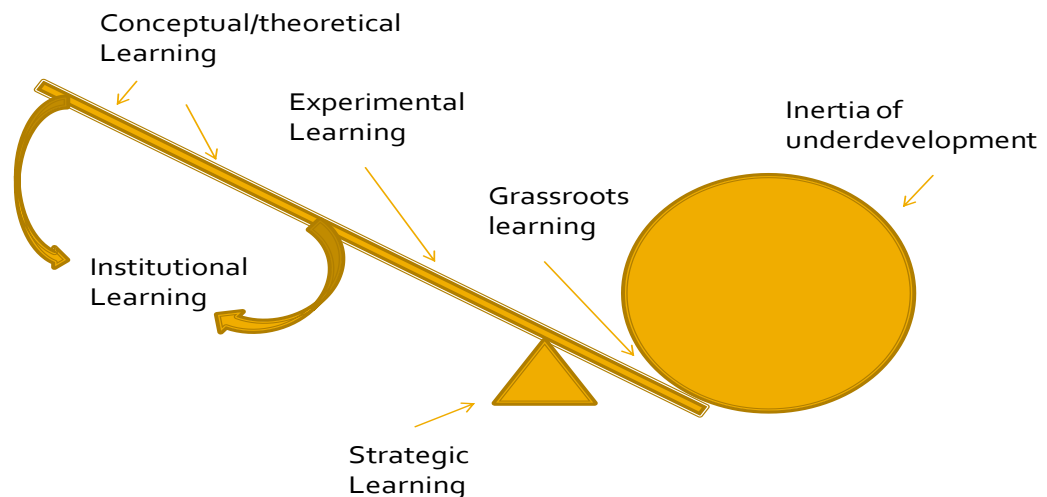
Study done by Dr. Barry Whatley in the context of an MA thesis with the University of Ottawa titled, “Helping Christian NGOs become stronger learning organizations”

I Introduction and framework

This report is best read with the companion document, “Toward a model of an effective learning NGO” which provides a fuller theoretical development of each dimension of the learning model.

According to Taylor (2002), a learning organization builds and improves its own practice consciously and (is) continually devising and developing means to draw learning from its own and others’ experience. Our understanding of a learning organization focuses on five different dimensions of learning: grassroots learning, experimental learning, theoretical (conceptual) learning, leverage learning, and organizational learning. The following diagram provides a helpful template to situation the different dimensions of learning in the overall framework of the development NGO.

The NGO leverage-learning model



Overcoming the inertia of underdevelopment is the goal of the development NGO. The only possible way to overcome this inertia is through careful leveraging as the lever imagery indicates. The full complement of learning multiplies the contribution of a given NGO to the task. The ultimate goal is that this inertia would be overcome so that it could roll without major

input from the outside. No single NGO has the resources and ability to break the inertia, and so this picture can only be completed by situating a number of NGOs and GOs strategically around the inertia so that the maximum leverage could be applied and result in movement.

Grassroots learning

Key Question: To what extent and in what ways does the organization listen to and learn from its primary “clients”/customers/beneficiaries and their development needs.

This dimension of learning could also be referred to as contextual learning and refers to learning that comes from careful observation, data gathering and interpretation of the context. Effective grassroots learning requires, for example, strong participatory approaches and a careful ethnographic stance (Chambers 2008). To be a strong grassroots learning organization also requires a commitment to “contextualizing” development practices to the local context, and not an uncritical importing of approaches from other contexts. According to our model, the grassroots learning is the interface with the development context, the part of the pole that is wedged under the need.

Experimental learning

Key Question: To what extent does and in what ways does the organization have an “experimental stance,” viewing developmental projects as experiments that they are learning from, not an end in themselves?

The focus of experimentation is the flip-side of the grassroots learning. A given practice aimed at addressing a development need requires a monitoring structure to measure the progress of this initiative and modify it accordingly. But an organization with a strong experimental learning stance has more than a careful monitoring process; it also is committed to honestly facing failure and learning from it. Furthermore, similar to the above, it does not uncritically import outside initiatives; it is committed to adjusting them after experimental evaluation. This commitment to experimentation lengthens the pole and provides more leverage for the task of overcoming underdevelopment inertia.

Theoretical Learning

Key Question: To what extent and in what ways does the organization tap into and draw from the breadth/depth of thinking and research that addresses the needs in their context? How is this broader research, as well as experimental learning and grassroots learning, being transformed into vision and policy?

This important dimension of learning is critical for the bigger learning picture. Good practice is impossible without strong theory/concepts. Our model demonstrates that a strong theoretical stance adds critical length to the pole and thus increases leverage. Examples of good theoretical learning in an organization would be its commitment to tap into broader research that sheds light on critical development issues. For example, if the development project addresses the needs of children that have experienced trauma, to what degree is research into the effects of trauma on

children reflected in the initiative? Expertise/strong theory is needed for good research at the grassroots level as well. For example, if the development project addresses an agricultural need, to what degree are agricultural technicians and specialists integrated into the planning, execution and monitoring of the project? Theoretical learning is particularly important in advocacy initiatives, as this requires a deep and broad understanding of critical issues. A development organization that has a strong commitment to theoretical learning will, among other things, ensure that qualified technicians/specialists are employed and consulted; it will prioritize research; and it will both integrate and disseminate effective ideas. Commitment to theoretical learning is also reflected in the commitment of the organization to train its people through appropriate academic programs. These and other commitments lengthen the pole and create significant leverage for the organization.

Leverage Learning

Key Question: To what extent and in what ways does WVB seek to discover ways to align its work with other initiatives; how effective is it at learning to partner and finding convergence; how well is it learning to contribute to the full portrait of development in Burundi and to finding its role?

Leverage learning is tied in with theoretical learning. The main idea behind leverage learning is that the organization is committed to finding its most effective investment. This requires a strong listening stance and discernment of both the context and the strengths the organization brings to the development challenge. Tied in with leverage learning is the commitment to listen to and collaborate with others, for the task is far greater than the resources of any given organization. Without leverage learning, massive efforts can be squandered. This is clearly demonstrated by the model. (To be clear, the placement of the fulcrum under grassroots learning insignificant in the diagram; the placement of the fulcrum indicates maximum leverage). If the fulcrum is misplaced on the pole—if the organization does not function strategically in cooperation with others according to its strengths—then all the other dimensions of learning are rendered insignificant; no effective leverage can be applied to the inertia.

Institutional Learning

Key Question: In what ways and to what extent does the organization learn to function effectively and efficiently in accomplishing its vision.

This is best understood as the thickness of the pole and refers to the ways in which the organization learns to function more effectively. Organizational learning can be seen through several lenses:

- alignment of vision, the degree to which members understand and embrace the vision of the organization;
- alignment of communication, the effectiveness of the communication within the organization;
- relational alignment, the level of harmony and trust in the organization;

- giftedness alignment, getting the right people in the right positions with the right training.

Learning to align these different critical components of an organization strengthens the pole and enables pressure to be applied to the task. If the organization is not learning and growing in these areas, the pole will weaken and can easily break when pressure is applied. The effective learning organization must not only position itself to learn about its external environment and challenges; it must also address the challenge of learning to function internally.

II Methodology

The director of World Vision Burundi, Simon Heliso graciously accepted to facilitate this research project, even though the request came only weeks before Barry Whatley's visit (another Burundi-based NGO had declined his request at the last minute). In preparation for the study project, a MOU was agreed upon and signed. Upon arrival, Dr. Whatley briefed the Senior Management Team prior to beginning his interviews and shared the above model.

The interviews were designed to get feedback from different levels of WVB management and staff on each of the learning "key questions" that are indicated above. They took place in Bujumbura at the central office, and in Cankuzo province. The assured anonymity of the interviewees gave them liberty to respond honestly and frankly to the questions. The questions were mostly open-ended, although a few structured questions gave respondents the opportunity to evaluate some of the internal dynamics of the organization on a 1 – 5 scale. The senior and middle-management interviews covered the whole spectrum of the model, whereas support staff and field staff interviews were more focused on their particular area of expertise. All interviews touched on the internal dynamics of the organization, "institutional learning," except for the interviews of the community development workers, the enumerators, and, of course, those outside of WVB. (Five "outsiders" to the organization were also interviewed). Some of the staff and middle-management participated in group interviews, as indicated below. Members of the senior management team were interviewed personally. Data was gathered through extensive note taking by the interviewer on his laptop. Over two hundred pages of notes were gathered and evaluated. Few direct quotes were integrated into the report; rather, the data were used to paint a general picture. One brief group interview with a group of beneficiaries (men) was conducted in Cankuzo province, but little data of substance came from it.

An exit interview with the Senior Management Team was also held; here the interviewer shared his initial findings with the group and asked several questions, taking further notes. A draft of this report was forwarded to Simon Heliso June 15; he commented on the report and provided some clarification. This final report was submitted on August 1, 2010.

Table 1

Interviews in Burundi, March 28 to April 13, 2010

4

Category of interviewee	Total Numbers	Male	Female	One-on-One Interview	Group Interview
Senior Management Team (SMT)	5	4	1	5	(The SMT also participated in two group discussions)
Middle Management Bujumbura	9	8	1	4	5 (one group of three, one group of two)
Middle Management Cankuzo	7	6	1	1	6 (one group of six)
Field Staff Cankuzo	8	5	3	0	8 (two groups of three, one group of two)
Outsiders	5	5	0	5	
Total	34	28	6	15	19

III Special contextual considerations

Burundi has experienced a long and devastating civil war that only recently has ended (the last open hostilities occurred in 2008). The impact of the conflict on the social and economic fabric of the society is far reaching. Several repercussions of this situation intersect with our theme or learning and adaptation, and were identified by many of the interviewees. First of all, World Vision's work was begun in Burundi with primarily a relief focus; in fact in 2006 all of their work was in relief projects. Many of these initial relief projects are still ongoing. Relief projects by default are strong on action and weak on assessment; a compelling need sets the agenda. Regarding our study of WVB as a learning organization, it would be unfair to measure the learning component of WVB uniquely against the backdrop of their relief projects. The former relief focus has further created a set of expectations in the communities where WV serves. WV is no longer there to hand out resources to meet needs; they are there to help the community develop. This change in perception takes time and is a difficult sell in many communities.

IV Overview of findings

The report work will be presented according the above model.

F. Grassroots learning

Key Question: To what extent and in what ways does the organization listen to and learn from its primary "clients" or beneficiaries and their development needs? How extensive and effective is the assessment process?

Summary

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This dimension of learning could also be referred to as contextual learning and refers to learning that comes from careful observation, data gathering and interpretation of the context. Effective grassroots learning requires, for example, strong participatory approaches and a careful ethnographic stance (Chambers 2008). To be a strong grassroots learning organization also requires a commitment to “contextualizing” development practices to the local context, and not an uncritical importing of approaches from other contexts. According to our model, the grassroots learning is the interface with the development context, the part of the pole that is wedged under the need.

Now that WV has moved definitively away from relief focus toward a development focus, grassroots learning or contextual learning has become a much higher priority. But this shift in its own right has not been easy to navigate, particularly in communities that had received aid during the relief phase. (In fact, a recurring comment of the interviewees at the field level was how difficult it has been to change the perception of those who have become “habitués à recevoir” (used to receiving). In the projects that have a strong development focus, grassroots/contextual learning seems to be a high priority and is consistently front and centre, particularly in the Area Development Programs. In the projects that began with a stronger relief focus, learning has been difficult to integrate. Our evaluation of contextual/grassroots learning has therefore two different tracks, one for the primarily “relief” projects, and the other for the development projects, primarily the Area Development Programs.

1. Contextual Learning in relief-focused projects

One of the main relief projects in Cankuzo is the food security program sponsored by the European Union. Interviews with the field workers/technicians revealed a striking disconnect between the observed and reported needs on the field and any subsequent adjustment of the program. They also commented that they were not in any way included in elaborating the project. The technicians expressed repeated frustration at the total lack of response to their expressed concerns. Furthermore, these technicians are the interface with the local community and speak on behalf of the local people. They gave numerous examples of how the project was maladapted to the context: only 1 goat was available for every 100 homes; only 10 of the 25 “agents de santé” were offered training; banana seedlings were offered to the households, but beans were needed. The actual mid-term (24 month) report does identify some of these failings, but seems to minimize them:

Le feedback donné par les bénéficiaires à Cankuzo est positif, spécialement avec un accent mis sur la valeur des arbres et la valeur des champs de démonstration/ les trous de compost. Beaucoup de ménages ont beaucoup apprécié la distribution des chèvres, *même si le nombre de chèvres distribués dans le cadre de ce projet semble être petit par rapport aux besoins dans les communautés* – la distribution de plus de chèvres et autres animaux domestiques devrait être envisagée pour les projets à venir (Food Security Cankuzo Interim Report 08-09, italics mine)

Feedback from the beneficiaries in Cankuzo is positive, particularly regarding the value of the trees the demonstration plots, and the compost holes. *Homes receiving goats much appreciated them, even though the number distributed seemed small in light of the needs in the community.* Greater distribution of goats and other domestic animals should be considered for subsequent projects (Food Security Cankuzo Interim Report, italics mine 6

To the technicians' exasperation, this report did identify many failings of the project and change was proposed, but nothing ever materialized. They were also given the impression that they would be involved in reworking the project; again, nothing ever came of it. If I understand correctly, these problems were exacerbated by the departure of one of the coordinators; after his departure the proposed changes never got traction.

I do not know all the details of this situation, but the three technicians interviewed were at their wits' end. To make matters worse, the project is coming to a close very soon, and the technicians said there was nothing in place to carry forward any of the investment. A six-month no-cost extension has been granted but will not offer enough time to make substantial changes to the project. This project, at least through the eyes of the technicians, demonstrates a glaring failure in learning and adapting to context. According to the program manager in Cankuzo the project was implemented in a time of crisis and there was little or no assessment that helped shape the project. Perhaps this lack of assessment at the initial stages set the project on its course to failure? At the same time, it seems, at least through the eyes of the technicians, that much more could have been done to learn and adapt this project to its context.

I did not interview extensively those in charge of other projects, such as the Children of Cankuzo program. Perusal of the documentation for the Children of Cankuzo project seems to reveal a lack careful pre-assessment in that it proposes that child-led households that are acutely vulnerable will be able to attain a measure of livelihood sustainability, and this without the mentor/caregiver strategy integrated elsewhere. This belies the literature and weight of careful observation that the "poorest of the poor" and the most vulnerable are unable to manage and benefit from normal development initiatives (such as new stoves or small loans) (Smillie 2009, 175). The School feeding program was also established primarily as a "relief" project; it depends fundamentally on food given by the WFP. (WV runs the school feeding program in 42 primary schools in Cankuzo province). The results of the project are encouraging, particularly the increased number of girls attending school. There was a measure of learning that helped adjust the program, particularly the decision to provide an extra ration for girls and thus encourage their families to keep them in school. As well, the program initially hired some local people to cook the food, but now has mobilized parents and families to be involved in food preparation at the schools. At the same time, the project has been primarily relief focused, and there appears to be no clear "next step" should the WFP no longer provide the food.... As yet no one seems to have "learned" or devised a grassroots solution to carry this project forward.

2. Contextual learning in the Area Development Programs (ADPs)

As the development model par excellence for WV, the ADPs have an extensive assessment design. According to the overarching "LEAP" framework, assessment is the critical first strategy

toward what they term “transformational development.” Assessment is defined as the “process of defining the ‘why’ of a proposed programme/project by collecting and analyzing information on the community, the agency and other partners.” The purpose of this assessment according to the LEAP document is to understand the context and issues causing poverty; to identify needs, opportunities, and resources within the community; to decide on the feasibility of contributing to tackling poverty; and to set priorities for this contribution (LEAP framework).

I was able to interview a group of enumerators who were gathering initial data for a potential ADP in a neighboring community. This group of four young adults are contracted to bring together representative groups from the “commune.” Their questions address four main areas: agriculture, animal husbandry, education and health/nutrition. They also gather external and environmental data. Their assessment work is indicative of the emphasis on data gathering that is woven into the ADP design. If I understand the process correctly, the work of these enumerators follows several other preliminary steps in the process: studying the broader macro issues, ensuring that funding is available, and meeting with potential partners or stakeholders. Their work is to gather secondary and qualitative data through general research and focus group discussions. This entire process of data gathering, according to the LEAP framework, can take up to six months. From this data an assessment report will be drawn up, and, if approved, is followed by a design phase. A design phase will then ensue, which can take from 7 to 12 months, and involve communities and partners to come up with a prioritized intervention and resource contribution plan. This process will be handled with a team of WV experts in health, Design, monitoring and evaluation, education, food security/livelihoods, sponsorship, etc. Then this design document becomes the blueprint for the project. With three new ADPs on track for this year, and a fourth in the design phase, the assessment work is a big priority.

From my estimation, the four young enumerators were given some good tools for their work as well as clear guidelines as to how to proceed with forming and interviewing the representative the focus groups. Their goal through these focus groups discussion is to get a sense of the overall needs and priorities of the area. They also interview the “chefs de collines” and other community and church leaders. Although all four of these young people were university graduates, I was surprised that none had had previous experience or training in this area. It was explained to me that this is not the normal procedure. I assume that they will not be interpreting the data, but it is seems that having at least one experienced member of the team would have been wise.

It is fair to say that assessment is a high priority in ADP design and implementation. The published assessment report that under girds the ADP in Cankuzo reveals these priorities. This assessment takes over a year and may cost up to up to US\$90,000. The assessment began with a pre-assessment workshop attended by representative members of the community and various stakeholders. Subsequently, data was gathered primarily through focus group interviews. This assessment influenced, among other things, the development priorities of the ADP. For example the ADP near Cankuzo town has as its first priority food security, whereas other ADPs for the first stage may prioritize health and hygiene and only secondarily agricultural development or education. The local community through workshops and focus groups is consulted as to what development needs should take priority; the ADP implantation plan honors their choice. I sensed in speaking with a group of men who we part of an association working within the ADP that they felt honored, “empowered” by WV’s work among them (but it was a bit disconcerting that they

could not identify any practical “outcomes” or “learnings” from the different initiatives, such as the agricultural demonstration plots). In the area of health and hygiene there is also a strong commitment to consulting the population as to their needs and receiving their feedback on proposed activities.

At the same time, the data gathered through the assessment process, and the interpretation of this data, will not alter fundamentally the structure of the ADP. This structure is used across the spectrum of development initiatives with World Vision, and includes the trademark emphasis on child sponsorship as the main strategy and source of funding. This is a non-negotiable (for ADP projects at least). One consequence of this policy is that a major investment of time and effort goes into “sensitization” regarding the nature and benefit of child sponsorship, often misunderstood by the parents/guardians. In this regard World Vision reveals that it is donor and policy driven and not “client” or beneficiary driven; its own policy can easily trump the expressed needs and priorities of its beneficiaries in that sponsorship in many cases would not be the community and family choice. Sponsorship is an effective funding tool that appeals to the individual donor and ensures steady and ongoing income for a development initiative, but it is not a grassroots strategy. In fact, other options are a priori excluded. “Learning from” and honoring the wishes of the beneficiary take a back seat in this case. To be fair, sponsorship is never “imposed” on a community, and there is an important process of assessing readiness for sponsorship; at the same time, this is the default strategy.⁵⁵

3. Conclusions regarding Grassroots/contextual learning

Grassroots/contextual learning is a key component of the Area Development Programs, although the policy and donor-driven priority of sponsorship short-circuits any fundamental “re-learning” and crafting of a different approach to development, as does the child-centric paradigm that presents children as the most important agents of change in the community. Be that as it may, consulting and learning from the community is an ongoing priority in project design and implementation, at least within certain parameters. The hiring of local staff certainly helps in keeping close to the grassroots. We are concerned that there are few formal accountability mechanisms that contribute to the empowerment of the local constituency. This concern is more keenly felt with regard to those projects with a “relief” focus; here grassroots learning shows signs of fundamental dysfunction. Further research would be necessary to fully appreciate and validate these observations.

G. Experimental learning

Key Question: To what extent and in what ways does the organization have an “experimental stance,” viewing developmental projects as experiments that they are learning from, not an end in themselves?

Summary: The focus of experimentation is the flip-side of the grassroots learning. A given practice aimed at addressing a development need requires a monitoring structure to measure the progress of this initiative and modify it accordingly. But an organization with a strong

⁵⁵A theoretical discussion of the child-centric focus is presented in the theoretical evaluation section of the report.

experimental learning stance has more than a careful monitoring process; it also is committed to honestly facing failure and learning from it. Furthermore, similar to the above, it does not uncritically import outside initiatives; it is committed to adjusting them after experimental evaluation. This commitment to experimentation lengthens the pole and provides more leverage for the task of overcoming underdevelopment inertia.

As experimental learning involves two sides of the same coin, many of the above observations are valid here as well. Experimental learning is reflected in a strong monitoring and flexible design that facilitates modifying existing projects. The priority of assessment at the design phase gives way to effective monitoring as the program takes root. As above, projects that were birthed in the context of relief will be considered separate from the ADP projects

1. Relief initiated projects

It was demonstrated above that monitoring in the EU food security project was largely ineffective, not that it was never a priority or that reports were not submitted, but that these were largely ineffective in producing any changes; all this according to the interviewees. The project most definitely was not designed or at least not monitored in such a way that change to the original plan could be made. Other projects have been more effectively monitored according to the interviews. One element of the Children of Cankuzo project was the integration of more effective stoves into poor homes, with the hope that this would shorten time needed to gather wood, be more environmentally effective, etc. It was discovered through the monitoring process that often the stoves were often not being used. The project also aimed to help the poorest homes by providing them with chicks. Through monitoring it was found that the poorest families had often sold the chicks or that they were unable to care for them. The strategy shifted its focus to families more able to benefit from them; this adjustment to the strategy was a result of monitoring (but it also challenges one of the fundamental foci of the project, which aims at the most vulnerable, child-led households). It would be interesting to explore whether this insight that the poorest of the poor often lack the capacity to benefit from many development initiatives is integrated into other projects and initiatives, or whether fundamental changes to the Children of Cankuzo project follow this observation. This also relates to the above priority of assessment: Could some of the failures discovered through monitoring have been avoided through more effective assessment at the start?

2. ADPs and experimental learning

The ADP in Cankuzo is too early in its cycle to measure the effectiveness of the monitoring process. There seems to be strong theoretical model in place through the LEAP framework (2007):

Monitoring is the routine collection of information that tracks and assesses project inputs and delivery of activities and outputs. In other words, monitoring documents is the *implementation* of a project. It supports local management decision making and accountability.

Such monitoring is made possible through establishing baseline indicators at the start of the ADP project. These indicators—reproduced as part of the “logic framework analysis”—provide the grid from which to evaluate progress. As the centerpiece of the ADP project is the child and his progress toward “life in all its fullness,” the primary focus of the monitoring is the health, development, and education of the sponsored child, and the children of the entire community. The Community Development Workers (CDWs), chosen from the community, are trained to 10 this monitoring. Each worker visits 20 homes per day and must fill out at least 40 monitoring forms per week; each form must be signed by a care giver in the home. The workers are trained to identify basic health indicators and nutrition indicators; they also note if the child is attending school. My interview with two CDWs let me to conclude that they were well equipped and motivated in their task.

Other indicators also monitor progress toward food security. In the ADP I visited, food security is the first priority. WV works closely with local associations that were already in place. These associations become the channel through which, for example, different agricultural initiatives are pursued. I visited one of the demonstration plots where the members of the association will work together, learning new agricultural techniques, experimenting with better quality plants. There will be baseline indicators in place to measure progress for this project as well. However, during my brief discussion with a group of men that are part of the association, they were not able to identify any practical improvements or insights that they had gained through the project. Perhaps it is too soon in the project to measure progress, or maybe something got lost in translation.

It was shared with me that each project normally has its own monitoring tool that is designed specifically for it, the “logframe.” This tool measures, for example, activities versus expenditures in a given quarter. Health projects have a strong monitoring component, which include 6, 12 and 24 month indicators. According to one interviewee, if the monitoring reveals that certain activities are not producing the desired outcomes, changes are proposed and the donors are made aware of the need for modification of the project, and mid-course changes are implemented.

Experimental learning in the Burundi context faces a set of unique challenges. One such challenge comes from the cultural context and the pace of life. The context in Burundi has been deeply marked by the conflict. Trust takes time to build in this context, and the pace of life is slow. For development projects to take root in a community they must be community based and driven (an expressed value in WV). One interviewee commented that for most of the projects the workers are not community based. I noticed this with the staff in Cankuzo. Many live in Bujumbura and commute on weekends back to the city. This undoubtedly undermines somewhat the ability of the staff to build this needed trust; many remain outsiders. Another constraint is the slow pace of life, and the fact that people are not as responsive. But the need to finish a report and meet donor expectations (yesterday) can be at cross-purposes to honoring the pace of the community, and learning from them and with them. There is a further point that was raised in this regard. The policies and procedures that must be followed religiously in project design, implementation, and evaluation have not been designed in the Burundi context. Neither are they “community-friendly”; their complexity will make difficult the transference of these projects to community leaders. Yet this is the ultimate goal! The donor/organization imperative in this regard seems to override learning, experimentation and adaptation

3. Conclusions regarding experimental learning

Cankuzo has not yet entered a significant evaluation stage, so it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the evaluation tools. Regarding “experimentation” that led to failure, it was revealed in the interviews that some projects had in fact been failures and that lessons had been drawn from them. It is hoped that some important lessons would be drawn from the EU food security project that will help avoid some of the shortcomings that were shared in full relief during the interviews. Further research would be needed to confirm the impression that many of the projects (particularly those with primarily a relief focus) were not being monitored and evaluated effectively. For example, no one was able to clearly point to the next steps for phasing out the school feeding project. It was noted however that talk of sustaining the school feeding program is somewhat misleading; the goal of the program was to increase enrollment, and it has succeeded in that. The need for food security is another issue. One of the interviewees noted that monitoring The Children of Cankuzo programme revealed that the most vulnerable households lacked capacity for caring for the chickens, and that many had died. It was not clear how this discovery had resulted in any modifications to the program.

There are also a set of cultural dynamics that need to be more carefully considered in the Burundi context, such as the need to have a stronger community presence and to respect the slower pace and responsiveness of the population. On a similar note, many of the project design and monitoring frameworks are overly complex and ill-suited to easy transference to the local population. Opting for a one-size-fits-all evaluation framework reveals a fault line in experimental learning. There also is a need for more careful documentation and dissemination of discoveries gleaned through experimental learning.

H. Theoretical learning

Key Question: To what extent and in what ways does the organization tap into and draw from the breadth/depth of thinking and research that addresses the needs in their context? How is this broader research—as well as experimental learning and grassroots learning—being transformed into vision and policy? How are staff trained to undergird their practice with strong theory.

Summary: This important dimension of learning is critical for the bigger learning picture. Good practice is impossible without strong theory/concepts. Our model demonstrates that a strong theoretical stance adds critical length to the pole and thus increases leverage. Examples of good theoretical learning in an organization would be its commitment to tap into broader research that sheds light on critical development issues. For example, if the development project addresses the needs of children that have experienced trauma, to what degree is research into the effects of trauma on children reflected in the initiative? Expertise/strong theory is needed for good research at the grassroots level as well. For example, if the development project addresses an agricultural need, to what degree are agricultural technicians and specialists integrated into the planning, execution and monitoring of the project? Theoretical learning is particularly important in

advocacy initiatives, as this requires a deep and broad understanding of critical issues. A development organization that has a strong commitment to theoretical learning will, among other things, ensure that qualified technicians/specialists are employed and consulted; it will prioritize research; and it will both integrate and disseminate effective ideas. Commitment to theoretical learning is also reflected in the commitment of the organization to train its people through appropriate academic programs. These and other commitments lengthen the pole and create significant leverage for the organization.

Theoretical learning in WV Burundi will be evaluated from several angles.

1. Challenging the theoretical assumptions of the child-centric focus

An important theoretical issue arises from the child-centered focus of World Vision's model. The model not only prioritizes the needs of the children, but sees them the critical "agents of change". This fundamental child-centric focus is reflected in this quote from the handbook to the recent Integrated Programming Model:

Development theory based on adult-centric approaches has, at best, provided sporadic and inconsistent gains for child well-being and, at worst, increased children's vulnerability. World Vision has spent many years in communities trying to address poverty, yet children are still malnourished, abused, and sidelined from the development process... Placing children at the heart of development allows WV to become more focused in its contributions while building on existing aspirations of families for their children and local efforts to address child poverty. (2010)

It would be interesting to see the studies that this conclusion is based upon. But we see here the fundamental paradigm within which WV operates. Despite the consultation and assessments, the final product will always be child-centric and not adult-centric. Here WV's listening to and learning from the community can only go as far as their child-centric paradigm permits.

This child-centric focus goes even one step further: seeing children as the most important agents of change and involving them as partners even in the decision making process. The model focuses therefore on increasing the capacity of children, particularly those most vulnerable, to be involved in the decision making process: "It is imperative that children's perspectives are included at the programming level." It can be argued, even quite persuasively, that this is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse. From the biblical perspective, it is difficult to support a child-focused decision making process within community and family life. Biblically, decisions, directions, and wisdom reside almost exclusively with the parent and the elder, and children are called to honor their parents in their role of authority.

These decisions and wisdom from the biblical perspective will consistently protect the vulnerable, honor the well-being of the child, and stand resolutely against any forms of exploitation (see Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 6; Isaiah 58). It seems difficult to compute how an adult-centric model that empowers adults to be stronger wiser leaders and protectors of children could result in "increasing the child's vulnerability" as WV literature suggests. Another potential fault line in this argument for child participation in the decision and programming process is the

consistent emphasis on vulnerable children. The most vulnerable children are part of the weakest and least powerful family units. WV practitioners consistently observed, and the literature also supports this, that the poorest families are inappropriate candidates for most development initiatives, as they lack the capacity to “manage” responsibility (such as a small loan or a new stove; see also Smillie 2009, 175).

Yet WV literature suggests that “empowering” vulnerable children will enable them to become contributors in the decision making process and agents of change in the community. I surmise that the most vulnerable children, not unlike the family units they are part of, will sadly also be inappropriate “agents of change” in the community. The paradigm WV presents of children as decision-making participants and agents of change is questionable even with a healthy, confident child; it seems totally unrealistic that an acutely vulnerable child will be able to play this role. Research by Boyden and Cooper (2009) on child resilience specifically addresses the question whether children are “up to the task of disrupting the transmission of poverty” (289); the studies on the theme are far from conclusive.

2. Ensuring that employees understand vision and values

“Transformational Development” is one of the three axes of WV’s global strategy (the other two are Humanitarian and Emergency Affaires and Advocacy). This model places the child’s wellbeing at the centre but includes empowering communities and influencing structural change. Each new employee is given an orientation to the mission statement, core values, history of WV Burundi, strategic mission and organizational structure. However, the lion’s share of training and orientation of new staff resides with the personnel supervisors. There has been a high turnover of staff as well as the hiring of significant number of new workers to staff new projects. More intentional and structured orientation of new personnel will be essential to ensuring that vision and values of WV are continue to be fully understood and embraced. It also is regrettable that the yearly staff retreat is no longer scheduled. Staff expressed disappointment across the board about this. This too would be a unique opportunity to instill a richer and deeper understanding, particularly of the spiritual values that undergird WV’s work. It seems to be a missed opportunity and critical oversight to not make this a priority. Nevertheless, the morning devotionals do provide a regular reminder of these spiritual values.

3. Theoretical learning and staff development

Ongoing training of staff is a strong priority in WV. In fact, it has the reputation of being the strongest training NGO. Several referred to it, in fact, as the “nursery” for training development workers for other organizations! (Many staff members who have left WV now work for other NGOs). The staff development guideline outlines the scope of training that is available. Some of the field staff, however, did express frustration that the training provided to the supervisors was only shared only superficially with them. One comment: “How can you adequately share in 30 minutes what you learned in a week?” Three of the field staff also expressed frustration that their training was more “information” than “formation” and that they were given few opportunities for improving their skill set. Although there are opportunities for groups such as the assessment teams to travel to neighboring countries to observe and learn from similar projects, training of field staff was identified quite broadly as lacking. A few middle-

management/coordinators also expressed that training opportunities are theoretically available, but the actual opportunity might come up “once in five years if you’re lucky.” Meeting deadlines and submitting reports can trump the priority of training. Nevertheless, there was much positive feedback on the opportunities for training and professional development. I interviewed three participants in the modular MA program who were pleased with the opportunity and encouragement they received to pursue this training; there was also financial help for this even though it is not World Vision sponsored training.

WV Burundi has a competent human resources development manager who is responsible for both recruitment and training. Her role, and the role of human resources, is not to develop the training, but to ensure that staff members participate in regularly offered training events (usually twice yearly). They also organize quarterly management forums to both attract and develop talent, and help management improve skills. One challenge they are facing in 2010 is that the capacity building budget has been cut due to financial constraints. As the project budgets do not include a training budget, this funding must be secured through other sources. At the time of interview, there was still no firmly identified funding source for this.

4. Theoretical learning and empowering upper-level management

It was encouraging to see WV’s commitment to training, and to talk with those who were benefiting directly from Masters-level training leadership and management. At the same time, I was quite surprised to find that the next-level of learning, the PhD level, was not part of the training vision and commitment of WV as an international organization. Should a leader in upper-level management who has already completed an MA pursue doctoral-level studies, he is completely on his own. No funding or sabbatical allotment is possible. This speaks volumes about the limited commitment of WV to become a strong learning organization. World Vision is the most important Christian NGO in the world; developing competent researchers, writers and spokespersons should be a priority.

5. Theoretical learning and understanding macro and socio-economic issues

WV strategic and planning documents highlight the importance of researching and understanding issues that affect development, yet it does not have a department or point person that is responsible for research. The following strategic focus indicates the need for such a person:

In the areas of WVB’s strategic focus, through quality ministry, resource optimization, and focusing on programs that have comparative advantages over others WV will give priority to activities which can have a “catalyst” effect to the broader economy of the country. Operational efficiency and quality is therefore considered as key in soliciting support and partnerships (WVB strategic plan).

Only careful and dedicated research will enable WVB to identify those catalytic activities that will affect the broader economy.

6. Theoretical learning and building institutional memory

A former employee who had a long and fruitful career at WVB spoke at length of the failure to create this strong institutional memory. His observation was that reports were most often not designed for learning and building memory, but for donors and for marketing. This observation finds some credence in light of the nature of the “communications” officer. The job description for this person is not to communicate insights and learning to the staff, but to showcase the transformation to the donor constituency. From what I could tell, there is no dedicated person responsible for archiving and synthesizing learning and insights to ensure that the organization moves forward with greater clarity and fewer failures. A member of the senior management team echoes this concern as well. He commented how quickly they run over things, how they often fail to see things through to maturity. He lamented the lack of documenting a strong list of best practices and integration of these tested ideas. ¹⁵

7. Theoretical learning and shoring up advocacy

Advocacy requires careful research. For an NGO to speak authoritatively on an issue, such as a child protection issue or a structural issue which limits access to education or basic medical care, then careful research is a must. There are signs that of this commitment in the area of health. Qualified health personnel oversee health assessment in a given community, particularly as part of the ADP assessment process. WVB also works closely with the government authorities in this assessment process. At the same time, the broader and more in-depth research into broader structural and nation-wide issues is critical. Commitment to either doing this research, or being part of such a research team, is lacking.

8. Theoretical Learning Conclusion

WVB is committed to the idea that good practice flows from good theory. But there is evidence their child-centric focus has very weak theoretical underpinnings; it is my conviction that this strategy cannot be convincingly argued from either a biblical, social or cultural perspective. The only sound argument for this approach appears to be that that it works in generating funds. On another note, WV does demonstrate its commitment to theoretical learning by its reputation as a strong training organization. They also have a strong set of mission/values/procedures documents that all staff members are required to understand and embrace. They further provide ongoing and regular staff development opportunities. The organization has thought through ways and means of building projects and monitoring their effectiveness. At the same time, opportunities for this training are often sporadic for middle-managers, and a number of field-staff feel entirely excluded from it. Training at a Masters level is both encouraged and supported, but learning at the highest level, the PhD, is not valued within WV as an organization.

Regarding institutional learning and societal learning, the evaluation is much more muted. There is little evidence of careful study of broader socio-economic issues, or of collaborating with others to that end. WVB has also been weak at building institutional memory and integrating insights into new initiatives. For WVB, the pole is lengthened through a measure of commitment to theoretical learning, but it could be much longer. Having a key person dedicated to deepening the well of overall learning, careful research, and building institutional memory would be an invaluable contribution.

I. Leverage Learning

Key Question: To what extent and in what ways does WV seek to discover ways to align th...¹⁶
work with other initiatives; how effective is it at learning to partner and finding convergence;
how is it learning to contribute to the full portrait of development in Burundi, finding its role?

Summary: Leverage learning is tied in with theoretical learning. The main idea behind leverage learning is that the organization is committed to finding its most effective investment. This requires a strong listening stance and discernment of both the context and the strengths the organization brings to the development challenge. Tied in with leverage learning is the commitment to listen to and collaborate with others, for the task is far greater than the resources of any given organization. Without leverage learning, massive efforts can be squandered. This is clearly demonstrated by the model. (To be clear, the placement of the fulcrum under grassroots learning is not significant; the placement of the fulcrum simply illustrates maximum leverage). If the fulcrum is misplaced on the pole—if the organization does not function strategically in cooperation with others according to its strengths—then all the other dimensions of learning are rendered insignificant; no effective leverage can be applied to the inertia.

1. Leverage and partnership

On paper WV is committed to working strategically, building partnerships, collaborating, facilitating collaboration among different partners, particularly Christian groups:

An integral part of the implementation approach is focusing on capacity building of partners including alliances with churches and local associations in order to contribute to spiritual and social transformation; bringing faith-based organizations together for more fruitful collaboration in order to address the material and spiritual needs of the community, especially in the domain of peace building and HIV/AIDS (LEAP Framework 2007)

A specific WVB commitment highlights one angle of this commitment to leveraging partnership:

In the areas of WVB's strategic focus, through quality ministry, resource optimization, and focusing on programs that have comparative advantages over others WV will give priority to activities which can have a "catalyst" effect to the broader economy of the country. Operational efficiency and quality is therefore considered as key in soliciting support and partnerships (Approved WVB Strategy 2008).

This written commitment and the reality seem quite dissonant, however. The conclusion of a number of "outsiders" to WVB, but definite insiders to the development world in Burundi, was unequivocal: World Vision (and other NGOs as well) have only a token commitment to collaboration and partnership building. One interviewee spoke of the spirit of competition that characterizes NGOs; this sadly leads, he commented, to wasted resources and ineffectiveness.

With regard to partnering and working alongside churches, these outsiders also gave a very negative evaluation of the NGO world, World Vision included. One leader commented that it took three years before he even knew that WV was a Christian NGO; another spoke of the organization's reticence to identify with the Church for fear of compromising certain funding partnerships. A denominational leader was unequivocal: NGOs basically work only parallel to the churches; they do nothing with the churches. This observation stands in stark contrast to the expressed value and commitment of World Vision: "The primary role of World Vision's programme staff is to serve as a catalyst and builder of capacity of local partners and partnerships toward improving and sustaining the well-being of children within families and communities, especially the most vulnerable" (IPM 2010). To be fair to WVB, this quote comes from the new IPM framework document that has not yet been integrated into overall project design.

Even at the NGO-to-NGO level, there seems to be little more than token collaboration. This struck me when I visited the region where the first Cankuzo ADP is being implemented. We drove past a field where a number of people were working collectively. The ADP director mentioned that that field was a project of another NGO in the region. Yet no mention of collaboration between these two initiatives was made. Furthermore, the group of 6 coordinators that I met in Cankuzo identified a total lack of synergy with other NGOs in the province. The program manager in Cankuzo is part of a network of NGOs that work in the province and meet together monthly, but they have no joint strategy for the province. He sees the need for this and I think he could be a good catalyst to see something come together.

But the bottom line with WVB according to both insiders and outsiders, to both upper and lower management, is that it is turned inward. It basically does its own thing. The system itself is not geared for collaboration. There is little capacity building of partners, only token alliances with churches, and a fruitless lack of collaboration with other NGOs. One interviewee commented that something either in the values of the mission of WV would have to change to prioritize this. Perhaps, related to the above comment on theoretical learning, there is a person needed whose main responsibility is ensuring that partnerships/leverage learning is more than a token commitment. This harsh evaluation, however, must be tempered by some recent encouraging initiatives.⁵⁶

2. Leverage learning and Advocacy

Advocacy is one of the three pillars of World Vision, the other two being Transformational Development and Humanitarian Emergency Intervention. Advocacy is woven into the strategic plan in WV Burundi, particularly in their commitment to contribute to social justice, equity and inclusion in the target community (Strategic Objective 3). They envision advocacy as a way of drawing attention both nationally and internationally to related justice issues. Their sub-objectives include the following:

⁵⁶These include an MOU with CIALCA, a consortium of agricultural research organizations to work together in banana propagation. WV, World Relief and Floresta Burundi are also exploring partnership option in the new southern ADP – Rutatna. Partnering with local NGOs in the context of the ADPs is also more and more common.

WV will partner with credible, local actors to mobilize ADP communities to raise awareness and increase harmony on issues of ethnic diversity and cross-cutting issues of gender and child protection; (c) community groups and associations will be supported through practical ways to raise issues to their respective authorities, particularly in regards to issues affecting the wellbeing of children (Approved WVB Strategy 2008).

Advocacy is also a key strategic element in two of their “cross-cutting” themes: peace building and child protection. These themes find particularly expression in several of the objectives, as seen above. These laudable objectives don’t seem to find much traction, however, in light of the comments in the interviews. Advocacy through partnership that results in lobbying and bringing awareness to critical human rights and justice issues will require intentional partnership at a number of levels, and a more significant investment by WVB.

One veteran WVB interviewee referred to advocacy as the lame leg the three-legged stool.¹⁸ WV’s priorities, both internationally and nationally in Burundi. To make the point, reference was made to the miniscule financial commitment globally to advocacy, a mere 4% of WV’s total financial investment. Specific reference was made to the importance of painting the full picture of child health in Burundi, so that the organization can lobby on behalf of carefully identified needs. Without such a careful commitment, working together with other partners, it seems difficult if not impossible to speak authoritatively, and act responsibly, on an issue.

3. Conclusion regarding leverage learning

Leverage learning, the commitment to finding the optimum place of investment with respect to its core competencies, the strengths of other partners, and the broader development needs, is the weakest learning dimension of WVB. The organization suffers from a common malady that afflicts large NGOs: self-sufficiency. An important leveraging step would be to capitalize on its strengths such as training and facilitating partnerships, and make them available to the larger development community. Although partnership and joint advocacy are valued on paper, there is little evidence of this in reality; however, there are some encouraging signs that this is changing. An important next step is making leverage learning, with its twin expressions of partnership building and advocacy, a primary value of the organization. This value could be reinforced through the creation of a department committed to research, partnership and advocacy, and of allocating a gifted person in the organization to lead this.

J. Institutional learning

Key Question: In what ways and to what extent does the organization learn to function effectively and efficiently in accomplishing its vision?

Summary: This is best understood as the thickness of the pole and refers to the ways in which the organization learns to function more effectively. Institutional learning can be seen through several lenses:

- alignment of vision, the degree to which members understand and embrace the vision of the organization;

- alignment of communication, the effectiveness of the communication within the organization;
- relational alignment, the level of harmony and trust in the organization;
- giftedness alignment, getting the right people in the right positions with the right training.

Learning to align these different critical components of an organization strengthens the pole and enables pressure to be applied to the task. If the organization is not learning and growing in these areas, the pole will weaken and can easily break when pressure is applied. The effective learning organization must not only position itself to learn about its external environment and challenges; it must also address the challenge of strengthening institutional learning, of learning to function internally.

1. Vision alignment

Learning at this level is an ongoing challenge at WVB. WVB does have strong vision/mission documents, but ensuring that employees understand and embrace this vision becomes difficult in light of the number of new staff members who are currently recruited to both replace those who leave and hire new staff for growth. Embracing vision requires time and margin. It needs to be soaked up and acquired by osmosis. Constant reminders are essential. Here as well interviewees expressed concern that the yearly staff retreat was no longer part of the picture. Others also commented on the constant demands on time and the lack of margin to even sit down with your staff and ensure that they understand the vision, the bigger picture. On a similar note, one interviewee lamented the heavy policy and procedure requirements, and how easy it is to be so preoccupied by these things that you forget the vision, which is the child.

The role of the coordinator for Christian commitment is critical and valued. The now defunct yearly retreat could be an important touch point for (re)learning and being reminded of the *raison d'être* of the organization. At the same time, it was encouraging to see the vision and values posted on the door of the Cankuzo office, and to sense the program manager's passionate commitment to the full spiritual vision that undergirds World Vision. The morning devotional times are also important times for refocusing on this spiritual commitment. Vision alignment received the highest rating by the interviewees, 3.5/5.

2. Communication alignment

There are some definite needs at this level. There is no "communications" department at WVB. The current communications officer is responsible for external communication and media relations. It was expressed by at least one interviewee that it is critical to have a communications officer for an organization that has surpassed 150 staff. One effort to facilitate internal communications is the quarterly electronic newsletter. With a few exceptions, up-down communication was quite effective; the SMT succeeds in communicating with the field for the most part. Down-up communication shows some signs of strain however. There apparently are some cultural barriers and social barriers that impede this. It was noted in the Burundian culture that people don't approach supervisors to express concerns as a rule, and expressing concern about working conditions is seen as dangerous; you could lose your job. Several field staff

expressed deep concerns about not being heard. They also appeared to be out of the loop in terms of understanding what the next steps were for them as their project was drawing to close. The failure of communication with these field staff was glaring. Others in higher positions of responsibility also commented that down-up communication is inefficient.

The French-English issue also came up often. The common language is Kirundi, but the language of education has been French. WVB has chosen to function in English, yet most staff are much more comfortable in French. This creates a significant challenge for those who are not fluent in the English, particularly when it comes to training opportunities or completing reports.²⁰

Overall, communication was average at 3/5.

3. Relational alignment

Most interviewees commented that there has been improvement at this level. In the last couple of years there were some issues that some of the interviewees alluded to; these led to firing of some staff. Not everyone who has left has left on the best of terms either. At the same time, none of the interviewees currently employed identified any major relational issues that were bleeding the organization. One commented that it has “improved tremendously.” The level of trust and camaraderie was also evident among the WV staff in Cankuzo. The program manager has a strong pastoral approach with his staff. On a practical level, there is also a recourse system in place to deal with grievances.

I was not able to discern any level of tension over the historic Hutu-Tutsi conflict. A few interviewees did express that there was an unofficial “affirmative action” priority to get more Hutus into the organization following the Arusha accord in 2003. None identified any concerns with respect to this, but discussing the “issue” is shrouded in taboo for many Burundians. One interviewee commented that the retreats had been helpful in this regard. At the SMT level there was evidence of a strong and harmonious working relationship. The Director’s vision is to empower his staff and seems to be a strong team player and is not afraid to devolve authority.

Overall relational alignment is strong, with a 4/5.

4. Giftedness alignment: the right people in the right job with the requisite skills

This section ties in directly with the above discussion on the priority of human resource development. The evaluation is quite mixed as noted above. There is only a small pool of qualified individuals to draw from the Burundi context, and those chosen have to be strong enough in English to qualify. This may be one of the reasons that the SMT has four members out of seven from other countries.

As new staff may not meet the required qualifications, considerable training needs to be done in the field. Opportunities for training were described above. A major and recurring concern at this level is the salary question (it came up consistently in all the interviews). One of the reasons for the high turnover is the remuneration that has not kept pace with other organizations. And this sword cuts both ways, limiting the capacity to draw qualified candidates, and undermining the

current staff. One of the expressed values of the WV is that they value people. Staff members have trouble feeling valued when their salary does not reflect their contribution. Several also expressed concern that their contracts were all short term, and that even if the contract was extended, it took months at times for the contract to be finalized. Many live with constant insecurity. One manager did comment that things are on the cusp of changing. I sensed that these changes had best come soon.

Evaluation through the giftedness lens is weaker, 2.5/5

5. Conclusion institutional learning

WV Burundi is learning to function as an effective organization. The vital signs are good, but there is room for improvement. There is overall alignment in the key areas. In order to keep deepening understanding and appreciation of the vision and values of WVB, it would be very helpful to reignite the yearly retreats. Nevertheless, the devotional times are valuable moments for reaffirming the spiritual dimension of WVB. Communication is quite strong but there is significant room for improvement, particularly the down-up flow. Having additional dedicated communications person and perhaps department could be a valuable contribution to improving communication flow. It seems to me as well that the decision to function in English creates an unnecessary burden on the communication in a country that still leans toward French. Trust and relational alignment is strong across the board, but the spiritual retreats would serve to strengthen it further. The giftedness alignment is mediocre, due to number of factors, not least of which is the pace of growth of the organization and the need to find qualified staff in a small pool. This problem is exacerbated by poor salaries and short and uncertain contracts. Many feel undervalued and unmotivated in such an environment. This concern must be attended to for the long term health of the staff and the organization.

V. Overall conclusions and key recommendations

The proposed NGO learning model pulls together the best of the theory on learning organizations and applies it specifically to the development world context. It highlights effectively the interplay, even interdependence, among the different learning commitments. None can be neglected without seriously impairing the strength and effectiveness of the organization. If the organization is committed, for example, to strong grassroots learning and “action research” but fails to integrate their discoveries into a broader and richer theoretical framework, they will lack leverage and effectiveness. Or if the organization is committed to championing the rights of the poor through well-researched advocacy and effective lobbying, but fails to create a healthy functioning team dynamic in their internal organization, they will break under the pressure. Of particular interest to this study was the critical role of leverage learning—of finding synergy with others through partnering and collaboration, of searching for the most effective and strategic way to serve with the unique strengths of the organization. Few NGOs rise to this challenge in any significant way. World Vision Burundi was typical in this regard. Without more significant leverage the noble efforts and investment, of World Vision and others, will create no significant leverage to overcome the inertia of underdevelopment that weighs so heavily and destructively in Burundi and elsewhere.

This study recommends that WVB focus on strengthening each dimension of learning for the organization. WVB is a relatively robust organization from the institutional learning perspective; there are few noticeable “misalignments” that could derail the organization (with the exception of the salary question). They also have a relatively effective development model in the ADP programs that integrates an important assessment and evaluation structure. The recommendations have more teeth at the theoretical and leverage levels. I identified some significant weaknesses in these areas and believe quite strongly that WVB needs to prioritize theoretical and leverage learning.²² Thus the recommendation to hire an individual whose unique role is to deepen the theoretical footings of the organization in critical areas (there is already a similar “position” that is at this time vacant in the area of communications). But this proposed role would also include a strong “leverage” component. The person would be mandated to help WV become the leader in working with others in order to find the right synergy, the right leverage for the organization. WV has contented itself with being strong on the periphery; they need to step into the centre and lead. This recommendation has a dual purpose: not only will it make WVB become a more effective, strategic catalyst for change, increasing pressure on the underdevelopment inertia in the country; it also will help WV overcome perhaps the greatest bane of the development industry—existing not for the mission, but for the institution. The self-serving nature of NGOs has been flagged across the board. Without a constant reminders of the bigger picture, of the need for collective and strategic effort, of the challenges to exist “to help the world’s poor”, it will fall into the default institution-serving paradigm.

I surmise that WVB is representative of the broader NGO world, and that its commitment to learning and improving its effectiveness is higher than most (at least they were open to be studied!). It is my hope that a number of the recommendations will be given careful consideration and may result in a number of renewed commitments to strengthening learning in the organization. WVB is one Christian NGO among many across SSA; others as well would benefit deeply from committing themselves to becoming stronger learning organizations. My hope is that that this NGO learning model might be of service to others as well, all to the greater glory of God, who is the defender of the poor and the needy.

World Vision Burundi Evaluation of Learning Culture
Summary of observations, conclusions and recommendations
Submitted August 16, 2010

Summary paragraph

World Vision Burundi (WVB) demonstrates overall a strong commitment to integrating learning into the organization. This commitment is strongest at the grassroots and experimental level. At the organizational level, learning is also relatively strong. Theoretical learning and leverage learning are the weaker dimensions of learning in the organization. A set of renewed learning priorities, the integration of one or two new structures, and the hiring of three new staff for these structures is the proposed strategy for improving learning in WVB.

Key observations and conclusions

1. Conclusions regarding grassroots learning in WVB

Grassroots/contextual learning is a key component of the Area Development Programs, although the policy and donor-driven priority of sponsorship short-circuits any fundamental “re-learning” and crafting of a different approach to development, as does the child-centric paradigm that presents children as the most important agents of change in the community. Be that as it may, consulting and learning from the community is an ongoing priority in project design and implementation, at least within certain parameters. We are concerned that there are few formal accountability mechanisms that contribute to the empowerment of the local constituency. This concern is more keenly felt with regard to those projects with a “relief” focus; here grassroots learning shows signs of fundamental dysfunction. Further research would be necessary to fully appreciate and validate these observations.

2. Conclusions regarding experimental learning in WVB

Experimental learning has an important place in project design and implementation. The ADP project in Cankuzo has not yet entered a significant evaluation stage, so it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the evaluation tools. Regarding “experimentation” that led to failure, it was revealed in the interviews that some projects had in fact been failures and that lessons had been drawn from them. It is hoped that some important lessons would be drawn from the EU food security project that will help avoid some of the shortcomings that were shared in full relief during the interviews. Further research would be needed to confirm the impression that many of the projects (particularly those with primarily a relief focus) were not being monitored and evaluated effectively. For example, no one was able to clearly point to the next steps for phasing out the school feeding project. It was noted however that talk of sustaining the school feeding program is somewhat misleading; the goal of the program was to increase enrollment, and it has succeeded in that. The need for food security is another issue. One of the interviewees noted that monitoring The Children of Cankuzo programme revealed that the most vulnerable households lacked capacity for caring for the chickens, and that many had died. It was not clear how this discovery had resulted in any modifications to the program.

3. Conclusions regarding theoretical Learning WVB

WVB is committed to the idea that good practice flows from good theory. But there is evidence their child-centric focus has very weak theoretical underpinnings; it is my conviction that this strategy cannot be convincingly argued from either a biblical, social or cultural perspective. The only sound argument for this approach appears to be that that it works in generating funds. On another note, WV does demonstrate its commitment to theoretical learning by its reputation as a strong training organization. They also have a strong set of mission/values/procedures documents that all staff members are required to understand and embrace. They further provide ongoing and regular staff development opportunities. The organization has thought through ways and means of building projects and monitoring their effectiveness. At the same time, opportunities for this training are often sporadic for middle-managers, and a number of field-staff feel entirely excluded from it. Training at a Masters level is both encouraged and supported, but learning at the highest level, the PhD, is not valued within WV as an organization.

Regarding institutional learning and societal learning, the evaluation is much more muted. There is little evidence of careful study of broader socio-economic issues, or of collaborating with others to that end. WVB has also been weak at building institutional memory and integrating insights into new initiatives. For WVB, the pole is lengthened through a measure of commitment to theoretical learning, but it could be much longer. Having a key person dedicated to deepening the well of overall learning, careful research, and building institutional memory would be an invaluable contribution.

4. Leverage learning conclusion WVB

Leverage learning, the commitment to finding the optimum place of investment of organization's more specific contribution in light the need, the organization's strengths, and other partner contributions, is the weakest learning dimension of WVB. The organization suffers from a common malady that afflicts large NGOs: self-sufficiency. An important leveraging step would be to capitalize on its strengths such as training and facilitating partnerships, and make them available to the larger development community. Although partnership and joint advocacy are valued on paper, there is little evidence of this in reality, although there are some encouraging signs that this is changing. An important next step is making leverage learning, with its two expressions of partnership building and advocacy, a primary value of the organization. This value would need to be reinforced through the creation of a department committed to research, partnership and advocacy, and of allocating a gifted person in the organization to lead this.

5. Conclusion regarding institutional learning WVB

WV Burundi is learning to function as an effective organization. The vital sign are good, but there is room for improvement. There is overall alignment in the key areas. In order to keep deepening understanding and appreciation of the vision and values of WVB, it would be very helpful to reignite the yearly retreats. Nevertheless, the devotional times are valuable moments for reaffirming the spiritual dimension of WVB. Communication is quite strong but there is significant room for improvement, particularly the down-up flow. Having an additional dedicated communications person and perhaps department could be a valuable contribution to

improving communication flow. It seems as well that the decision to function in English creates an unnecessary burden on the communication in a country that still leans toward French. Trust and relational alignment is strong across the board, but the spiritual retreats would serve to strengthen it further. The giftedness alignment is mediocre, due to number of factors, not least of which is the pace of growth of the organization and the need to find qualified staff in a small pool. This problem is exacerbated by poor salaries and short and uncertain contracts. Many feel undervalued and unmotivated in such an environment. This concern must be attended to for the long term health of the staff and the organization.

Summary of recommendations

1. Grassroots learning

- Continue with the strong assessment structure for ADP projects and ensure that a similar assessment is integrated into all future projects
- Prioritize simplifying the LEAP framework through the Integrated Program Model, or other models that would be best suited to the context
- Discover ways of making these frameworks more user friendly and ensuring that they do not overburden staff and that they can be used (eventually) by the beneficiaries themselves

2. Experimental Learning

- Identify more clearly the cause of failures of the EC project to learn from and adapt to its context
- Establish a clearer “exit” and transference strategy for relief-focused projects
- Carefully evaluate and revise project timelines in light of the cultural pace and responsiveness of the population
- Discover simplified ways to approach evaluation and involve local stakeholders

3. Theoretical learning

- Prioritize the training/human resource budget; ensure that it is not the first budget to be cut in times of restraint
- Design a fuller-orbed integration and orientation process for new staff
- Ensure that all staff and middle-managers have opportunity for training
- Create a staff position dedicated to research/theoretical/leverage learning to ensure appreciation and appropriate response to key issues that affect the development challenge

4. Leverage learning

- Move the partnership priority from paper to reality
- Equip the above research person to facilitate and foster partnerships and stronger advocacy
- Make strategic partnerships non-negotiable at the provincial and the national level

- Become THE catalyst for leverage learning and collaboration in the Burundi development world
- Become part of the solution to the isolation and self-sufficiency in the NGO world

5. Institutional learning

- Re-institute the annual retreat
 - Critical for ongoing and deepening vision alignment particularly in light of projected growth of staff
 - Critical for maintaining the atmosphere of trust
- Revisit ways to facilitate internal communication
- Revisit the question of English as the main language of communication re-establish salary parity with other NGOs and remove the contract uncertainty for workers that have proven track record

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