



Learning organisations: emerging practice from CDKN's experience

by Juliane Nier, Rachel Phillips and Russell Cook

About this Working Paper

This paper aims to help organisations prioritise learning by highlighting six useful models and frameworks. Drawing on the rich experience of the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), it explores how these models and frameworks have been applied in practice, and what this might mean for other development practitioners faced with similar tasks and also for those engaged in areas other than climate change and development. While CDKN has been a multi-project programme composed of staff from five alliance member organisations, it has often performed as an organisation. This Working Paper offers a starting point for thinking about organisational learning, and raises key questions and decisions for embedding learning more deeply in organisations.

About the authors

This Working Paper was written by Juliane Nier, Rachel Phillips and Russell Cook at Edge Effects.

The Edge Effects team has been supporting CDKN since 2012 in its efforts to prioritise learning by designing and managing the implementation of the CDKN learning programme.

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Contents

1. Learning to tackle complex challenges	2
What is a learning organisation?	2
2. Six models/frameworks for organisational learning	3
Levels of learning	3
Complexity models	5
Adaptive and generative learning types	7
Action–reflection cycles	8
Learning for change design principles	9
Building blocks of a learning organisation	10
3. CDKN's evolution as a learning organisation	11
Endnotes	13

1. Learning to tackle complex challenges

Integrating climate challenges into development action is complex. The causes and impacts of integration challenges are not single, straightforward or linear; they are interconnected, cross-sectoral, multi-stakeholder and rarely predictable. When tackling such complex challenges, practitioners can rarely rely on past experience and best practice; getting into action quickly and building a culture of learning are most important for organisations that need to make progress with climate integration.

To respond to these challenges, 'becoming a learning organisation' has become an ambition for many actors operating in the international development and climate change context over the past two decades. This Working Paper highlights useful models and frameworks that can help organisations progress this ambition. CDKN contributes first-hand experience of applying these models in practice.

For CDKN, learning has taken place in many forms, for different purposes and by different actors. As a knowledge network, CDKN continuously generates and amplifies emerging practices, new insights and cutting-edge knowledge from its work across Asia, Africa and Latin America. CDKN has facilitated learning for others through applied research, demand-driven technical assistance and tailored communications/public relations. On an organisational level, CDKN has been increasingly systematic in articulating its priority learning questions and mobilising internal resources to capture emerging insights.

With an increased focus on implementation and action, set in the complex context of climate integration and exacerbated by growing urgency, learning has become ever more crucial to CDKN. Solutions and next steps need to be more effective and developed even more quickly. The overarching intention for CDKN's learning is to:

- become better and more effective operationally
- enable others to become better, more efficient and faster at integrating climate into development
- stimulate international debates with key lessons grounded in real country experiences and actions
- share what works and why with a wider audience to inspire action.

What is a learning organisation?

There are many definitions of learning, learning organisations and learning systems. Box 1 presents some examples of how others talk about learning organisations.

Box 1. Talking about learning organisations

A learning organisation is one that learns continuously and transforms itself... Learning is a continuous, strategically used process – integrated with and running parallel to work.

Watkins and Marsick (1993)¹

Learning organisations are organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.

Senge (1990)²

A learning organisation is an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.

Garvin (1993)³

Our emerging definition, which resonates with CDKN's experience and knowledge, is:

A learning organisation has a living, shared, meaningful vision and purpose. It intentionally seeks to learn from its own and others' experience and uses that learning to inform future decisions and actions which best achieve its purpose.

2. Six models/frameworks for organisational learning

Considering the purpose and intention of learning at different stages has led to CDKN being more systematic in its approach to designing and developing learning interventions and how it facilitates effective organisational learning. Specific models and frameworks have been particularly useful to CDKN as the organisation evolves and strengthens learning throughout its approach and operations.

Understanding its operating context has helped CDKN become much clearer about the design of learning interventions. CDKN has learned the importance of articulating, from the very beginning, what type of learning it is after, which in turn has had an impact on the choice and design of learning interventions. To guide the design of learning interventions, CDKN has worked with a set of learning principles and action–reflection processes that allow for flexible application in different contexts.

Table 1 summarises the key models and frameworks that have helped CDKN become a learning organisation, and why they have been useful. The remainder of this section explores these models and frameworks more fully. We highlight how specific practical models and frameworks have been useful in shaping how effective learning interventions, strategies and processes are designed. These reflections may be useful for other development practitioners interested in facilitating organisational learning more effectively and strategically.

Levels of learning

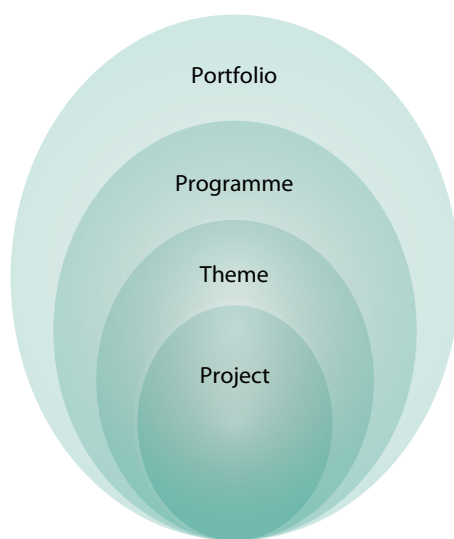
Like most organisations, CDKN operates at many different levels. CDKN's experience shows that whereas learning at some levels (e.g. project, individual, country) is relatively straightforward to capture, learning at other levels (e.g. portfolio, programme, global) needs to be systematically planned and designed.

Table 1. Six models/frameworks

Model/framework	Why is it useful?
Levels of learning	Learning happens at multiple levels – distinguishing between the different intentions and processes that happen in different parts of the organisation
Complexity models	Operating in a complex environment and matching learning process to context – understanding complexity and recognising there are different contexts in which we learn and make choices about the most effective methodological processes
Adaptive and generative learning types	Balancing different types of learning: adaptive and generative – recognising that different learning types require different resources, approaches and skills
Action–reflection cycles	Continuous adaptation grounded in action and reflection – learning by doing as a key part of organisational learning in a complex context
Learning for change design principles	Guiding principles for designing learning interventions – applying the ten learning for change principles when designing learning interventions and strategies
Building blocks of a learning organisation	Practical, core building blocks of implementing learning – connecting with other models

A similar message emerged strongly from the UK Department for International Development (DFID)'s Learning for Change dialogues through the International Climate Fund⁴ – learning needs to happen at multiple levels (Figure 1). Enabling learning to flow between levels is difficult and requires deliberate focus, design and resourcing. When an organisation is clear about its learning priorities, it can be much more strategic in focusing and connecting up different pockets of learning. An organisational taxonomy, or organising framework, can help to enable this; in CDKN's case this has evolved over seven years. Activity workstreams such as research, technical assistance and knowledge networks provided an initial organising framework before shifting to a thematic lens that aligns more closely with CDKN's strategic priorities.

Figure 1. Levels of learning

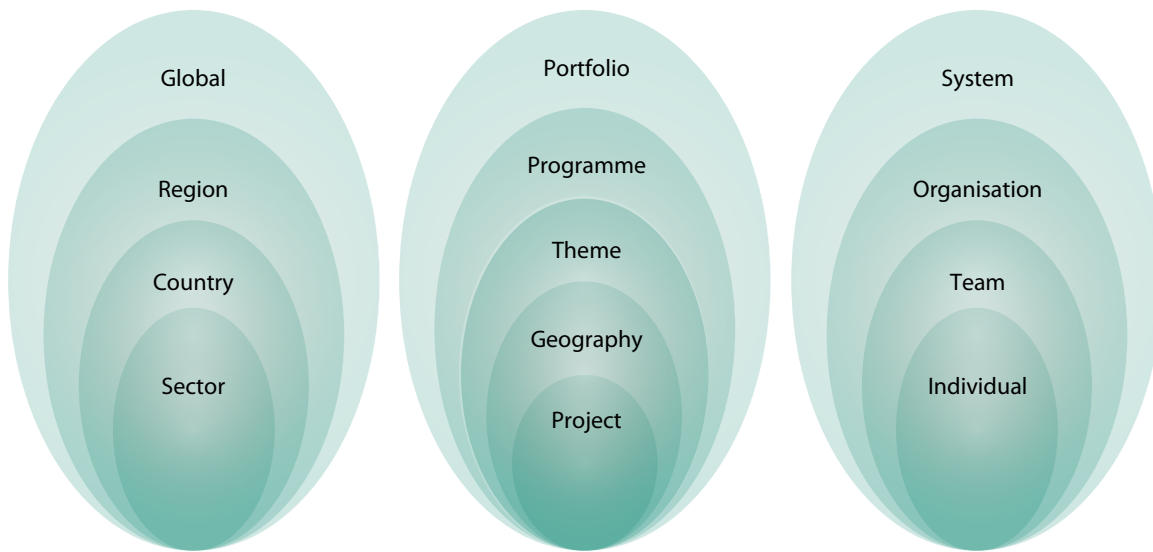


Source: Adapted from Clark et al. (2015)⁵

Encouraging learning to flow across levels helps to ensure that decision-making at the global and systemic level is informed by and grounded in practice, experience and learning on the ground and that future action is connected with strategic intent.

Creating connections between multiple levels, and spaces for sense-making between them, also allows the emergence of meta- and generative learning that focuses on issues with organisational or system-wide relevance. This can help an organisation to identify and focus resources on strategic priorities that will accelerate the emergence of the new system. CDKN has taken a more systematic approach to learning by drawing on specific experiences and case studies at the country level to inform thematic and global debates, as highlighted in its Planning for NDC implementation quick start guide⁶. Approaches like this have helped the organisation to connect pockets of learning, making them greater than the sum of their parts.

It is important for an organisation to decide where to locate its learning in order to bring about the change it is seeking to make (Figure 2). Which of these levels is most relevant to its context? At which level should it operate? How can critical connections and feedback loops between levels be created?

Figure 2. Different ways of viewing interconnecting levels

Source: Adapted from Clark et al. (2015)⁷

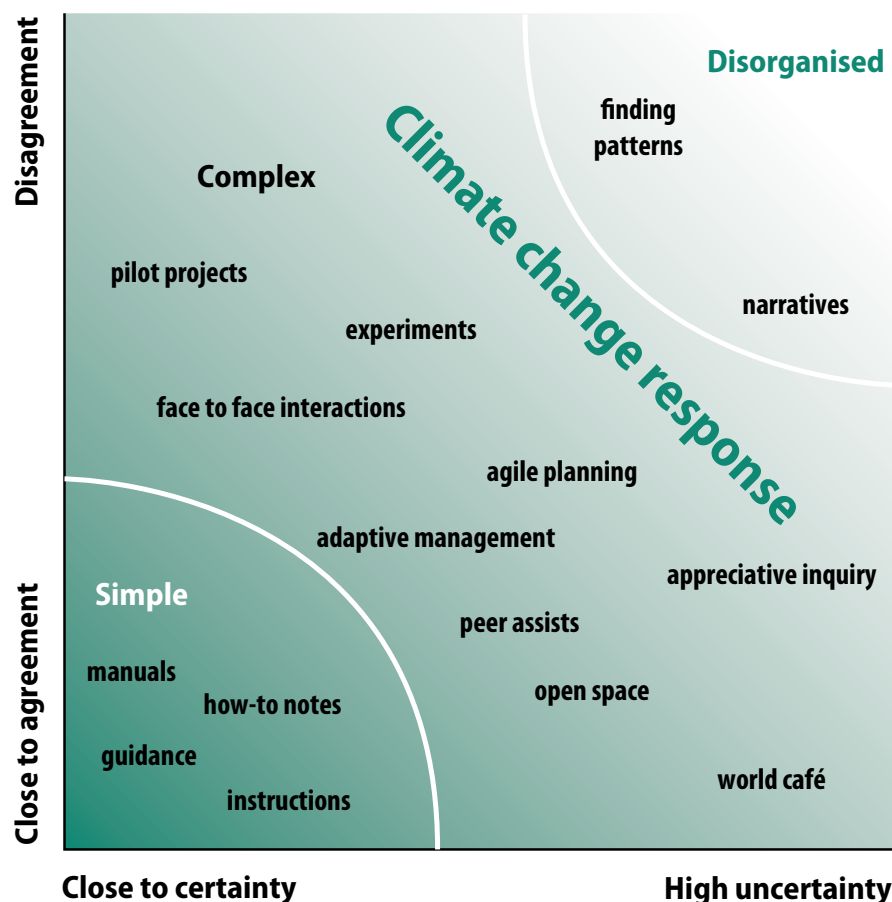
Complexity models

An organisation's activities will span many different contexts, and there is learning potential in every activity. Depending on an organisation's learning priorities and their associated operating contexts, different learning approaches and methodologies are required.

Ralph Stacey's complexity model⁸ (Figure 3) identifies four main contexts.

- **Simple** – the relationship between cause and effect is well known, we have relevant experience to learn from, and we have high agreement and certainty between partners. Here we use manuals, 'how-to' guides, procedural guides, training, etc., and learn from best practice.
- **Complicated** – the relationship between cause and effect is understood and there are multiple potential solutions that require context analysis and expert knowledge. Here we work with expert consultants, provide technical assistance and learn from good practice to identify the best-fit solution or approach for this situation.
- **Complex** – the relationship between cause and effect is unknown and can be perceived only in retrospect. There are wildly divergent views on the best response to the situation. Here we co-create: probe, sense, experiment, prototype and respond with emergent practice. We need to keep our plans and programmes flexible and adaptive. Continual learning is essential to constantly improve outcomes through feedback loops.
- **Chaos/disorganised** – chaos is unorganised, with high levels of uncertainty and disagreement. Here we can learn into and explore the patterns and help shape the narrative of an emerging system.

CDKN has responded to different challenges at different levels and has operated in all four contexts listed above. This has meant applying a range of methodologies as well as translating knowledge and learning from one context to another (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Stacey's complexity model

Source: Adapted from Clark et al. (2015)⁹

In a simple context, methodologies CDKN has used include guides and how-to manuals such as the toolkit on the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s Fifth Assessment Report¹⁰ for Africa, South Asia, Small Island Developing States and Latin America. In this case, existing information was tailored and made more accessible to different audiences. In a complicated context, technical assistance and multi-stakeholder applied research, such as Ahmedabad's Heat Action Plan,¹¹ were more effective methodologies that leveraged key skills and knowledge of technical experts. In the complex context, CDKN has used methodologies such as South-South learning exchanges and action labs bringing together different actors around a specific topic or challenge. A good example is the Uganda Action Lab,¹² which brought together development practitioners, migration specialists and international donors around climate and migration challenges, a nascent topic in the Ugandan context.

Tackling the climate integration challenge means operating in a rapidly changing, unpredictable environment where identifying the 'right' solution or cause-and-effect relationships is near impossible. Using complexity models, many of the interventions – especially in the field of policy-making – are characterised as complex. To be truly effective in this space, it is not enough to rely on technical expertise alone. Organisations also need to build their capacity to learn into their organisational DNA and develop an understanding of complexity through convening, knowledge brokering and partnerships among unusual actors. With CDKN as a partner, the 'Raising risk awareness'¹³ project brought together climate scientists, journalists, knowledge brokers and policy-makers from Asian and African societies to understand the role of climate change in extreme weather events and prepare for future ones.

Adaptive and generative learning types

There are different types of learning for different needs. One helpful way of differentiating these is to look at learning as primarily adaptive, or primarily generative. Both are equally important, playing key roles in enabling an organisation to become better at creating change. There are also opportunities for generative learning to be triggered from adaptive learning processes, and vice versa. A learning organisation can determine the balance between these two types of learning and effectively leverage the interconnections to best meet the organisation's priorities and needs.

Organisations that are clear about the type of learning they are seeking are better able to make choices about the focus of their efforts, resources and skills, and the appropriate systems and methodologies, resulting in more effective learning strategies, programmes and interventions.

Table 2. Adaptive and generative learning

	Learning type	
	Adaptive	Generative
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving actions, processes, structures, operations • Focusing on how to do something better and more effectively • Reflecting on existing processes, action, experience • Learning for continuous improvement • Developing good and best practice • Often situated within an organisation or entity • May be context-specific or learning that has already been done by others • Linking reflections across the organisation back into strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning about the unknowns (e.g. things we don't know how to do; or what we should do) • Focusing on issues with global and systems-wide relevance • Inquiring into intention, purpose, context, why we do what we do • Learning into the future, can't rely on past knowledge • Highlighting emerging practice • Learning for systemic change with different perspectives and stakeholders • Informing organisational strategy
Learning methodologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection processes as integral part of project management operations • Reflection as part of business planning process • Practitioner-led reflection with suppliers, service recipients, teams • Thematic or operational working groups • Learning as part of monitoring and evaluation processes • After-action reviews • Handover, debriefing, exit interviews • Reflection points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-stakeholder dialogues (e.g. South–South learning exchanges) • Collaborative inquiry (or communities of practice/working groups) • Pilot projects and experimentation • Action learning sets • Action labs

As organisations identify the optimum balance between these types of learning, they can also explore the potential interconnections between adaptive and generative learning, and design interventions in a dynamic flow where both types of learning inform and shape one another.

CDKN has straddled both learning types. South–South learning exchange is an example of generative learning where CDKN has contributed to the global debate about mobilising finance¹⁴ and developing bankable climate compatible development projects.¹⁵ The learning that participants brought and took away also enabled them to operate more effectively and contributed to their adaptive learning. It is CDKN's role as a knowledge broker and convener to weave this adaptive learning together and back into the generative narrative for systems change.

Action–reflection cycles

In the context of climate change, actors operate in an uncertain environment. Often they cannot rely on previous information, nor can they predict with certainty the consequences of their actions. Experimentation and iteration of action is therefore key. The bottom line is: act, reflect and adapt quickly, learning as you go.

Cycles of action and reflection provide a strong foundation for organisational learning processes, particularly for the kinds of complex environment within which many organisations operate. A learning organisation will look for opportunities to build critical reflection points into its strategic planning processes and map them into other ongoing processes (e.g. project management cycle or business planning cycle) wherever possible.

CDKN's learning programme is underpinned by action and reflection. The formalised and systematic process enables CDKN consistently to focus staff attention on learning priorities using a bottom-up process. Organisational learning priorities align with the breadth of experiences and activities at the country and regional levels, and are embedded in the annual business planning cycle.

Working with cycles of action and reflection enables organisations to build their learning into decision-making. New concepts, processes and ideas that have emerged from reflection points can be tested and implemented; in turn, this contributes to making the organisation more effective and responsive to change. Cycles take place over time. In some cases a process will happen quickly, in others it might take a lot longer. The action–reflection cycle can either take place at different levels or help connect across levels.

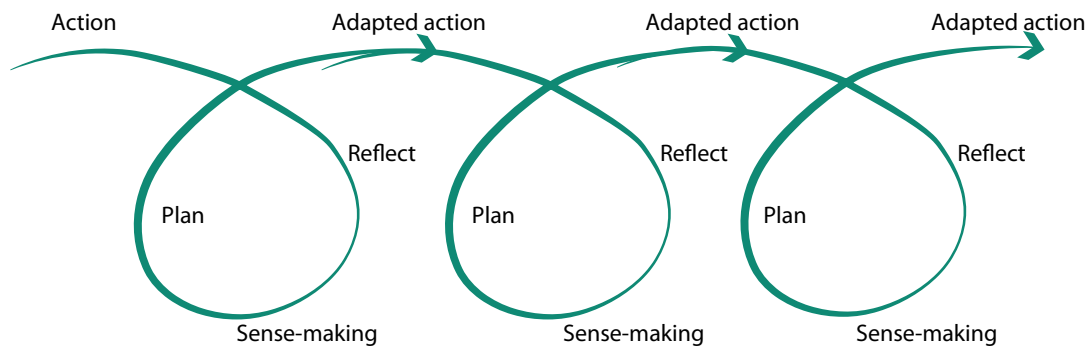
Increasingly important when addressing complex challenges is experiential learning by doing, which is based on doing and on lived experience. Being grounded in action, it helps us to learn quickly as we go. The action–reflection cycle capitalises on that in its five stages (Figure 4).

1. **Action** – real or lived experience of implementing activities and creating change – the stage of doing.
2. **Reflect** – space for individuals and teams to review and question deeply what actually happened, how it worked and why – the stage of capturing reflections on a specific issue from different perspectives.
3. **Sense-making** – making sense of the collected reflections, identifying patterns and exploring what they mean for the change process – the stage of sorting and giving meaning to reflections on an issue.
4. **Plan** – thinking about the next steps in the wider change process and how learning can be applied – the stage of relating learning back to initial actions and asking what comes next.
5. **Adapted action** – putting learning back into practice and adapting previous actions based on new insights – the stage of closing the cycle and entering into the next iteration.

The cycle can be started at any stage, and many organisations are better at some stages than others. Learning organisations will set up systems and processes that go through all stages of the cycle to experience its full benefit and maximise the learning from their experience.

The CDKN learning programme has created opportunities, spaces and time for team members across the organisation to come together to reflect openly and honestly and draw out key messages. One such space has been subnational integration, an important theme within CDKN's work that is rich with activities across the three focus regions. Over four years, learning inquiry questions have focused on different areas within this theme, including facilitating policies and practice at the subnational level; scaling up and out of subnational interventions; and moving from planning to implementation of climate compatible development. The subnational learning programme¹⁶ has drawn out learning from country experiences.

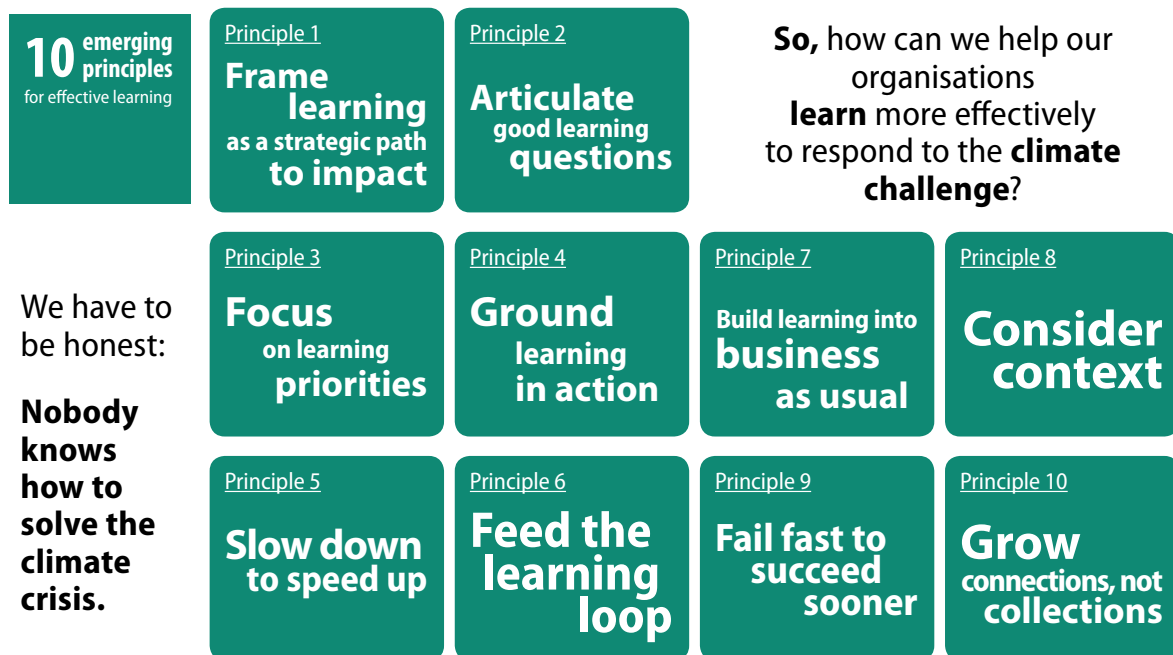
Learning for change design principles

Figure 4. Action-reflection cycle

The ten emerging principles for effective learning¹⁷ (Figure 5) are grounded in the collective experience of practitioners and DFID-funded programmes, including CDKN, that support change in the climate and development context. The principles have been applied by UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and CDKN in designing learning strategies and interventions, and when making budgetary decisions.

In 2013, in response to a recommendation by an external evaluation team to focus more on learning priorities, CDKN put in place a more systematic approach to learning. The organisation began to articulate learning questions in order to be intentional and strategic about inquiry processes.

Following this, CDKN decided to prioritise the principles of growing connections and sharing learning with others, which allowed for a more inclusive and open process. It shifted the focus to learning with and for developing country partners, in addition to learning for itself.

Figure 5. Ten emerging principles for effective learning

Source: Clark (2016)¹⁸

Since 2015, there has been a clear focus on framing learning as a strategic path to impact by making it part of the annual business planning process. An important underlying principle is the consideration of context (see 'Complexity models' above). The programmatic and multi-country context has a strong influence on strategic priorities, resources and thought leadership.

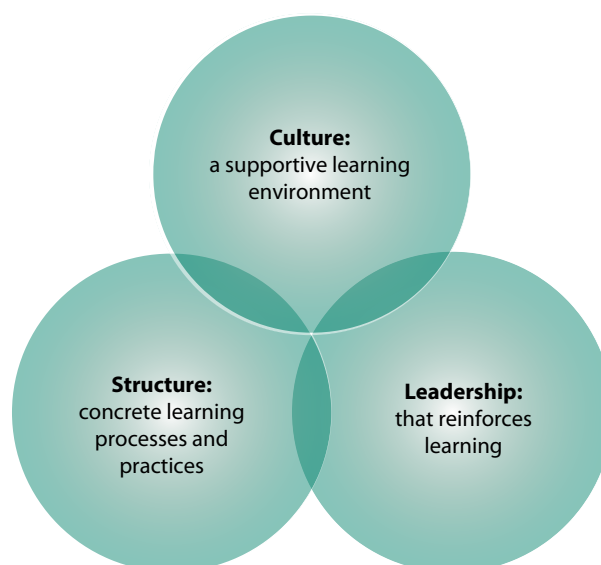
Building blocks of a learning organisation

In a learning organisation, everyone is involved – learning is not something that happens among a few people or in isolation within a learning department. David Garvin et al.¹⁹ describe three core, interrelated components that make a learning organisation effective:

- a supportive learning environment
- concrete learning processes
- practices and leadership that reinforce learning.

These three components work in synergy to reinforce a strong learning system and empower the organisation to be more agile and responsive.

Figure 6. The core components of an effective learning organisation



This model is useful to organisations because it provides practical building blocks to consider when designing and expanding a learning organisation. It can be used to build a roadmap and to assess where an organisation is strongest, or where it needs more focus and investment to become more effective.

Over the past seven years, CDKN has gained a lot of experience both of learning as an organisation and of facilitating learning for others. Many of the attributes of Garvin's core components resonate strongly with that experience. Safe spaces for learning have been created within the organisation, for example on the 'Raising risk awareness' project, where team members were able to come together regularly to share reflections and learnings. CDKN management has encouraged staff to engage in learning activities, but limited influence over budgets and performance assessment were constraints. Organisational learning requires both leadership and management. A key question that continuously came up throughout this process was how much time project managers have for learning and thought leadership. Externally, CDKN has facilitated learning for many different actors through collaborative processes and tailored communications. A key question here is: what leadership is needed to build learning into action?

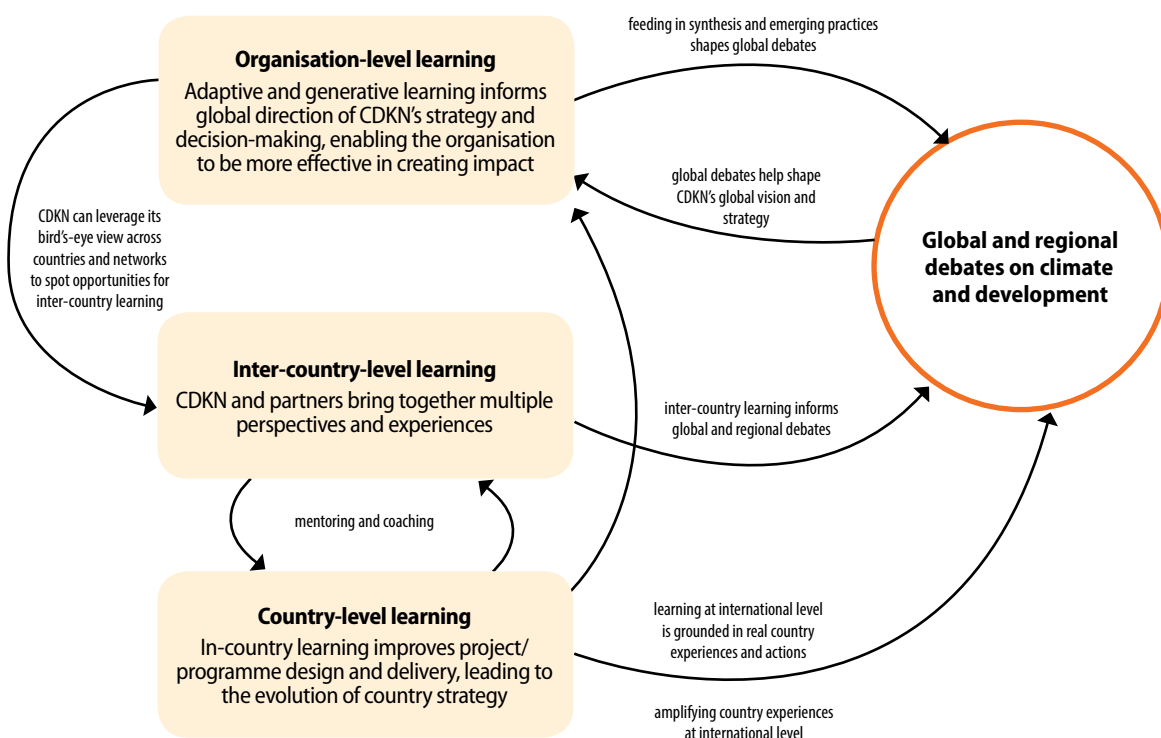
Table 3. Attributes of the core components

Component	Attributes
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological safety to reflect and learn together • Appreciation of differences in perspectives and ideas • Openness to new ideas • Time for reflection in balance with other business activities
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generation, collection, interpretation and dissemination of information • Sharing in systematic, clearly defined ways
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively questioning and listening to employees, encouraging active reasoning and creative thinking • Spending time on learning activities (e.g. problem identification, knowledge transfer, reflection) • Showing willingness to entertain alternative points of view

3. CDKN's evolution as a learning organisation

Becoming a learning organisation is not a static end point. Rather, organisations are continuously evolving, consciously strengthening learning as part of their business-as-usual activities, systematically capturing learning from their own and others' experiences, and using learning in their decision-making and thought leadership.

As CDKN is changing shape and evolving from a donor-funded programme into a new, more strongly southern-led phase, it has an opportunity to develop its approach to learning. Drawing on best practice and the models and frameworks outlined above, this paper concludes with a proposed blueprint structure for CDKN as a learning organisation (Figure 7), which may be adopted by other programmes and organisations. Along with this proposed structure come a number of choices that every learning organisation faces, which will determine the resources, skill sets and more detailed design going forward.

Figure 7. Proposed blueprint structure for CDKN as a learning organisation

CDKN continues to operate at different levels.

- For capturing, synthesising and using emerging insights, the focus is primarily on the country, inter-country, organisational and global levels. Learning flows across these four levels and informs changes in CDKN's operations, as well as probing into new practices and possible next steps for tackling climate integration challenges. Important questions to consider here are:
 - What are the right incentives for different types of learning at all four levels?
 - What are the right competencies and skills needed at different levels?
- With an even stronger focus on integration of climate challenges into development planning in developing countries, CDKN continues to operate in a complex environment. Insights and emerging practices from the country level contribute to ongoing climate and development debates at the global level around NDC implementation, resource mobilisation and sector-specific integration. As a knowledge network, CDKN convenes different actors, including developing country government partners, research institutions and the private sector. It creates safe spaces to engage in generative dialogue. At the organisation level, CDKN uses in-depth knowledge of global debates to guide its strategy and vision, enabling the organisation to work continuously at the cutting edge. Key questions here are:
 - What are CDKN's learning priorities?
 - How will they help the organisation on its strategic path to impact?
- The majority of insights emerge from CDKN's experience of designing and delivering interventions that address climate integration challenges in developing countries. Therefore action-reflection remains an important cornerstone for CDKN as a learning organisation. Together with guiding principles, the organisation can design tailored learning responses. This also results in important choices and trade-offs around the following questions:
 - How much time do project managers and practitioners have for reflection and thinking? How can we socialise our learning for action, both within the organisation and with others?
 - What are the best methodologies and tools we can use in various parts of the organisation and for different learning purposes?
 - How do we allocate the right mix of resources for different learning activities and in longer-term planning?

CDKN continues to explore these questions as it develops a more detailed approach to learning. This is an iterative process to ensure its learning strategy and systems are fit for purpose, enabling CDKN to have an impact in convening diverse networks and learning communities to progress climate compatible development implementation and climate integration.

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About CDKN

The Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) supports decision-makers in developing countries in designing and delivering climate compatible development. It does this by combining research, advisory services and knowledge-sharing in support of locally owned and managed policy processes. CDKN works in partnership with decision-makers in the public, private and non-governmental sectors nationally, regionally and globally.

About Edge Effects

Edge Effects is a consultancy specialising in learning, leadership and capacity building for sustainable development and positive change. We believe that effective responses to complex sustainability challenges reside in a diversity of perspectives, collective wisdom and creative experimentation; our purpose is to enable people and systems to tap into their creativity and accelerate the transition to a low carbon, climate resilient world.



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