

# Learning for a low-carbon climate resilient society



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How can we improve institutional effectiveness to accelerate impactful change around climate change investments and policy?

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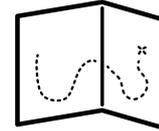
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# How to use this booklet

This booklet explores how learning can help us improve institutional effectiveness in the context of climate change and policy making for the International Climate Fund (ICF) and beyond. It documents the intermediate results of an ongoing dialogue process. We wrote it to gain clarity on our emerging thinking and to invite you into the conversation.

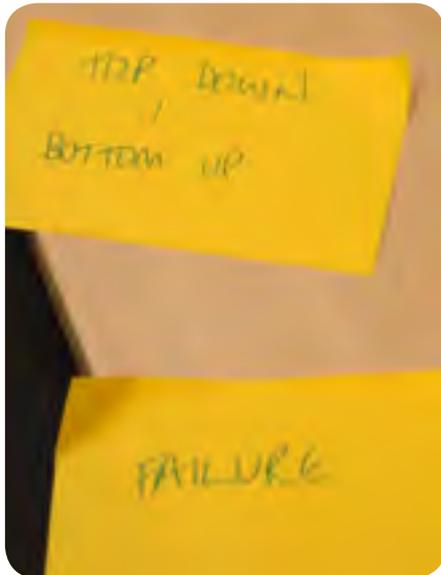
You might be a programme manager within an institution focusing on climate change, maybe tasked with leveraging learning in your sector. Or you might come to this booklet as a learning champion, keen to apply your passion to meaningful challenges of our time.

You will find a rich potpourri of information here: The **dimensions for effective learning**, for example, can help you map your organisation's learning style. The **10 emerging principles** are practical guidelines to design learning interventions.

While this booklet necessarily follows a linear structure, there are many ways for you to engage with it:

1. Read stories of others' learning approaches;
2. Find inspiration and resources for practical tools and models to apply;
3. Ask questions to shape your own learning approach;
4. Review prototype principles and emerging models;
5. Send it to colleagues to start learning together;
6. Invite your friends for an informal conversation about learning for change;
7. Use it to start sharing stories at the water cooler;
8. Draft your own principles for learning;
9. Send us your stories and feedback;
10. Above all, we invite you to learn and experiment with us.

## Welcome to this journey!



To have a 50% chance of keeping climate change to within 2°C of pre-industrial levels, global greenhouse gas emissions need to peak between 2020 and 2030 and then decline steeply. Already the world's climate and weather patterns are changing. Global temperatures are rising, causing more extreme weather events, including flooding and heatwaves.

These facts are nothing new and as a response, organisations worldwide have started taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to unavoidable climate change. However, we are not making fast enough progress; there are neither international treaties or binding commitments nor sufficient action on the ground. Estimates say that we need to double our rate of innovation and act in order to meet the challenge.<sup>1</sup>

**We have to be honest: Nobody knows how to solve the climate crisis.**

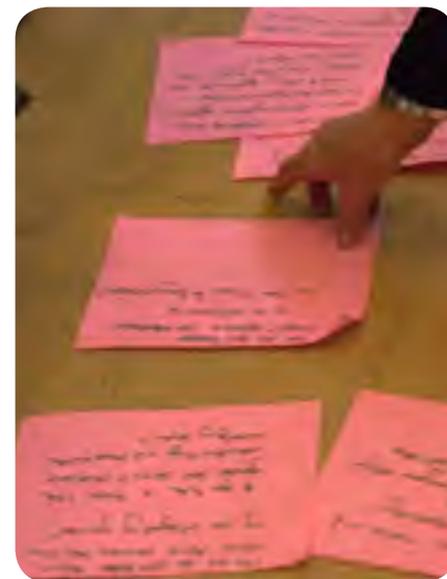
**Yet, together, we need to find a way to respond.**

Individually, we often feel overwhelmed by the task – or pretend it is not our job to lead change. There is so much to do, and so little time. We also know that we can't just go on with business as usual. As our challenge grows, our organisations need to improve and scale up their response to climate change fast. In this increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, learning is key to adaptation, resilience and a low-carbon economy.

**So how can we help our organisations and institutions learn more effectively how to respond to the climate challenge?**

Institutional improvement is not easy. Experimentation on the ground and a culture of learning by doing are important – but they won't be enough. This booklet explores practical ways that we can learn collectively from our experience and purposefully be more effective at creating a low-carbon, climate resilient society tomorrow than we are today.

# Learning is not an optional extra



<sup>1</sup> [Chatham House \(2009\): Who owns our low carbon future?](#)

# Our story

Learning and improvement around climate change is already happening in many places. At DFID, this work started about five years ago with a set of strategic conversations around the question: “How can we ensure that our international development programmes adequately take climate change into account?”

At the time, there were plenty of written reports and guidance about this issue, but these were not sufficient to drive change<sup>2</sup>. We found curiosity and an appetite for learning among the people we worked with. Enthusiasts quickly emerged and we tried to facilitate their needs from the bottom up: through conversations, connections between people and, ultimately, communities of practice on issues like planning, low-carbon energy and the link between poverty and climate change.

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<sup>2</sup> See [Doemeland/Trevino \(2014\): Which World Bank Reports Are Widely Read?](#)

## What we talk about when we talk about learning

Learning can mean different things to different people – even amongst the people we spoke to, there were multiple interpretations of what ‘learning’ means and why it is important. It’s seen as a step on the path to improvement, as a way to increase accountability, as an essential component in dealing with complexity.

For the purposes of this dialogue, we take learning to mean organisational learning across the ICF Portfolio. We are interested in exploring how DFID can systematically reflect upon its own and others’ experiences and capture lessons about what works in creating impactful change around climate change investments and policy, and in how that learning can be shared and used to influence policy, strategy, decisions and actions.

Since then, climate change has taken a more prominent role in international development with the creation of the International Climate Fund to help developing countries adapt to climate change, take up low-carbon growth and tackle deforestation. With the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), BRACED, KNOWFOR and other initiatives, a number of ICF's programmes explicitly address learning and organisational improvement. At the same time, the quality of learning and improvement in international aid has come under scrutiny<sup>3</sup>. While good practice in learning is widespread at the individual and project level, institutional learning struggles to combine all elements into a single, integrated system and engage in sense-making at the portfolio level.

With the increase in investment and the programmes generating lessons, the time is right to focus our energy more and ask:

## How can we best enable effective institutional learning across the ICF portfolio to accelerate impactful change around climate change investments and policy?

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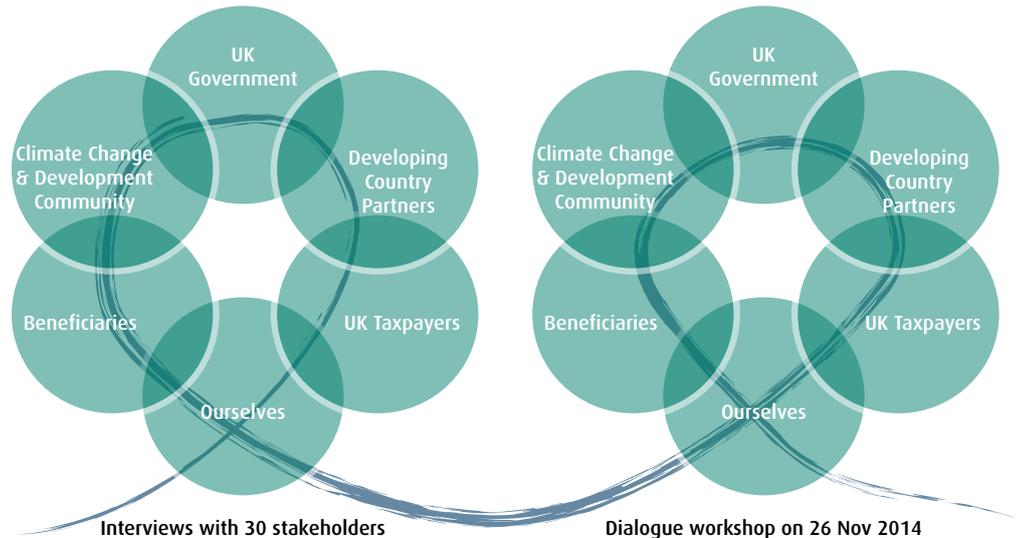
3 See, for example [ICAI \(2014\): How DFID Learns](#)

# The inquiry

In autumn 2014, we started the **ICF Learning for Change Dialogues**. The dialogue process set out to engage a large number of people across ICF stakeholder groups in a conversation about what it takes to learn from our experience and how we apply our learning in our future programme decision making.

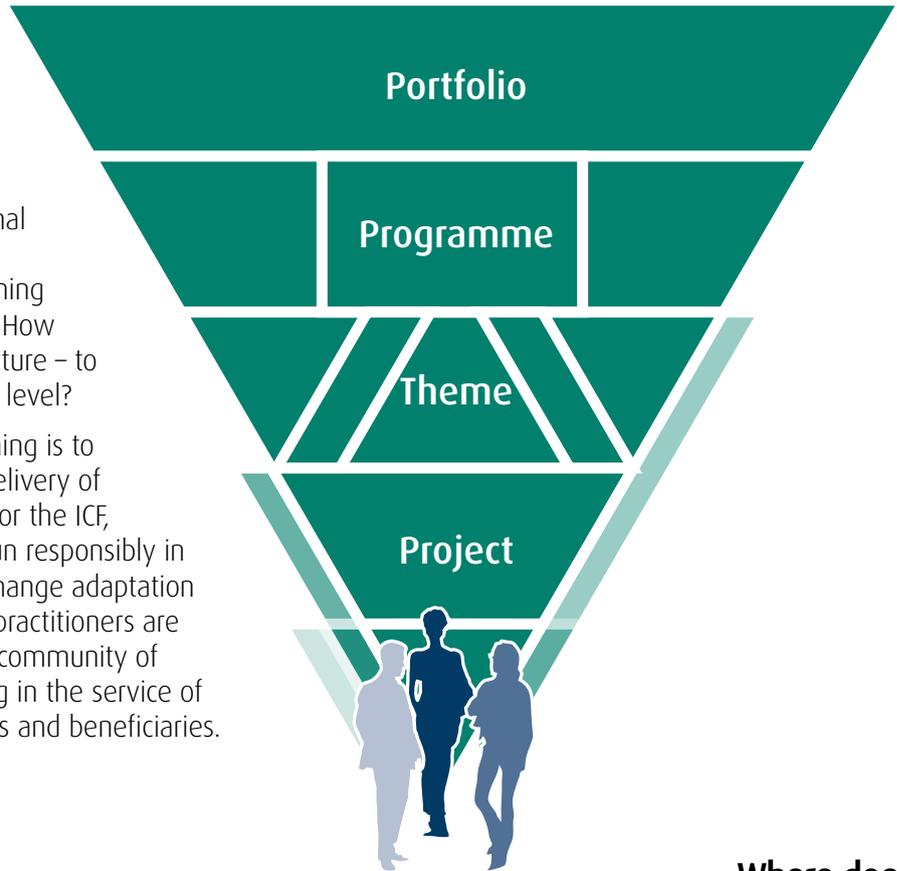
Our first step was to speak to 30 practitioners across our networks and to explore our collective experience working in the context of climate change programming:

- What do you mean by learning?
- How important is learning for you and your work?
- What learning processes are you currently using?
- What are some of the enablers and barriers?



Many told us about their mixed feelings about learning: how there was never enough time to do learning and how they didn't really know what it meant to do learning well. As an emergent practice, we are lacking a shared understanding and a common language around effective institutional learning. At the same time, we heard many stories of well-developed and innovative learning practice on the project and programme level. How can we connect this learning to the bigger picture – to inform decisions and priorities at the portfolio level?

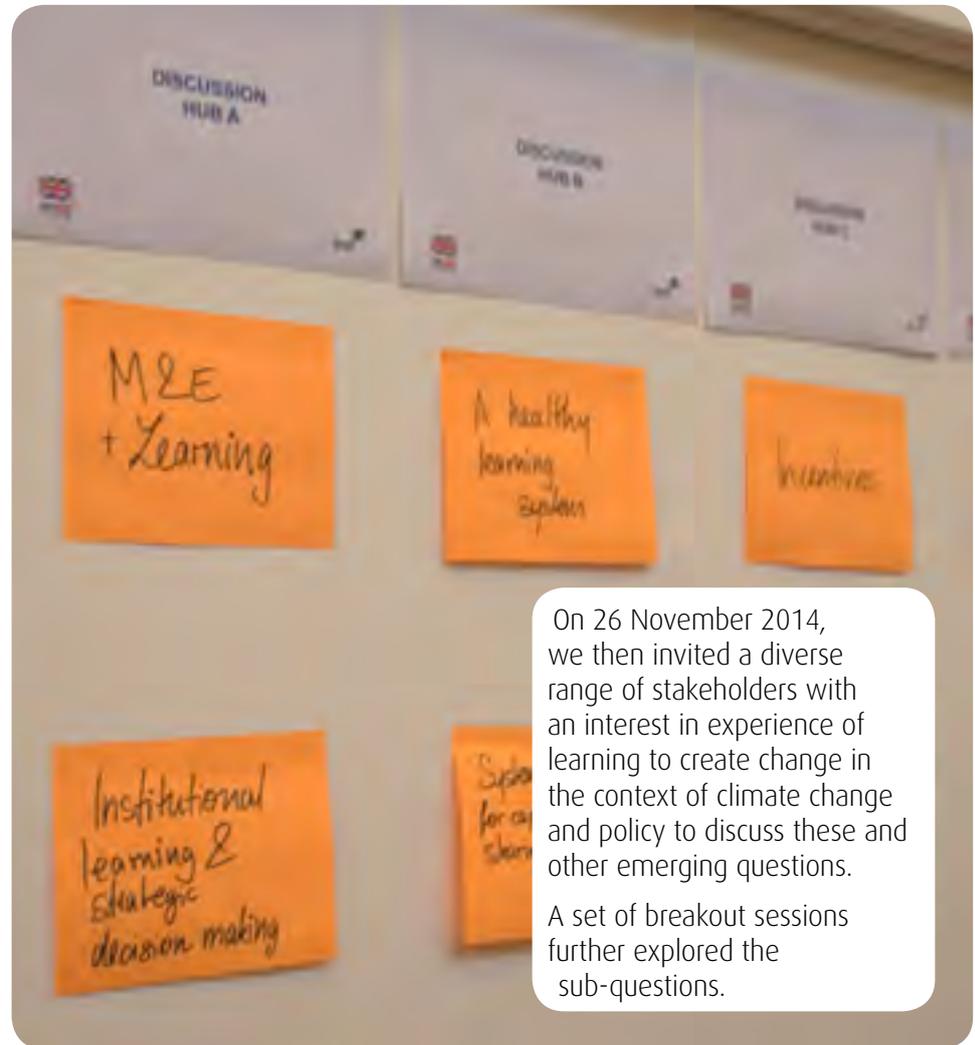
Over and over, we heard how important learning is to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery of climate-compatible development. Especially for the ICF, learning is a path to ensure that the fund is run responsibly in response to the emerging needs of climate change adaptation and low-carbon development. In that sense, practitioners are not just learning for themselves or their own community of practice but, more importantly, they are acting in the service of the UK taxpayers and the programme partners and beneficiaries.



**Where does  
learning really  
happen?**

From these conversations, six questions came up over and over again, pointing us to a set of learning sub-questions to explore further:

1. How could learning processes and monitoring and evaluation be linked to enable maximum benefit from both? When should they be linked and when not?
2. What kind of incentives can be designed into programmes and projects to prioritise and enable really effective learning?
3. How do we capture and share learning systematically?
4. How can we measure and demonstrate the impact of our learning processes?
5. What enables us to aggregate our learning and make sense of it at the ICF portfolio level to maximise the impact of the ICF investments?
6. How can we enable the flow of learning between practice on the ground and higher level policy making in highly political contexts?



On 26 November 2014, we then invited a diverse range of stakeholders with an interest in experience of learning to create change in the context of climate change and policy to discuss these and other emerging questions.

A set of breakout sessions further explored the sub-questions.

# Fields of inquiry about learning for change

1. The link between learning and monitoring and evaluation
2. Incentives for learning
3. Capturing and sharing learning
4. Sense-making at the portfolio level
5. Measuring the impact of learning
6. Learning between policy and practice

# The link between learning and monitoring and evaluation

Development institutions invest heavily in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of programme results and impacts. M&E processes are often well integrated in programme management and allow organisations to ensure internal and external accountability. Whilst M&E can have a clear learning mission, this often depends on the purpose, political context, audience and implementers. For example, in some contexts the purpose of

M&E is solely accountability; in these instances simply following an M&E process is not automatically going to result in learning. If we understand learning as a means to achieve improved performance, planning and delivery for the organisation, M&E can provide a great starting point for learning interventions.

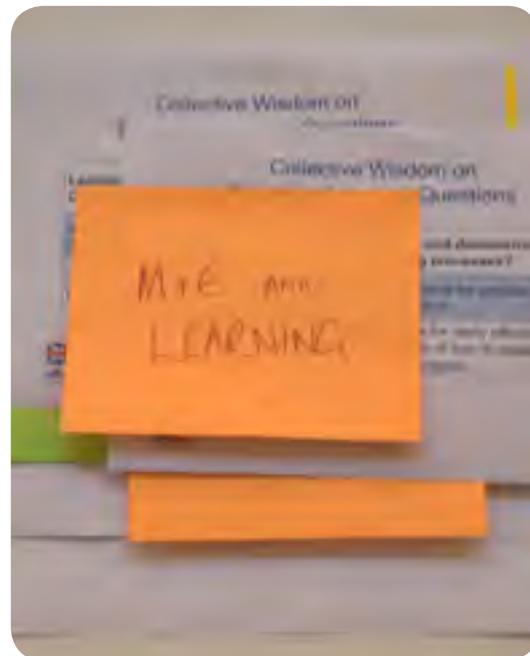
Quotes from the Dialogues:

I don't think you can have learning without M&E – and the value of M&E is lost if you don't do the learning from it.

How are M&E and Learning linked? M&E is for accountability and an end in itself. Learning isn't. Learning is a means to an end.

We use the results reports as starting points for conversations. I think some learning is going to result from that.

How much do people actually learn through M&E systems?



A workshop explored the relationship further and developed a typology of the relationship (see illustration on next page). The question remains:

**How could learning processes and monitoring and evaluation be linked to enable maximum benefit from both? When should they be linked and when not?**

## Monitoring & Evaluation

Day to day monitoring of local-level projects (monitoring visits, record sheets, team meetings)

Use of M&E findings for accountability upwards (or downwards), marketing or PR, resource allocation

Production of anecdotal stories of change (especially best cases)

Basic information collection methodologies (interviews, observation, surveymonkeys, etc.)

Development of databases and recording of admin or raw data

Monthly, quarterly or annual budgeting and reporting

Logistics, activity or financial reporting

Evaluations focused on verification of results or ensuring compliance

## Learning

Academic or institutional learning (including learning from external books and papers)

Formal or informal training

“Doing, reflecting, conceptualising and trying”

“scanning, peer-assist and adaptation” – demand side

Many aspects of situational analyses, planning etc. can be done for learning purposes before a project/programme starts<sup>1</sup>

Formal research studies

Stakeholder reviews

Workshops, conferences, seminars

Group emails, use of internet or intranet sites

Sector-wide study groups

e-dialoguing, e-conferencing, virtual chat rooms, digital workspaces, Wikis, video casting, weblogs, podcasting, social networking tools and e-learning

Complex information collection and analysis methods (MSC, outcome mapping, RCTs, etc.)

Participatory M&E (and planning) that involves different stakeholders at different levels

Learning-based internal or formal reviews (or peer-based reviews) – sensemaking

Methods of analysing change – production of analytical reports (including reporting on lessons learned and recommendations)

Methods for formally sharing learning and M&E findings within an organisation (e.g. newsletters, generation of learning reports)

Impact assessments

Evaluations focused on generating new data or promoting new learning

Establishment of non-threatening learning culture

Generation or analysis of negative or ‘no change’ stories

1 This can be included on the left hand side under a Participatory M&E system.  
2 As everything in this booklet, this graph is work in progress. What might this diagram look like if learning, monitoring and evaluation were represented in 3 different circles?

# Incentives for learning

Learning takes time. A second topic that emerged was the need for clear institutional signals to nudge individuals and programmes to prioritise and make time for learning.

Here is what we heard:

There's pressure to be on top of the next sexy topic, rather than on consolidating what's been done, making it accessible and disseminating it...

If you know you want an approach to extract ongoing learning from projects – you need to design it in from the beginning and resource it from the beginning.

There aren't a lot of incentives at later stages of projects to ensure that they prioritize learning among all the other activities they're carrying out.

The biggest piece of advice to someone setting up a learning strategy? Get the incentive right to do the learning.

A lot of people are quite intrinsically motivated by helping poor people and delivering better returns and doing a better job. So how do you convince people that doing active learning is helping them do a better job?

There is a very strong incentive to get projects approved by the boards – there is incentive to implement.

In a breakout group conversation, we identified a number of existing institutional systems that can be adapted to create incentives for learning. Through these tweaks, we can encourage learning through business as usual activities. These include:

- The programme cycle: logframes, theories of change, evaluation grids;
- Contracting and human resources: terms of reference, job descriptions, performance management;
- Events: board meetings, annual experiential learning, external policy processes.

A formal learning strategy linked to the long-term vision of the organisation can provide legitimacy for this process. In addition, learning resources (such as thematic communities of practice, helpdesks and knowledge platforms) can help make connections between those eager to learn more.

We will continue to explore: **What kind of incentives can be designed into programmes and projects to prioritise and enable really effective learning?**

# Capturing and sharing learning

Learning is a social process. Capturing and sharing are essential practices to make learning visible within organisations and to strengthen their ability to make sense of learning, synthesise and generate lessons. Effective learning organisations have robust mechanisms for recording and sharing learning at all levels, ranging from in country, project level to the global programme and portfolio level.

Quotes from the Dialogues:

How can we communicate the learning in a way that allows others to see how its relevant to them and what they are doing?

We need to think about how we can make better use of our systems to signpost things, so that if people do leave the programme, we don't forget that something was done.

That process relies quite heavily on people with institutional memory. I'd love it if our systems worked better, but systems only work as well as people keep them up to date.

For example I was looking at [a project proposal] and it became quite obvious then that the author didn't know that we have already done six of these before.

When we discussed effective systems and processes for capturing and sharing learning, we noted that the challenge is to link systems and to aggregate information: How do we know what information is needed? What are our strategic learning questions? IT systems can be useful to provide access to learning; yet, sense-making and learning need human facilitators to help identify useful information and learning questions.

The question remains:

**How do we easily capture and share learning systematically and as part of business as usual, enhancing institutional knowledge and reducing the risk of dependence on tacit, informal knowledge?**

# Sense-making at the portfolio level

Effective institutional learning happens on all levels – individually, within a team, a single project, a programme and across the entire institution. Just as each level has its own set of objectives, they also have different learning needs and questions.

Quotes from the Dialogues:

Beyond the narrow focus of learning for implementation and the donor there is often a need to learn more widely. A donor commissions an evaluation for one climate programme, but actually the findings are incredibly relevant for other donors or climate programmes. There is just no system in place to pull that learning out and share it.

We sit in the [CENTRE]. We have very little contact with the countries, very little contact with the task team.

In a programme of this scale and breadth – that's one of the many challenges for the ICF as well – lots of people doing lots of different stuff in lots of countries – how do you see the commonalities?

The power of learning is in the institutional shifts. So the question is how you get this learning at the institutional level and see shifts both in the narrative and investment strategies.

As someone who's heavily involved in one of these ICF programmes - I don't know anything about the other ICF programmes and what they're doing and where there might be synergies and opportunities for learning between them.

When discussing requirements for a healthy learning system, breakout group recommendations were to focus on learning at each level and to connect all institutional levels with the help of strategic learning champions:

- What are the three most important learning questions?
- What can we contribute to the learning objectives of the level above?
- How can we support the learning objectives of the level below?
- Which other networks can we share with?

The exploration continues: **What enables us to aggregate our learning and make sense of it at the ICF Portfolio level to maximise the impact of the ICF investments?**

# Measuring the impact of learning

Learning is not an end in itself: it helps our institutions achieve their objectives more effectively. One other area of concern was how to determine which learning interventions are effective.

Quotes from the Dialogues:

How to measure the effectiveness of learning activities? For example – does the knowledge generated at these meetings actually get applied into decisions actions and behaviours further down the line?

When you produce a global report – every country wants to be in it. When the table becomes visible, with everyone in it, people really care about the data being accurate – making it public creates some competition.

It takes time and it's difficult to measure a single intervention.

We said that we wouldn't fund them because it's so difficult to see the impact.

We're struggling with making causal jumps – to find a meaningful and measurable indicator which gives some certainty that the knowledge that you are producing, tracking and measuring through this indicator is leading to this outcome of better informed decision making.

Understanding the benefit and impact of learning interventions is key, but often difficult to measure or quantify. We need to learn what interventions lead to the most effective improvements and why. Some organisations already do this by integrating research on impact assessment for learning interventions into their proposals.

What do you think:

We are trying to figure out right now how we can establish a learning baseline.

**How can we measure and demonstrate the impact of our learning processes?**

# Learning between policy and practice

Another area that people struggle with was how to enable the flow of learning. Quotes from the Dialogues:

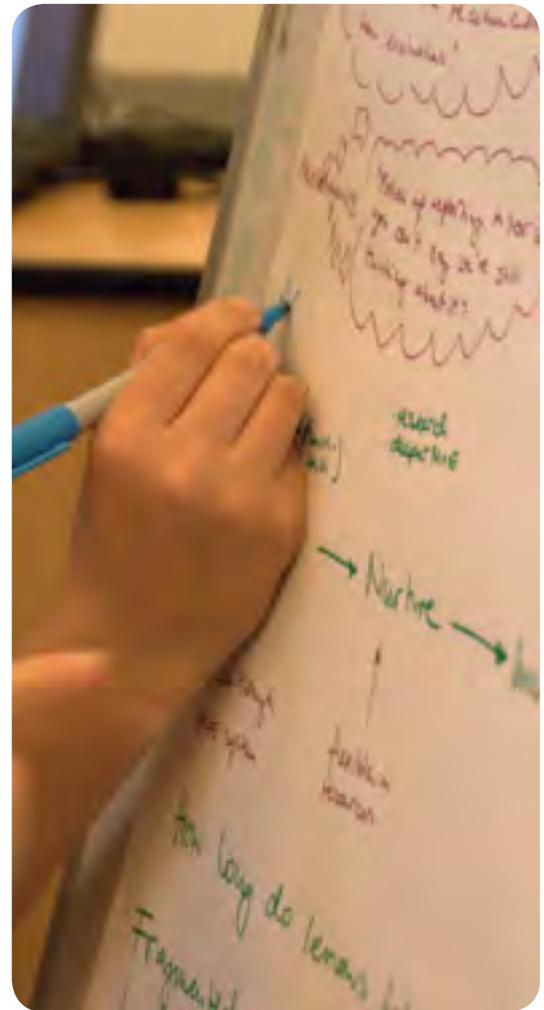
There is a big disconnect between the needs and agendas of vulnerable communities – and their government leaders and with other external bodies of knowledge and ‘assistance’.

Some governments who are very open to development partners working with them to do analysis and then taking that analysis into their policy making processes, developing funds that climate finance can come through and agreeing a strategy with development partners how to move forward. And then we have other governments, where the way that we have delivered evidence they're taking on, they would much prefer a greater distance between explicit policy making processes and their development partners.

Some governments are uncomfortable with the whole idea of learning from others – or being in a space where they might need to acknowledge that what they've done before isn't quite right.

What is your experience?

**How can we enable the flow of learning between practice on the ground and higher level policy making in highly political contexts?**



# Dimensions for effective learning

## Core Dimensions

Supply	Demand
Top-down	Bottom-up
Intentional	Emergent

## Design Considerations

Formal	Informal
Facilitated	Practitioner-led
Multi-stakeholder	Single-stakeholder
Experiential	Instructional
Micro	Aggregated

As we reviewed what our stakeholders had told us about effective institutional learning, we started to use a set of dimensions to understand learning context and review learning interventions. In each dimension, the 'right' balance depended on the context of the institution and its needs. It might even change over time as new information or stakeholders come in.

The two extremes of a dimension come with their own risks and opportunities. Instead of focusing entirely on one end or the other, effective learning holds a dynamic tension. Whilst leaning towards one end when needed, over time we might find an even balance harvesting the advantages on both ends.

A set of questions for each dimension can help start a conversation within your organisation about the purpose of learning, the current learning system, a vision of institutional learning and the design of necessary learning interventions.

# Dimensions for effective learning

The following three dimensions of effective learning help to understand and navigate the context of learning.

## **Supply – Demand**

We can learn for different audiences. Understanding who we are learning for, their needs and interests, and their relationship with the organisation are important to set an organisational learning agenda, create ownership and build opportunities for uptake of learning. Whilst some organisations might actively seek out the learning they need, others will be driven by the learning needs of their stakeholders, like donors, beneficiaries or peers. Thought starter: Who are you learning for? Are you generating learning for others (demand) or are you responding to your internal/organisational learning needs (supply)?

## **Top-down – Bottom-up**

A learning agenda can be set at different levels within the organisation. Whilst senior sponsorship can be a driver for learning, many organisations also create space for individuals at different organisational levels to take ownership, engage in the learning process and become thought leaders. Analysing organisational hierarchies and power dynamics will help you find the right balance. Thought starter: Relating to your organisational structure/system, who decides learning priorities? Is the decision directed from the top of the organisation (top-down) or can anyone in the organisation influence the content and process of learning (bottom-up)?

## **Intentional – Emergent**

Why we learn depends largely on the context we work in and the stakeholders we learn with and for. Organisations can learn at different levels in country, on single projects or at programme level. Some use predetermined themes to make sense of their learning and share lessons with a wider audience. In other contexts organisations might prefer to allow new learning themes to become apparent in order to respond to future challenges. Thought starter: As an organisation/system, what are you learning about? Is your learning around predetermined themes (intentional) or are you allowing new learning themes to come up (emergent)?

The following five dimensions can be used to make design decisions of learning interventions.

### **Formal – Informal**

To generate learning, organisations can decide to specifically design learning interventions and processes or draw on existing structures from project management or M&E. Whilst these formalised structures can help surface learning there also needs to be space for rich learning to evolve spontaneously through informal conversations, on the job practices and individual or collective reflections. Thought starter: How are you learning as an organisation/system? Do you follow a structured and systematic approach (formal) or is your learning spontaneous and incidental (informal)?

### **Facilitated – Practitioner-led**

Learning interventions, the implementation of the process and development of content can be delivered by different stakeholders. Practitioners within the organisation might lead learning interventions as part of their day-to-day activities. On the other hand the process could be facilitated by outsourced suppliers and learning experts. Thought starter: Who is delivering the learning process/intervention? Is a learning team/consultant/supplier delivering the content and process of learning for you (facilitated) or are practitioners within the organisation and beneficiaries delivering learning interventions (practitioner-led)?

### **Multi-stakeholder – Single-stakeholder**

Depending on learning themes, audiences and opportunities for uptake of learning we can decide how many different perspectives we include in our learning intervention. Sometimes solutions and prototype approaches can be more effective when they are developed through collective learning. In other situations the answer will come from one individual, team or organisation. Thought starter: Where does your learning come from? Are you learning from one individual, team, organisation or sector (single-stakeholder) or are you including different perspectives in your inquiry process (multi-stakeholder)?

## **Experiential learning – Instructional learning**

Once captured and synthesised learning can be communicated to internal and external audiences. There are many ways of communicating learning ranging from instructions, guidelines, working papers and other written materials to learning moments from experience. All ways of communicating will lead to a different impact. Sometimes organisations share their learning to contribute to an ongoing debate, other times they want to influence and change behaviours. Thought starter: How do you share your learning? Do you communicate your learning through opportunities for learning by doing/from experience (experiential) or do you communicate through instructions, guidelines, recommendations (instructional)?

## **Micro – Aggregated**

The richest learning happens in the micro at project level, in country and mostly removed from high level decision making. But organisations can make sense of this rich learning at different levels within the organisation to interpret, aggregate and inform decision making and strategy. Aggregating learning from the micro and making sense of it at an organisational level is one of the most difficult things. Thought starter: How do you make sense of your learnings within the organisation? Do your learnings occur isolated in little pockets (micro) or are you interpreting your learnings to make them more than the sum of its parts (aggregated)?



These dimensions can be used to evaluate an institution's current approach to learning and to identify needs for future learning interventions.

# 10 emerging principles for effective learning

During the dialogue process, we saw a set of principles and stories emerge that can help us design effective learning interventions that make a difference.

1. Frame learning as a strategic path to impact
2. Articulate learning questions
3. Focus on learning priorities
4. Ground learning in action
5. Slow down to speed up
6. Share learning with others
7. Build learning into business as usual
8. Consider context
9. Fail fast to succeed sooner
10. Grow connections, not collections

# Principle 1: Frame learning as a strategic path to impact

Doing more of the same is not going to help us address climate challenge. Learning is not something we can view as an optional extra. We need better answers and better questions, fast. When we continuously learn from what works and what doesn't, our decisions and actions become more effective. As we consider learning as an essential part of our business strategy, we start investing the necessary time and resources to grow our impact.

The International Climate Fund (ICF) was set out explicitly as a vehicle to experiment with, learn from and scale up responses to climate change, especially in the areas of adaptation, low-carbon growth and deforestation. A number of programmes now explicitly address learning, and the ongoing **Learning for Change Dialogues** are preparing the ground for an institutional learning strategy.

Questions that can help us emphasise learning as a strategic priority:

1. What is your organisation's learning strategy? How does it feed into your overall mission and vision? What are the feedback loops into organisational strategy and decision-making?
2. What resources, structures and support do you provide for learning? How many people are involved?
3. How do you measure learning? How do you know you are learning the right things?

## Principle 2: Articulate learning questions

*“If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than 5 minutes.”*

– Albert Einstein

Throughout the dialogue, we often heard people saying that the first step towards effective learning is to identify clear learning questions: what do we as an institution need to learn about – and why and who for? In the midst of our busy work lives, we often forget about this and jump headfirst into action. Investing the time in good questions is worth doing. Once we know the question we want to inquire into, it acts as an overall framework which can orient others and encourage them to contribute their own experience to the bigger whole. Learning questions are particularly powerful for complex institutions to coordinate learning across their entire portfolio.

The Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), for example, identified a set of learning questions at the level of its thematic areas. These questions are used to reflect on lessons learned from practical experience and to synthesise key messages for decision-making.

Good learning questions:

1. are broad and enduring. In engaging with them, we might discover sub-questions or related enquiries. Over time, the original questions might evolve;
2. are purposeful and meaningful for the people engaged in the inquiry. We find ourselves returning to them because it matters;
3. are thought provoking. The questions resist quick and easy answers. They lead us into the unknown;
4. are relevant to our day to day work and grounded in practical experience;
5. have a clear focus.

There are great synergies between learning, research and evaluation questions. The questions might sound the same, but important differences lie in the purpose of doing them, the audiences, power dynamics, form and uptake of outputs and feedback loops to planning, decision making and action.

## Principle 3: Focus on learning priorities

Learning can happen everywhere, in almost everything we do. Yet, with limited resources for institutional learning processes, we need to be strategic and focus on the most important learning topics to deliver our mission. Especially in complex organisations and institutional networks, we need to ask: what learning would make the biggest contribution to our capacity to deliver effective change? Identifying these two or three priority learning areas helps to provide an overarching framework for people throughout the network to learn together and contribute to.

DFID, for example, identified a set of accelerator countries in Africa which are charged with capturing tacit learning and understanding and sharing it around the network. This approach helped them capture and share informal information on how project teams work with governments.

To identify learning priorities, we can ask the following questions:

1. If there was only one thing we could learn this year, what would it be? Which areas are we not going to look at?
2. Where will we invest in deeper learning, e.g. using multi-stakeholder processes, external evaluations and/or face to face meetings?
3. What are our most pressing challenges and greatest opportunities in delivering on our mission?
4. What do we most need to learn to meet those challenges and take advantages of the opportunities?
5. If we knew the answer, what difference would it make to our work and our impact? Is that worth focusing our energy and resources on?

## Principle 4: Ground learning in action

When learning how to become more effective agents of change with respect to complex challenges like climate change and development, the most relevant insights are often in the day-to-day experience and grounded in practice. Ensuring our learning questions relate to programmes and projects, we can link our actual experience with the strategic context and provide a framework for sense making from different perspectives, players, projects and geographies around the same challenges. Approaches like prototyping, action learning or learning journeys help us to test theories, bring together experiences and deepen our learning.

Questions that we find useful to ground our learning:

1. How can we link our activities to our strategic learning priorities?
2. Where do we have opportunities to experiment and test different approaches across our portfolio?
3. Are there other programmes or projects we should consider to enable us to learn?
4. Who is actively working in this field and making change happen? How can we involve them? Where have we already tried similar approaches?
5. What could we learn from other fields of practice, e.g. design or commerce?

When the government of Ethiopia started developing their response to climate change, they needed to find solutions suitable for a developing country with severe adaptation challenges. They found help during a learning visit from Bangladeshi climate experts and government officials who took time to learn about the Ethiopian situation before sharing advice from their own experience.

## Principle 5: Slow down to speed up

In many workplaces, there is a predominant focus on action and implementation. With our busy workloads, we want to get things ticked off the list and move to the next item. When do we check whether we are working on the right list? In order to learn, we need to create space to slow down, connect with the bigger picture and reflect upon our experience from all that doing.

After a particularly exhausting country engagement process in Ghana, the CDKN project team decided to take two entire days as a team to reflect about the political and practical challenges they faced. The results were ten pages of lessons learnt that helped them later to provide a better service to the government and to improve their own processes.

Questions that we find helpful in creating reflective spaces:

1. What's working well here? How can we build on our that?
2. What's proving to be difficult here? What could we try that's different?
3. What can we learn from our experience so far?
4. How can we help colleagues in solving their problems?
5. What kind of regular routine could help with this?
6. Where can we find help? Who knows about the problems at hand?

## Principle 6: Share learning with others

One of the most powerful ways of learning is to share it with others. There are hundreds of ways learning can be shared: from formal knowledge management systems to a quick email, from presentations at conferences to conversations at the water cooler. Sharing helps us to better understand how to do our own work better – and others can benefit from the insights and apply what is useful to their work. To strengthen sharing within our institutions, we need not just user-friendly IT systems, but also human champions with capacity to probe, connect and curate learning.

Questions that we find helpful in capturing and sharing our learning:

1. If we were to attempt a project like this again, what guidance would be useful?
2. Who could benefit from this information? What format is most useful for them?
3. Where can I teach what I learned from my work?

One of DECC's teams made space for learning for virtual collaboration with an open team meeting on Monday afternoons. Members of the team can bring their issues and questions, present research they had read, brainstorm ideas and review programme management.

*"In learning you will teach, and in teaching you will learn."*

– Phil Collins

## Principle 7: Build learning into business as usual

Throughout our discussions, learning was often talked about as if it was something on the side – something else to do on top of the day job – something that was done by ‘learning people’. But we also heard many examples where opportunities to reflect and learn were built into everyday business structures and processes. For an institution to develop a learning culture, learning needs to be embedded; the systems and structures that support the work of our organisations provide powerful opportunities to reinforce learning and quality improvement, be it through the programme cycle, human resources or financial management.

Questions that we find helpful in integrating learning in business-as-usual processes:

1. What systems, meetings and forms already exist? How do we integrate opportunities for reflection and learning in them?
2. Which other teams and departments could we work with, or invite into the conversation?
3. How will we support these processes? What happens with the results? How are the current systems used?

NB: When integrating learning, keep in mind that the original process also serves another purpose (e.g. monitoring and evaluation, programme management or quality assurance).

The Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) has processes that capture learning and reflections from project manager, suppliers and the service recipient at the end of each project. This gets picked up at project initiation with a form field that says ‘please describe how you are bringing in learning from previous work into this project’. The document thus acts as a trigger to say ‘well hang on a minute...’.

## Principle 8: Consider context

In seeking to tackle climate change and poverty reduction, we are trying to influence a complex ecosystem of organisations, power relations and resource flows in a multitude of sub-national, national and international contexts. Many factors influence the success of our initiatives and the subtleties of what works will be different depending on the context. While we need to adapt the details of each project (what) to the respective situation, it is easier to share insights about root causes (why) and useful techniques (how).

Questions that we find useful in considering context:

1. What does this situation have in common with other projects? What is different?
2. Which techniques could be promising in our specific environment?
3. What is at the root of the problem we are trying to solve? Who else has insights?
4. Who else has tackled similar issues? What can we learn from their experience? How would we need to adapt it to fit to our context?

When CDKN planned to conduct a climate vulnerability assessment in India, they wanted to learn from successful engagements in Colombia and ensure that their approach was relevant to the context at hand. They decided to invite parts of the Colombian team to the multi-stakeholder project design workshops – and built in action learning cycles to continue learning and ensure that the project remained relevant and effective.

## Principle 9: Fail fast to succeed sooner

Ending up at a different place than planned can be a beautiful learning opportunity. If we consider failure as part of the process, we can design projects to quickly give us information about the feasibility and viability of our approach. We can fail fast to succeed sooner, and we can shift from blame to inquiry: What did we set out to do? What actually happened? What could we do differently next time? Not every initiative will succeed. No innovation is without risk.

The Asian Development Bank had set up a programme to provide bank guarantees for solar power investments in India. When the programme failed to gain momentum, it was brought to a close. However, instead of writing it off and moving on quickly to the next thing, the programme steering committee decided to conduct an evaluation to find out what they could learn from the experience.

Questions that we find helpful in learning from failure (and change):

1. What worked? What didn't work?
2. What contributed to the success or failure of this project?
3. What surprised us? What did we notice?
4. What would we do differently next time?

## Principle 10: Grow connections, not collections

Learning is an inherently social process. We learn much more through experience, connections and interactions than we learn from static collections of knowledge. Especially when addressing complex challenges, the answer is in the system and the collective, not in any given individual or expert. By bringing people together in communities of practice and multi-stakeholder dialogues, we build connections and discover new insights that matter. Sometimes, the spark of inspiration can come from unexpected sources, be it a side conversation or an informal coffee meeting.

Questions that help us in growing connections:

1. Who are we learning with? How do we build these connections?
2. Where do we expose ourselves to chance and serendipity?
3. What does the system know that the parts can't yet see?

When CDKN helped to set up the first urban climate change project in Cartagena, Colombia, they had no proven recipe for success. Instead, they decided to learn using a long-term process and taking time to convene stakeholders and understand their common vision. They quickly found that from that clear shared purpose, the project design nearly developed by itself.

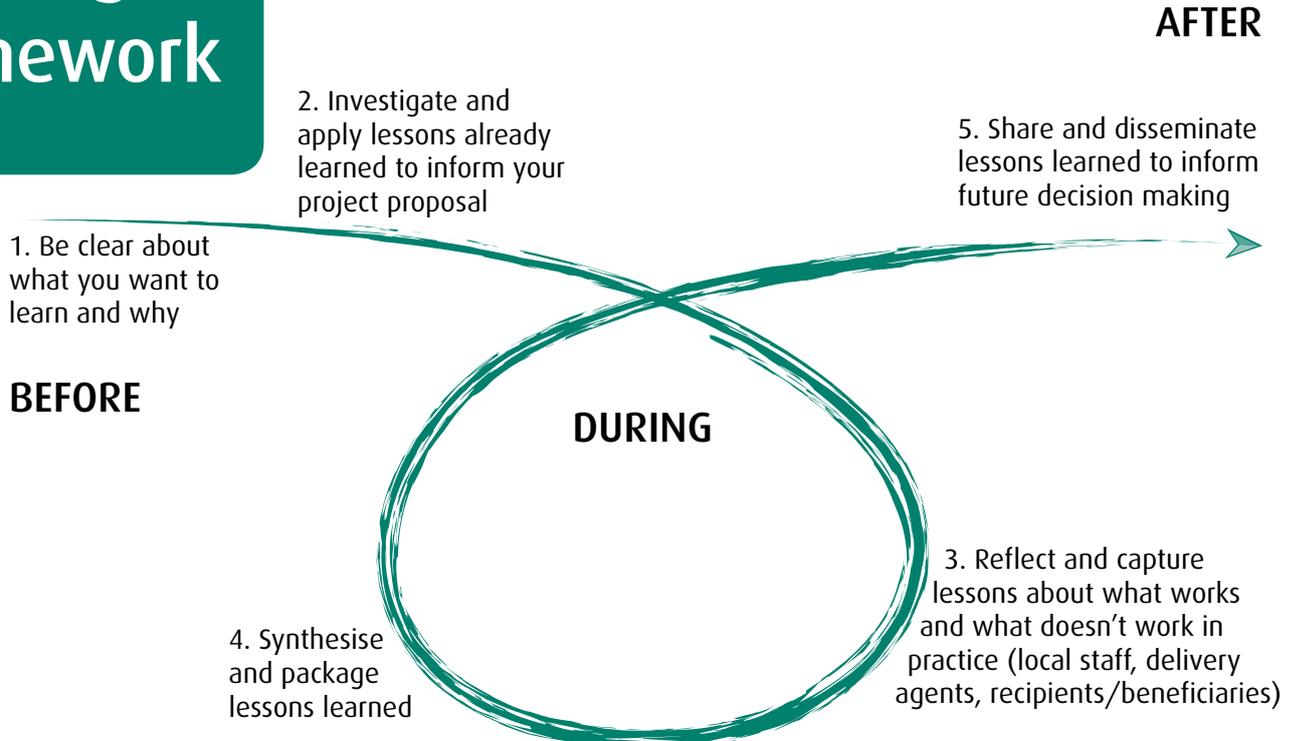
# Tools

Checklists, tools and models can be useful when navigating organisational improvement and learning in complex environments. Here are three that have helped us understand this space:

1. Simple learning framework
2. Navigating complexity
3. Nurturing niggles

# Simple learning framework

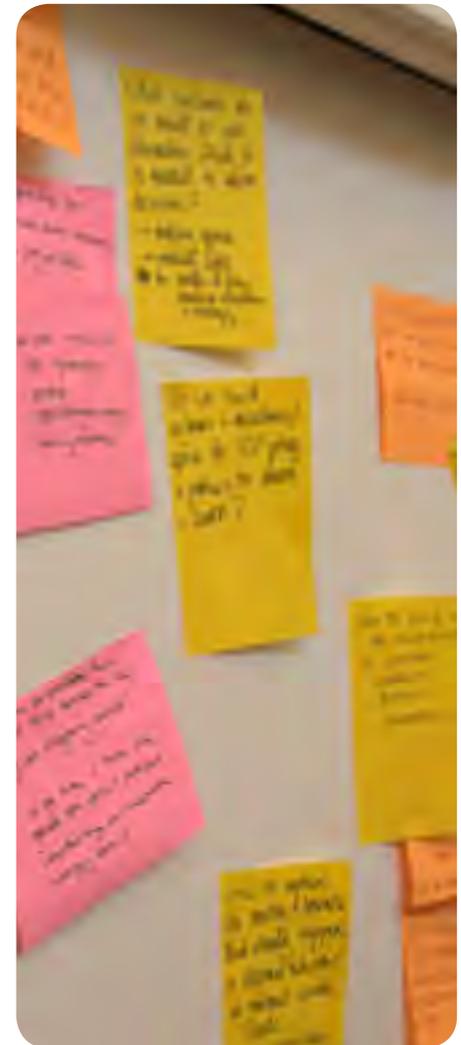
In our work, we have found this simple learning process useful and we have seen good examples of this in practice at a project level, country level and theme level.



For example, we might:

1. Start by setting learning questions and building connections. This could happen through email lists, a forum or other networks. This is the moment to find others who have done similar projects before and to build communities of interested people.
2. Set up conversations and peer assists with these networks so that people who may have insights can help you improve your approach.
3. Build learning into the implementation, e.g. by regularly conducting After-Action-Reviews for fast and quick reflection.
4. Conduct a more thorough retrospective after the project and identify possible improvements for next time.
5. Identify who can benefit from our insights, share lessons with them and be available for follow-up assistance to embed the learning widely.

Consistently applied, this simple framework helps to create more opportunities to integrate continuous learning into day-to-day tasks. It ensures that lessons about what works and what does not work are captured from each stage of the delivery chain, particularly in relation to locally employed staff, delivery agents and, most crucially, the beneficiaries and helps to assess the impact of learning on decision making in the devising and delivery of aid programmes.



# Navigating complexity

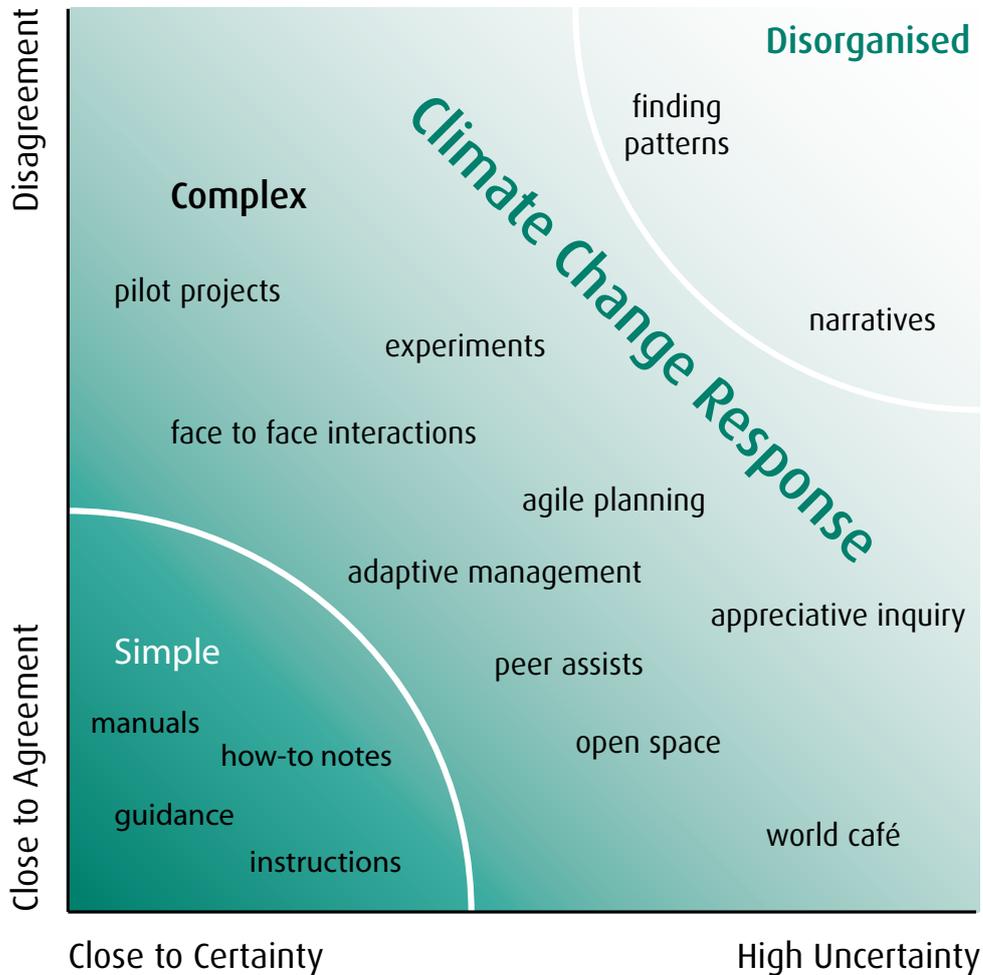
We used to plan development interventions as if we were handling machines: Given a defined activity, we would expect a certain result. We would write best practice guides and scale up solutions, without considering context or side effects. We now know: the world is more complicated than this and the effects of climate change add unforeseen risks to the picture. To be successful, we need to learn how to navigate complexity.

To understand whether we are dealing with a complex system, we can ask the following questions:

- How much agreement do we have about our goal and approach?
- How much certainty do we have that our approach will work?

In a simple system, rules of cause and effect are obvious to all and we have high agreement and certainty between partners. In a complicated system, the relationship between cause and effect requires some context analysis and expert knowledge. We have less agreement and certainty.

However, in complex systems (like today's responses to climate change), the relationship between cause and effect can only be perceived in retrospect, not in advance. There are wildly divergent views on the best response to the situation. The approach here is to co-create: probe, sense 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.



This illustration shows useful tools for situations of increasing uncertainty and disagreement (adapted from the work of Ralph Stacey).

# Nurturing niggles

In our work, we want to direct resources to where they are most needed and not spread them too thinly across the portfolio of an institution or programme. Monitoring and evaluation systems will identify areas that need to be explored further to translate initial hints or suspicions into actionable learning. These hints, suspicions (or 'niggles') may be based around areas of work that seem to be going particularly well or particularly badly, or they may come from issues on which several different stakeholders appear to be saying the same thing. Niggles might also simply arise from evidence or insights that point to something interesting or unusual.

Whenever we notice a niggles, we can then choose to nurture it and to target resources swiftly at the area of interest to identify whether or how to investigate further in order to produce timely, actionable learning. Later, this may involve informal discussions with different stakeholders to check their perception of the issue. If the niggles persists, we can test out the issue and potential solutions, e.g. through a fully-funded research project or a set of evaluations on a theme or subject.

Listening to niggles carefully can result in early course corrections which help to avoid larger more damaging mistakes.



# An invitation

This booklet presented some initial emerging thoughts on effective institutional learning as a response to climate change. We are committed to continue learning and we are inviting you to join us in this process. Explore with us:

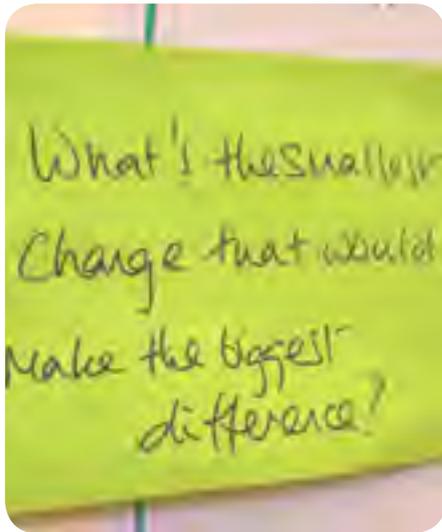
## How can we best enable effective learning to accelerate impactful change around climate change investments and policy?

As we apply the principles and tools from this booklet together and develop them further, we want to hear your stories, your questions, your ideas and your feedback. Following the first **Learning for Change Dialogues**, we are slowly building a community of practice around Learning for Change.

If we are serious about accelerating impactful change, we don't just have the permission to learn and experiment, we have a responsibility to do so.

If you would like to be involved, contact us at [learning@dfid.gov.uk](mailto:learning@dfid.gov.uk)

# Learning about learning



When we started thinking about the **ICF Learning for Change Dialogues**, we were hoping to find answers. Instead, we found a deep field of inquiry, more questions and a growing community of practitioners that is grappling with the same challenge. We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this process.

We brought our own models and tools to the table and championed them through working collaboratively, secretly hoping that our engagement process, the interviews and the workshop, would confirm what we already knew. Instead, we got mired in the complexity of the field and the change we are seeking. We heard powerful stories of change and the difficulties in making it happen. The more we tried to simplify the richness into models, the more our heads spun.

We realised: just as learning for change needs to live in the messiness of complexity, so does our own learning about learning. The world we live in means that there are no right answers independent of context. We are learning for the future and need to give ourselves enough space to experiment, reflect and reiterate. Learning is as much craft as science. Learning collectively in an iterative way takes time. We learn from doing, with the help of practices and principles, rules of thumb and collegial advice.

We have learnt: This work is not optional for a low-carbon climate resilient society. Learning is integral to effective policy making and delivery. Let's walk this path together.

# Resources

This booklet builds on decades of work on organisational learning and global change and many people have contributed to our practice and thinking. The following publications have been particularly useful to us:

Ballard, D. (2013). **Mainstreaming adaptation from an organizational change perspective.** Presentation for AdaptationCommunity.net. Available from <http://bit.ly/l4c-mainstreaming>

Chambers, R. (2014). **Into the Unknown: Explorations in development practice.** Practical Action Publishing.

Collinson, C. and Parcell, G. (2004). **Learning to Fly: Practical Knowledge Management from Leading and Learning Organizations.** Capstone.

DFID (2013). **DFID Africa Division Strategic Programme Review 2013.** Internal document.

Draper, S. (2013). **Creating the Big Shift: System Innovation for Sustainability.** Report for Forum for the Future. Available from <http://bit.ly/l4c-bigshift>

Futerra (2009). **Sell the Sizzle.** Report. Available from <http://bit.ly/l4c-sizzle>

Grint, K. (2010). **Wicked problems and clumsy solutions: the role of leadership.** In: Brookes and Grint: The new public leadership challenge. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 169-186

Independent Evaluation Group (2014). **Learning and Results in World Bank Operations: How the Bank Learns.** Available from <http://bit.ly/l4c-bank>

Lowcarbonworks (2009). **Insider Voices: Human Dimensions of Low Carbon Technology.** University of Bath. Available from <http://bit.ly/l4c-insidervoices>

Pascale, R., Sternin, J., and Sternin, M. (2010). **The Power of Positive Deviance.** Harvard Business Review Press.

Ranger, N. (2013). Topic Guide. **Adaptation: Decision making under uncertainty.** Report for Evidence on Demand. Available from <http://bit.ly/l4c-topicguide>

Ricardo-AEA (2013). **PREPARE - Barriers and enablers to organisational and sectoral adaptive capacity** – qualitative study. Final report for DEFRA. Available from <http://bit.ly/l4c-prepare>

Rose, C., Dade, P. and Scott, J. (2007). **Research Into Motivating Prospectors, Settlers and Pioneers** To Change Behaviours That Affect Climate Emissions. Available from <http://bit.ly/l4c-behaviour>

Sutherland, J (2014): **Scrum: A revolutionary approach to building teams, beating deadlines, and boosting productivity.** Random House Business Books

The Learning Hub (2012). **Learning to Tackle Climate Change.** Report for Institute of Development Studies. Available from <http://bit.ly/l4c-learning>

We invite you to explore, find inspiration and apply the new ideas you may find. Send us your ideas and favourite resources as well.

# About this booklet

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This report is available for download at [www.cdkn.org](http://www.cdkn.org).

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