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6. Pushing the limits of adaptiveness through double-loop learning: organisational dilemmas in delivering Sexual Reproductive Health Rights education in Uganda¹¹

Abstract

This chapter untangles the complex realities of Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights education in Uganda based on a Participatory Action Research with staff and volunteers of the case study NGO. A detailed portrait is offered of the dilemmas faced by the team around value-contradictions in this culturally sensitive domain, the complex nature of change, programme targets and community expectations. Through double-loop learning methodology, the team reflected on their own mental models and strategies used in dealing with these dilemmas, and reframed their action theories towards more effective collaboration with learners and community members. The research process and outcomes illustrate the transformative power of reflection and double-loop learning, resulting in practical guidance for education NGOs facing dilemmas in community collaboration.

¹¹ This chapter is based on a published article: Blaak, M. (2021). "Pushing the limits of adaptiveness through double loop learning: organisational dilemmas in delivering Sexual Reproductive Health Rights education in Uganda", Educational Action Research, DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2021.1899013. Therefore, this chapter presents some overlap with chapters 2 and 3. I have maintained the theory and methodological sections of the paper to preserve the coherence of this chapter.

6.1 Introduction

Me as a peer educator [. . .] I don't know when to help someone when the problem is extremely . . . even [the NGO] cannot work on that problem. [. . .] Cause we teach about family planning in teen groups, but they have many problems!

Mildred (interview 4), volunteer

Mildred, a young volunteer, discloses her experiences delivering Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) education for youth in rural Uganda. During her seven-month placement, she learned that youths' SRHR challenges are vast and complex. Research on SRHR in Uganda supports her observations; a quarter of teenage girls are either pregnant or have given birth, 22 per cent of women have experienced sexual violence and six per cent of adults live with HIV (Ministry of Health, 2018; Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Further, youths' rights, such as the right to self-determination or the right to accurate information, are constrained by a complex web of politics, religion, culture and socio-economic factors (Rijsdijk, Lie, Bos, Leerlooijer, & Kok, 2013).

Based on an analysis of youths' perceptions and existing interventions in Uganda, studies suggest that SRHR programming should be multifaceted and involve multiple stakeholders. Besides positively framed, reliable SRHR information, there should also be an opportunity for learners to examine the validity of information, as well as discuss (gendered) values and beliefs. Curricula should include livelihood development, as well as skills to negotiate and handle relationships and sexuality (De Haas, Hutter, & Timmerman, 2017; Nobelius et al., 2010; Rijsdijk et al., 2013). Furthermore, because empowerment of youth requires a supportive social system, Rijsdijk et al. (2013) and Nobelius et al. (2010) recommended that SRHR education programmes involve different actors such as healthcare workers, *ssenga's* (paternal aunties), family and community elders. Enabling this engagement, SRHR programmes should include spaces for dialogue between genders, generations and societal positions (Rijsdijk et al., 2013).

This ideal type of SRHR education requires a unique organisational approach: one centred around community collaboration, learning and adaptation towards local realities, whilst navigating ethical complexity. Are NGOs set up to facilitate such programmes? Whereas NGOs usually have learning systems – such as needs assessments or community dialogues – these do not automatically translate into relevant adaptations.

NGOs often act risk-averse – at least to some extent driven by funding mechanisms that promote pre-defined short-term targets and limited overhead (Ramalingam, 2013). Education programmes that start out with a social transformative agenda and flexible delivery model, tend to formalise over time – standardising its curriculum, narrowing learning goals and reducing community interaction (Hoppers, 2006; Indabawa & Mpofu, 2006).

How can NGOs widen the space for adaptiveness – not just to make technical adaptations, but also to manoeuvre normative pluralism in the field of SRHR? In this chapter I present findings of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) activities with the case study NGO staff and volunteers that helped to unravel their complex realities delivering an SRHR programme. Zooming in on four dilemmas, this chapter illustrates how double-loop learning methodology helped the team open up space to adapt their education programme to local needs and reframe their understanding of social change in this domain. I first illustrate how field theory can help position double-loop learning in a dynamic, power-laden and normative context.

6.2 Social change in the field of SRHR in Uganda

6.2.1 A field theoretical lens to social change

Field theory offers several helpful concepts to explain the interplay between agency and structure in achieving social change. In field theory, social reality is seen as a mental space in which people give meaning to actors, relationships and capital around them. As interactions in the social space become patterned, fields emerge, differentiating them from other fields (Friedman, 2011). In this research context, we could consider 'SRHR education' as a field, but 'NGOs' or 'communities' also form their own fields. Each field has a symbolic order – referring to the meaning given to relations, rules, capital etcetera – and a structural order – which refers to relative positions of actors within the field (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015b). These structures are shaped through intricate processes of power as actors seek to influence what is considered at stake (Bourdieu, 1977; Hilgers & Mangez, 2015b).

People, through action and interaction, can change or reproduce the shape of a field, and in turn, through socialisation, people are (re-)oriented to new rules, meanings and action strategies. This interconnection between agency and structure is captured in *habitus*, a concept introduced by Bourdieu (1977), which he explains as a set of

dispositions developed by an individual through internalisation of the field. One's positionality in a field influences actions and alternative futures an individual considers (Bourdieu, 1977). When analysing the way NGOs organise themselves, concepts of field, habitus, symbolic and structural order help explain through which processes members become disposed to certain actions, but also how their agency can lead to change (Friedman, 2011).

Furthermore, a field theoretical perspective can shine a critical light on the normative and power-laden nature of social change. Power dynamics in a field become the subject of analysis, as well as the way these dynamics are internalised and enacted by individuals. In the context of aid, this is particularly important given the rising critique about the disproportional amount of power northern institutions such as donors or international NGOs have in setting the development agenda (McGrath, 2018; Ramalingam, 2013). Friedman (2011) suggests that reflexivity on the field emerging around an issue can help create awareness around possibilities for action. For organisations, it is important that such reflexivity transcends the individual level and translates into organisational strategies. Below I illustrate how this element of organisational reflexivity can be operationalised through Argyris' concept of double-loop learning.

6.2.2 Double-loop learning for social transformation

Organisational learning provides spaces through which members gather, process and interpret information to revise their action strategies, beliefs, goals, values or assumptions (Lipshitz et al., 2007). To differentiate whether organisational learning is more or less transformative we can use Argyris' concepts of single-loop and double-loop learning. Single loop learning results in changes to action strategies and double-loop leads to change in underlying beliefs, assumptions or goals (Argyris, 1982). Linking organisational learning to field theory (see figure 7), we could argue that double-loop learning examines our mental models (how we perceive the situation) and the way these models are influenced by the field. This could result in an alternative interpretation of reality and new action scripts. On the other hand, single-loop learning uncritically changes action strategies without exploring underlying dispositions and assumptions.

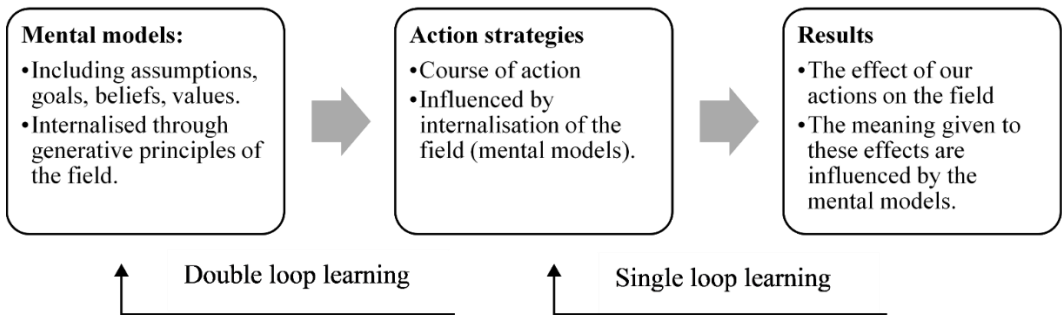


Figure 7 Theories-of-action in light of field theory

Argyris (2010) found that people are often unaware of their actual dispositions, beliefs and norms and he adds that we often espouse different beliefs than those actually guiding our actions. For example, we might say that our objective is to help youth make their own choices regarding birth control, yet our actions are guided by a programme target for youth to adopt a particular family planning method. What makes double-loop learning difficult according to Argyris (2010) is that when we become aware of inconsistencies in our actions, defensive routines are triggered, which can result in self-sealing processes. For example, an NGO manager who rewards team members who achieve higher family planning sign-ups could incentivise strategies that lean more towards uninformed sign-ups and in the long run make their bias towards birth control undiscussable.

Argyris' work on organisational learning has been criticised for being uncritical about the role of power. However, I join Bokeno (2003) in reading Argyris' concept of double-loop learning as a potentially critical learning project. As illustrated in figure 7, inspired by field theory one can analyse connections between mental models, positionality and power dynamics that influence what is considered desirable or even discussable. Therefore, if we develop double-loop learning skills, we might also gain (and extend) power to revise how success is framed and align our actions to what is meaningful to us and those we are trying to support.

Unfortunately, double-loop learning proves to be a difficult practice. Argyris (2010) discovered that the governing rules in organisations often discourage this critical examination of beliefs, values and assumptions. In the context of international development, trends of rationalisation also disincentivise double-loop learning

(Ramalingam, 2013). Thus, to facilitate double-loop learning in NGOs we also need to review the space existing for critical reflexivity and the opportunity to execute transformative adaptations. This paper presents part of a PAR study in which an NGO reflected on their learning spaces and tested several double-loop learning methods to overcome the messy dilemmas faced in SRHR education programmes in Uganda.

6.3 Context of the study

This paper presents part of my PhD research on organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda (2016–2019). Through this research, I aimed at generating practical knowledge that does not only help solve problems, but also identifies what is 'good' in a given situation. Aristotle termed this type of knowledge as *phronesis*, and several authors have underlined that Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a suitable approach to developing it (Carr & Kemmis, 2005). In PAR, those affected by the problem engage in cycles of action and reflection to investigate their realities and create more sustainable, just and productive futures (Boog et al., 2008). Especially critical forms of PAR can help people investigate problematic power dynamics and oppressive practices, for example, Carr and Kemmis (2005) suggest that: "critical rationality [. . .] still offers a way for people to think themselves out of their presuppositions, taken-for granted assumptions, habits of mind and existing expectations about how the world is and should be ordered" (p. 354). In this sense, PAR corresponds with the aspirations of double-loop learning: making explicit the implicit and reframing our perception of reality to enable more just and effective practices.

The overall PAR process consisted of five stages (see Table 16). First, to open the communicative space and establish an issue of legitimate concern, the orientation stage engaged NGO practitioners in informal conversations and dialogue. This resulted in the idea to run a multiple-case study to investigate current organisational learning practices. Of the many challenges uncovered, participants felt a study on double-loop learning could lead to a better alignment of their education programming to the emancipatory needs of learners. To facilitate a deeper investigation and testing of organisational learning innovations, we identified one organisation as a case study NGO.

Table 16 Overview of PAR project

Phase	1. Orientation	2. Problem diagnosis	3. Case study entry	4. Learning and innovation tracks	5. Closing
Time period	April-December 2015	January-September 2016	October 2016 - September 2017	October 2017-December 2018	January – May 2019
Purpose	Investigate practitioner's perceptions of meaningful organisational learning and broker connections towards community of practice	Identifying examples of and barriers of meaningful organisational learning, identify research direction	Map organisational field and opportunities for mutual learning	Deeper investigation and testing of organisational learning innovations	Synthesise findings and disseminate

One of the seven NGOs profiled in the diagnosis stage was identified as a suitable case study. The management welcomed this PAR, given their new strategy also focused on community-led development driven by principles such as adaptive programming and reciprocal accountability. After relationship building, I facilitated cycles of investigation and innovation testing with a team of staff and volunteers who were implementing an SRHR education programme. This fourth stage is what this paper focuses on. All staff and volunteers involved in this PAR stage were Ugandan, though not all were from the region of operation. The staff had prior experience in SRHR, social work, monitoring and evaluation or programme management, and had run this programme for approximately three years. The volunteers, on the other hand, were recent graduates, selected based on their zeal for youth, community development and SRHR. Before their seven-month placement in communities, volunteers participated in a two-week orientation training. The programme's curriculum blended SRHR with entrepreneurship training and a mechanism to provide seed capital for eligible teen mother groups. In addition, the programme included inter-generational dialogues and parent sessions. As such the

programme model comes close to the ideal type of SRHR education sketched in the introduction.

6.4 Methodology used to facilitate double-loop learning in this PAR

Through monthly PAR meetings, the programme team and I set goals and inquiry questions, chose methodology, discussed findings, and brainstormed innovations. The first meetings focused on ascertaining whether the topic identified during the diagnosis stage with other NGOs was of concern to these practitioners. The team recognised the organisation's efforts to engage youth, community members and (local) government representatives with the aim of aligning the programme to their realities, but they felt something was missing. Existing platforms did not generate all insights required and some insights were never translated to changes. This lack of responsiveness was associated with the pre-approved programme design, as well as government restrictions regarding sexuality education. It seemed that most of the learning occurred at a single loop level and the team was eager to develop double-loop learning skills to ensure their activities remained relevant and would drive sustainable outcomes for youth. This paper focuses on the double-loop learning methods we used and their results. The paper's primary data stem from personal-case interviews with ten volunteers and two staff conducted between February and November 2018 (see Table 17¹²) as well as the PAR meetings in which collaborative analysis and action planning happened.

Table 17 Double column case interview participants and themes

#	Role	Pseudonym	Sex	Method	Theme of the case
1	Volunteer 2017	Thomas	Male	Problem reframing	Position of volunteers
2	Staff	Beatrice	Female	Problem reframing	Monetary expectations, position of volunteers

¹² All names presented in this paper are pseudonyms.

3	Staff	Patricia	Female	Problem reframing	Monetary expectations
4	Volunteer 2018	Mildred	Female	Problem reframing	Complexity of change in SRHR
5	Volunteer 2018	Priscilla	Female	Problem reframing	Monetary expectations, position of volunteers
6	Volunteer 2018	Peter	Male	Problem reframing	Position of volunteers
7	Volunteer 2018	Mildred	Female	Learning from success	Complexity of change in SRHR
8	Volunteer 2018	Teopista	Female	Learning from success	Monetary expectations, position of volunteers, value contradictions
9	Volunteer 2018	Amos	Male	Problem reframing	Complexity of change in SRHR, position of volunteers, value contradictions
10	Volunteer 2018	Moses	Male	Unstructured	Values contradictions, volunteer position
11	Volunteer 2018	Timothy	Male	Problem reframing	Monetary expectations, volunteer position
12	Volunteer 2018	Lilian	Female	Unstructured	Volunteer position, value contradictions

The personal-case interviews were based on the double-column case method developed by Argyris (1982) and further adapted by Action Design (Rudolph et al., 2001). Members were invited to participate during PAR meetings and through the volunteer WhatsApp group; interested members could schedule an interview session. Prior, participants were given guidelines on writing a personal case about an experience in their SRHR work. This guideline included an ethical statement explaining the purpose of the research, the opportunity to opt-out, data usage and storage and contact details of the ethical review board. This statement was revisited at the start of the interview and the participant was asked for consent verbally.

In preparation for the interview, participants wrote their case in a table format: in the right-hand column participants wrote what occurred, and on the left, they wrote thoughts and feelings. When participants had not written the case prior, they verbally shared it at the beginning of the interview. After explaining the case, participants identified whether they felt this experience was a dilemma or a success. For dilemmas, we followed the reframing method of Razer and Friedman (2017). After reconstructing and investigating the theory-of-action applied in the situation, we examined the original frame used. Alternative frames were then explored and a more desirable frame was selected by the participant, feeding into a brainstorm of alternative action strategies. For successes, we followed the learning from success method by Schechter et al. (2004). These interviews aimed at reconstructing theories-of-action which contributed to the success and which general principles we could derive from this instance for the benefit of the organisation.

In PAR, authentic participation necessitates an intentional effort to create conversational space and mitigate power imbalances (Angucia et al., 2010). This deeply reflective interview method amplified this ethical demand; since I facilitated a live process of collaboratively analysing and reframing complex situations, my views could become overpowering. In addition, my positionality as a white PhD student could have influenced whether participants felt free to join as equal partners in this analysis. To create a conversational space, I adopted multiple strategies. First, I actively tried to build my skill, I practised the method with an expert and facilitated two practice interviews. Secondly, I made sure I developed rapport with all participants through the PAR meetings and by 'hanging around'. Third, by sharing the guide, I aimed at making the method transparent and 'equip' the participant as a co-researcher. During the interview, I regularly summarised how I understood the participant's explanation and asked whether this was an accurate interpretation. Also, only after hearing the participants' reflections did I pose other possible explanations as hypotheses which they could confirm or reject. This live analysis extended the power to interpret data to participants. Participants had two other occasions to nuance or contrast inferences made from their experience: via e-mail when I shared the transcript and preliminary analysis and during the co-analysis workshop.

There may not be an objective way to evaluate whether the interview space was 'safe', but the transcripts do illustrate participants objecting or ignoring some of my

hypotheses, or on the other hand elaborating how my interpretation helped them get 'unstuck'. However, sometimes my desire to find alternative frames made the interviews last longer than the scheduled one hour. Since this occurred during a practice interview, I was able to adjust my expectations and accept that sometimes we conclude with a good understanding of an interesting scenario rather than a reframing. In case the participant was available we sometimes agreed to continue or schedule another appointment. The interviews were transcribed by myself and a research assistant who was trained on ethical data management and signed an agreement to this end. After the interview was transcribed, I conducted a thematic analysis (Flick, 2009) to summarise the original theory-of-action as well as the revised theory or general principles of success. In September 2018, during a co-analysis workshop, I presented general themes and staff together with volunteers validated this analysis and added new insights.

Parallel to the interviews, the monthly PAR meetings continued and I observed several organisational learning mechanisms. In addition, two skill-building workshops took place in the context of this PAR – one on double-loop learning and the other on learning from success. In May 2019, closing workshops were held with the team and senior management to take stock of lessons learned and changes observed. All meetings were recorded and transcribed, and these data are used to triangulate interview data. Using four recurring dilemmas, the next section illustrates how the different methods generated double-loop insights into the team's theories-of-action and how these were translated to changes in the programme implementation strategy.

6.5 Double-loop learning processes illustrated through four dilemmas

6.5.1 Dilemma 1: when change does not occur as expected

While volunteers lived and worked in the community, SRHR problems became more than a statistic to them; they bonded with teen mothers and developed an intimate understanding of their multi-dimensional challenges. Although the programme combined education sessions with minor health services like referrals or HIV testing, volunteers discovered many unmet needs. Amos, for example, described how he referred a teen mother to a government health facility to address complications of a family planning method. Unfortunately, the girl reported back that she was not helped.

So, after the session she came and told me: [. . .] “you are talking about family planning methods, but most of them are bad, they are bringing complications to us.” She confessed like for example: “me I get bleeding”. [. . .] So, when I referred her to the government hospital, she went there. Then she told me that service is not there.

Amos, volunteer, interview 9

Teen mothers and community members continuously expressed high hopes and expectations to the volunteers. Yet, NGO staff told volunteers to avoid making promises about medical services since there was no budget. Burdened by the plight of the youth, volunteers expressed feelings of disappointment and powerlessness. Their lingering concerns were: how can we help youth if the systems are ‘broken’? And why could the NGO not facilitate them to do more?

Yes, sometimes you feel - it’s like doing something but it’s not complete - it’s not complete, you are helping but that help is not complete.

Amos, volunteer, interview 9

Through interviews with Mildred and Amos, we discovered that the volunteers were not helpless, but in fact were able to achieve small but important steps towards success. For example, in the case of ‘dead end’ referrals, volunteers did achieve making learners aware of their rights to access health services. Moreover, Amos came to see that his relationship with youth provided a unique platform for them to speak about personal issues. This resulted in two new explanations for the problem: change in the field of SRHR is complex thus success starts small, and all actors share the responsibility to solve the problem, not just volunteers or the NGO. These frames generated more positive feelings amongst the volunteers about their work and opened up new solution spaces.

No right now, I don’t say I wasn’t helpful, it was at that particular moment. But right now, I feel I did something great! Because right now she knows where she can get the services at least. [. . .] So at least I’m a bit content in some way. [. . .] not fully because eh the problem wasn’t intervened. But I did my work.

Amos, volunteer, interview 9

In these case interviews, we achieved double-loop learning at a cognitive level. Argyris (1999) suggests that double-loop learning should not end at this cognitive level, but should lead to action. Within the interviews and analysis workshop, the team brainstormed new action strategies. On a personal level, they suggested one could appreciate small successes, and the NGO could prepare volunteers for these complex realities in their orientation training.

[. . .] We need to involve past volunteers to work on the expectation of the one we are recruiting and their expectations. Cause they have that energy and when they reach there [in the community] the morale goes away. So, when they give them a bigger picture of what happens in the field [. . .] they just continue, not have set-backs.

Amos, volunteer, analysis meeting, September 2018

The idea to change the volunteer training was immediately operationalised. In the orientation for the 2019 cohort, two volunteers from the PAR team led a session on various dilemmas and the idea of embracing small changes. The content of this session was the alumni's experiential knowledge and excerpts from the interviews.

6.5.2 Dilemma 2: the NGO legacy getting in the way

To facilitate holistic SRHR education, the team engaged various community actors including youth, parents, health workers, leaders, and teachers. While team members agreed on the importance of this engagement, five interviews centred around difficulties emerging in this area – often linked to monetary expectations. For example, Priscilla invited a doctor to be a guest speaker:

I introduce myself; I tell him who I am, what [we] are doing and why we need him to do something like that. [. . .] So, then I told him “we give you an allowance for transport and some refreshment”. And he is like: “okay, so how much are we talking about?” [. . .] And I told him “25,000 cause that is our budget”. He is like “what?” [. . .]. He is like “yeah, I understand, and I have done this before with other organisations, but at least make it to the USAID standard of 80,000”. [. . .] So, I get out very disturbed and my perception of the whole thing was: these health workers don't even care anymore about people, all they care about is what is in their pocket.

Priscilla, volunteer, interview 5

These scenarios were not just difficult because it was practically impossible to meet these expectations, but in some cases, they resulted in conflict. This affected the organisation's ability to adapt programme activities informed by a diverse knowledge base. Since it came up so often, volunteers and staff had several strategies to deal with this challenge. For example, appealing to self-interest, offering gifts like t-shirts, or looking for extra funds. While in most cases the team was able to 'work around it' using these single loop solutions, they still felt their activities and goals were affected.

Therefore, we investigated issues underlying these dilemmas. In the interviews and the learning from success workshop, members discussed why people ask for money. The team noticed that people with whom they have had a prior relationship hardly asked for money. They agreed that since it was a common practice for NGOs to offer money for stakeholder engagement when they came as 'strangers' this rule of the game was triggered.

Literally you walk into someone's office, they are seeing you for the first time you're introduced from [this NGO]. When they just know you are from an NGO, they always think you are given money to facilitate all these kinds of things.

Priscilla, volunteer, Learning from Success workshop, August 2018

As such, members realised they had been part of reproducing this rule of the game. For example, volunteers of a previous cycle made promises about money that the next cohort was held accountable for. Whereas the strategy of engaging community members was rooted in an ideal of local ownership and authentic participation, the theories-in-use seemed more in line with the idea of a transactional relationship. When Patricia reflected on a conflict about money, she realised her actions were not driven by her espoused beliefs that partner schools should be driving the programme. Rather – understandably – she promised to give more money next time as a quick solution that would protect the organisational image and prevent the teachers from leaving.

Patricia: Now you're having a situation where you have to address something there, calm down people there [. . .]. Maybe I can say there's a risk in that as well perhaps that may . . .

Marit: What is the risk?

Patricia: Maybe the risk is at that point in time you are focusing on providing an immediate solution. [. . .] But maybe it's not the type of solution that is long lasting. [. . .] I feel it's a situation we want to deal with even ahead of time [. . .]. As we initiate our partnerships with the school, with the teachers like to already help them appreciate where we are coming from really.

Patricia, staff, interview 3

So, an alternative explanation of the dilemma emerged: people who ask for money are not necessarily ill-intended – they actually made sense. Furthermore, the way the team members relate with these people sets the tone for collaboration. Strategies emerging from this new frame focused on relationship building and giving people a choice and accepting the trade-offs in terms of the number of people involved.

What is ideal [. . .] maybe it's that point where you should really just make it clear, [. . .] and to let people know that there's that choice, that option of maybe discontinuing participation. [. . .] Of course, it won't put you in good books of everyone, but those that you will have retained perhaps are the very cream that you need.

Patricia, staff, interview 3

The team proposed organising inception meetings with various community actors to co-create an action plan and distribute responsibilities. In addition, they proposed the NGO should streamline transport allowances between programmes and partners to avoid a continuous increase in monetary expectations. Whereas the double-loop insights for dilemma 1 were operationalised within this PAR, in this case no concrete actions were observed. When I asked the team about this in the final workshop, they noted that some changes needed to come from 'the top'. Circling back to the idea that within their position they could also influence 'the field', members eventually resolved that their role could be to document the realities on the ground and follow up actively with managers once a proposal has been made.

I think what I'm looking up to is to create more evidence-based advocacy or reports - which is evidence, maybe with quotations, maybe a short video, [. . .]. I think we need evidence to show them what is happening.

Juliana, staff, PAR meeting, May 2019

6.5.3 *Dilemma 3: value contradictions*

The Ugandan government predominantly promotes abstinence in their sexuality education strategy for youth. In communities too, many people believe that for unmarried youth abstinence is 'the right thing'. In contrast, the case study programme uses a rights-based approach and exposes youth to a variety of family planning methods, which often triggers suspicion in the community. For example, some community members associate the organisation with homosexuality – despite the programme excluding this topic in line with the Government's policy. In their orientation training early 2018, volunteers were informed about possible dilemmas that could emerge around condom use, gender norms or LGBTQ. In the interviews, four volunteers shared situations in which they found themselves in a value conflict. For example, Moses shared about a local chairperson publicly expressing his concerns about the programme.

We invited him [local chairperson] to attend our session. [. . .] And he was like "what family planning!? [. . .] eh but the Quran prohibits that!" [. . .] One, at first it was so challenging you know! We thought [. . .] he is trying to let these people not believe in what we are teaching, they will not trust us, him being the elder you get. [. . .] So, for us, we are young people, and they may think what we are bringing in is poison.

Moses, volunteer, interview 10

In terms of adaptiveness, this calls for strategies to navigate the tension between local values and the 'foreign' rights-based approach – which volunteers seemed to have developed already. For example, emphasising that they are not forcing people to make certain decisions, but instead providing information. Or volunteer Lilian, who used stories to illustrate the risk of inadequate SRHR information to deal with parent's concerns. As a result, parents reconsidered their role in sexuality education.

I gave so many scenarios of some of the things we grew up seeing, of the different kind of ignorance, [. . .] that different kind of children had [. . .] whose parents were not telling them anything to do with sex education.

Lilian, volunteer, interview 12

In the heated moment with the local chairperson, Moses's team acted promptly to curb the leader's statements. They chose to reference family planning used in the African traditional society and compared these to modern practices.

We brought in the other thing of African traditional society and modernity [. . .] I personally told him there was family planning in [. . .] African traditional society, where I gave him an example that [. . .] when the other umbilical cord gets taken off [. . .] they tie and put it . . . that symbolised that [. . .] the woman will not conceive. [. . .] That was family planning. [. . .] So yeah, he accepted.

Moses, volunteer, interview 10

During this interview, Moses and I reflected on beliefs and assumptions driving the strategies he used to explore if a different framing could perhaps lead to a more desirable situation. He explained that an important consideration for him was to ensure the teen mothers could access accurate information about family planning because they are deeply affected by the consequences of teenage pregnancy. But there seemed to be another layer to this. There appeared to be a self-sealing process within the programme regarding personal ethical beliefs. Moses for example mentioned that, in line with his Catholic faith, he personally does not support family planning. Pointing out this apparent paradox, I asked what he would do if a programme would instead ask him to promote abstinence. He explained he would do whatever the contract states, but also find a way to bring in other information. As such we discovered that his theory-in-use was guided by programme expectations, placing his personal beliefs in a secondary position.

While his personal beliefs did not hinder the volunteer from educating youth and community members about SRHRs, he did propose that the NGO allows space to explore one's personal values during recruitment and orientation. Perhaps such conversations could prevent the formal systems such as contracts and programme designs from making personal beliefs undiscussable and 'irrelevant'.

Marit: Do you think if you were to run an NGO you would do it the same way?

Moses: No

Marit: How would you do it?

Moses: Me I would feel - I would recruit volunteers who have - You know when you are opening up an NGO consider even the personal values - You know first put yourself within people's shoes before starting on a project, yeah. You're doing this, how will the community look at me, yeah, put

yourself within the eyes of those people without you - you're the one going to face them, aha, what if they bounce the question back to me, how will I, yeah

Moses, volunteer, interview 10

Since this in-depth reflection with Moses happened after the co-analysis workshop, we were not able to discuss what the NGO could do to handle such normative dilemmas.

6.5.4 Dilemma 4: targets versus the reality in communities

During a check-in with volunteers during their mid-term training, a volunteer expressed wanting to be 'change-makers, not target achievers'. They wanted to explore synergies with local initiatives and integrate new content or delivery methods to increase relevance and sustainability. In nine interviews, volunteers expressed feeling 'unheard' by the NGO. For example, volunteer Peter, together with his team, brokered a connection with a local organisation to train their teen mothers in product making skills. They planned to market these products during a community clean-up. When sharing this proposal with staff, he was underwhelmed by their response, leaving him with a lingering concern:

Are our monthly recommendations analysed or they simply want us to write while they have a predetermined way of doing things? Why do they even waste our time if our efforts can't be appreciated by recognising our discoveries?

Peter, volunteer, interview 6

Other volunteers also felt they were not taken seriously and worried that if adaptations were not made, the impact of the programme would be at risk. Consequently, volunteers utilised various platforms to provide feedback, for example by writing recommendations in their reports or explaining their ideas during staff field visits.

Despite the feelings of frustration, contextualisation and adaptations did take place as illustrated by Peter. In addition, certain programme activities were set up for localisation, for example, intergenerational dialogues in which local actors expressed their own concerns and agreed on the next steps. Moreover, in their relationships with learners, volunteers were able to help solve unique personal issues.

However, volunteers still felt their ideas were not reaching decision-makers and did not influence the programme design or organisation at a broader level. As a result,

some volunteers mentioned feeling discouraged to innovate and avoided the 'risk' of going outside the programme targets. Others continued innovating, but would not report about it.

For me I feel like you can innovate and make it a little bit broader, so long as we achieve that goal, yeah. So, for as long as what I am doing is right. I will give her the report; [. . .] I will only pull up the extract of what she wants, yeah, I give her that report and then the other report remains on my heart because I did it and I am happy.

Peter, volunteer, interview 6

As mentioned before, not only volunteers felt stuck when pushing ideas 'upwards' in the organisation. Programme staff similarly experienced limits to adaptiveness. During the PAR meetings, volunteers started realising that staff did not ignore their ideas out of unwillingness, but they were also influenced by forces outside their control, such as targets and reporting frameworks.

[Space to innovate is] there but minimal, cause at the end of the day it goes back to targets. Remember we have to report to our donors, but also like [this] programme we are implementing it as an alliance, we have other partners doing similar things in other communities and we are expected to move at a certain pace.

Maureen, staff, PAR meeting, December 2018

During the PAR process, the team reflected on these external forces limiting their space to innovate as well as their own role in expanding this space. The latter resulted in a slight unfreezing of the assumption that targets were rigid and unnegotiable. The staff indicated that they prioritised targets in many activities in a bid to stay in control and ensure management and donor expectations are met.

I didn't know they [volunteers] were fearful of the what, like they feel bad when you know every time targets . . . [. . .] I think it has given me an oversight maybe when I'm asking about targets, [. . .] I should be a little bit observant on the words I use, maybe while I'm asking about targets. We should not take them as target makers but changemakers.

Juliana, staff, PAR meeting, December 2018

Volunteers, on the other hand, noted that some ideas might have been impractical given resource and time constraints. They further noted that when they keep quiet about ideas, things would never change and that they should look for suitable ways to present suggestions.

Then I think another thing also is getting volunteers to appreciate the fact that whatever they do in their social space determines the impact. And also [...] it's not about the programme officers or the team leaders. But also, just [...] come to appreciate that it's part of their responsibility. [...] Maybe that would also reduce on the kind of conflicts or situations.

Priscilla, volunteer, analysis meeting, September 2018

The team's insights were incorporated in the volunteer training mentioned earlier. Besides, the team lead introduced incentives for proactive volunteers – like an invite to an event – and alumni were involved in field support to enhance a safe space. During the closing stage, two co-researchers mentioned seeing a notable difference in the new volunteer cohort – these volunteers were more efficient problem solvers.

I got a response from [...] the mayor and he's "like yeah this time the young people you brought are very vibrant, they like, they take the active role of engaging the stakeholders." [...] And then also from the staff, from themselves, you hear them saying "this cycle is very different like we've had less problems with them, they are achieving their targets, they are coming at us with the solution and the problem not like just the problem.

Maureen, team lead, reflection interview, May 2019

6.6 Discussion: from dilemmas to opportunities

The four dilemmas illustrate a real-life portrait of what Schön (1983) termed the 'swampy lowlands': "where situations are confusing "messes" incapable of technical solution" (p. 42). The NGO staff and volunteers already had numerous action scripts to deal with these messy dilemmas, but felt something 'was not quite right'. In many cases there was a lingering normative concern about the role of targets or the tension between local SRHR beliefs and organisational beliefs. In this paper, I have illustrated how double-loop learning methodology in the context of a PAR opened up spaces for reflective conversations through which practical and normative knowledge can be generated. By

reflecting on successes and dilemmas, the team made explicit their action strategies, underlying beliefs, assumptions and goals; things that were taken for granted – or what Carr and Kemmis (2005) referred to as 'habits of mind' – were reconsidered. Through this unfreezing, the team was able to push the limits of adaptiveness and more flexibly respond to learners' needs.

One could argue that adaptiveness is not necessarily good if it means aligning an education programme to the interests of powerful actors. Especially in the field of SRHR, adaptiveness calls for a critical approach to ethical tensions and micro-politics. Whereas Argyris is less explicit about this normative angle of organisational learning, double-loop learning could serve as a critical practice. Field theory – through concepts such as habitus and symbolic and structural order – seems to be a helpful framework to make more explicit the interplay between power, facts, values and beliefs in processes of learning and knowledge generation. More empirical studies could be done in other contexts to further expand this theoretical connection between double-loop learning and field theory. Through PAR, researchers or practitioners could test and create methods that make field dynamics – the interplay between agency and structure – a subject of reflection and a tool to overcome messy dilemmas. Those seeking to assess the impact of education programmes in complex settings could also borrow these concepts to establish smaller reconfigurations of a field.

In his work, Argyris (1999) sets a high bar for what is considered double-loop learning. He even concludes that some people cannot develop double-loop learning skills. Our experiences also showed variations; not everyone was able to spot how their mental models contributed to the problem as swiftly as others and not all new frames were shared by the team or were translated into action. However, like Friedman and Lipshitz (1992) conclude, double-loop learning may be more dependent on psychological safety than Argyris acknowledged. What seems to have contributed to psychological safety in this research, amongst others, was the vocabulary field theory offered. First, by acknowledging that there are forces that make it difficult to act in a manner that may be more emancipatory, and secondly, by presenting social change as a complex process, relieving practitioners from the pressure that all problems need to be solved immediately. On the other hand, it is also possible that some cognitive insights may have changed people's mental models latently, and change may still happen later. Further

research could look into this 'time lag' of double-loop learning and varying gradations of double-loop outcomes.

Though our PAR particularly aimed at generating contextual knowledge, our experiences could guide other action researchers, NGO practitioners or policy makers who seek to generate knowledge to overcome messy dilemmas.

(1) *Zooming in on micro-situations by creating a conversational space*: Discussing specific cases offers a helpful entry point to make explicit theories-of-action and forces in the field, of which people are often unaware. However, to ensure this collaborative inquiry results in new meanings that are not over-powered by the facilitator, the facilitator should intentionally create a conversational space by being transparent about the method, building rapport and giving multiple opportunities to verify inferences.

(2) *Providing conceptual frameworks*: In this PAR, providing a conceptual introduction to field theory and double-loop learning proved helpful. These concepts were tested through the team's experiences, eventually presenting new meanings to the concept of double-loop learning. Dimensions that stood out were: looking at (small) successes, comparing your actions to your values, shifting perspective with the other and understanding how the wider field could explain a situation you are in. The concepts fed new conversations and provided a sense of empowerment by showing the power of agency.

(3) *Carefully selecting participants*: Who should participate in reflection and when should be considered carefully. In this study, volunteers were represented at most of the PAR meetings which fostered a mutual understanding; both volunteers and staff realised that they were in the same predicament. However, there were moments where meeting without 'the other' had merit. For example, volunteers opened up about certain experiences without the staff being present and vice versa.

(4) *Selecting a dedicated facilitator*: In this PAR, the researcher balanced an insider and outsider view. External action researchers could explore ways to gain an intimate understanding of the realities while maintaining a facilitative role wherein an external 'eye' can play an important role. An NGO facilitating their own PAR could identify a facilitator who can competently maintain a safe conversational space.

(5) *Leadership is key*: Managers play a vital role in encouraging critical dialogue and resource allocation to facilitate change in NGOs. In this research, the close involvement of the team lead helped incorporate innovations in the volunteer orientation promptly, whereas other ideas were 'stuck', in part due to the dependency on leaders who were not as intensively involved.

6.7 Conclusion

As the title suggests, the team was able to push the limits of adaptiveness. Through their day-to-day interactions with learners and community members, practitioners develop an intricate understanding of the field of SRHR education. Our research revealed how inventive staff and volunteers already were to balance programme targets, budget constraints, conflicting expectations and value contradictions. Moreover, the programme had pre-designed spaces for adaptiveness, such as community dialogues and research with elements of social accountability. In this PAR, the team further pushed the limits to adaptiveness through reflexive thinking. Bravely entering a space for double-loop learning, the team examined their own beliefs and actions and identified how they could change the way things are done. As a result, the team learned to redefine success, foster shared responsibility and mutual relationships and balance public and private faces. Regarding the space for learning we gained insights into the self-sealing processes and defensive routines that sustained certain rigid approaches to implementing SRHR education programmes. All in all, the research process yielded a valuable body of practical knowledge that did not only benefit the participants, but the wider organisation, by making embodied knowledge explicit.

The practitioners portrayed in this paper have demonstrated that reflexivity at a double-loop level can trigger transformative action, one small step at a time. They cannot, however, transform the field alone; managers, donors, scholars, and government leaders can all contribute to an alternative future wherein the voices of marginalised learners drive SRHR and other education programmes. A paradigm shift could be on the horizon if actors in each region of the field strengthen their normative practice.

